

Food Inc:

What People Are Saying



"Our farmers deserve praise, not condemnation; and their efficiency should be cause for gratitude, not something for which they are penalized."

- President John F. Kennedy.

"In no other country do so few people produce so much food, to feed so many, at such reasonable prices."

- President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

A letter from Trent Loos, Loupe City, NE

As a sixth generation United States farmer, I fully understand the romance of yesteryear's food production systems but a reality check is in order.

As filmmakers Michael Pollan and Robert Kenner are making the circles in the media promoting the release of Food Inc., their message about the modern food production system is nothing but a circle as well. The most glaring example is the mention that food shortages are looming, yet the solution is reverting back to food production methods of the 1930s when one farmer fed 10 people. Today's American farmer feeds 164 people annually with the safest, most reasonably priced food the world has ever seen. Last year the American consumer still only spent 10% of his/her disposable income on food despite reporting of higher food prices by major media sources.

Today's food system is safe and it is "green" and efficient. Cornell University just this week released a study indicating that today's food system emits 63% less carbon per unit of food produced than the same unit of food produced in 1954.

Science and technology combined with human initiative has allowed the United States farmer to provide food, fiber, fuel and pharmaceuticals more efficiently than ever before imagined.

With all of that said, I am willing to make a deal. If Kenner and Pollan are willing to show their film in black and white and silent as movies were in the 1930s, I'll go back to my grandfather's era of food production.

“U.S. corn farmers are proud of their work. Each season, we battle the elements to plant, grow and harvest a crop that is the world’s wonder, a crop that is used safely for countless products, from food to fuel to fiber. And each season, we strive to do this in a more and more efficient and environmentally sustainable manner, thanks to reliable technology in the seed and in the field.

“The fact is, conventional U.S. field corn is a safe product, whether it is used in processed foods such as corn starch or corn syrup, whether it is fed to cattle and other livestock, or whether it is used as ethanol or fiber. Its versatility as a safe and inexpensive ingredient is second to none, which is why demand for it persists year after year.

“This film’s producers don’t like the steps government, the food industry and commodity groups like NCGA have taken to keep food prices low and help feed the world’s hungry. We have the least expensive food of any nation, and for that we’re grateful.

“Further, the movie’s producers offer no large-scale workable solution, just more outdated practices that will reduce yield and drive up costs – in effect, making sure fewer mouths are fed at a higher cost. We urge them to look at the real costs and causes of obesity and its related health issues and recognize – along with the scientific experts – that corn is a healthy and safe natural food product.”

- National Corn Growers Association President Bob Dickey

The Washington Post

We’re Getting A Bad Feeling About Our Food

Ezra Klein - Washington Post - 7/1/2009

"Does for the supermarket what 'Jaws' did for the beach," says Variety's John Anderson. "Everyone should see 'Food, Inc.," enthuses this newspaper.

It's high praise, and not undeserved: "Food, Inc." is certainly an important film. But, like the movement that spawned it, it's also a frustrating one. It's driven less by a thesis than by an intuition: Something is wrong with our food production system. It's just not clear what. Over the course of 94 minutes, we wander through meatpacking plants and fast-food drive-throughs and the halls of Congress. We meet a mother who lost her son to tainted meat and a farmer who can no longer stomach Tyson's treatment of her chickens. We stop in with a hyper-charismatic farmer who pets his pigs and preaches sustainability and loathes corporate cash cows, then travel with a hippie yogurt baron who touts his company as the ethical future of big-box food.

The sense that something is wrong with our food quickly blurs into the suggestion that everything is wrong with our food. It has too much bacteria but also too many pesticides. It is too expensive, but we do not spend enough money on it. We need fewer corporations, or maybe more corporations run by the yogurt guy. With so much wrong, it is hard to know where to start. And sometimes, in fact, it seems that fixing one problem would create another: Making fruits and vegetables cheaper, for instance, is hard to do if you also want them to be organic.

But despite its overwhelming complexity, "Food, Inc." joins "In Defense of Food," "Fast Food Nation," "Super Size Me" and dozens of other polemical books and films in the necessary effort to convince us that checking out at the

supermarket is, on some level, a political act, with consequences for ourselves, our families and our world.

Amid all the concern over global warming, we are beginning to reckon with the fact that meat production accounts for more carbon emissions than cars. As we labor to reform the country's health-care system, we now realize that the skyrocketing costs are in no small part due to the way our diets make us obese and sick. An IBM poll released last week found that 77 percent of Americans want more information about the food they buy. That's no surprise. As food writer Michael Pollan says at the start of the film, "the way we eat has changed more in the last 50 years than the previous 10,000." The way we think about the way we eat hasn't kept up.

Quite the opposite, in fact. We know rather less about our food than our grandparents did. In part, that's because the process of creating food in a lab is less familiar than the process of growing it in a garden. Food producers might have to print ingredient lists, but no one ever passed a law saying we had to understand them. (How do you hydrogenate an oil, anyway?)

But there also has been a concerted effort to pull a curtain across the food production system. You see that twice in "Food, Inc." Once, when a farmer who raises chickens for Tyson agrees to allow cameras onto his farm, only to have Tyson quickly call and persuade him to rescind his offer. And again, when Monsanto refuses to comment on, well, anything. It's one thing to be kept out of Dick Cheney's underground lair(s?). But we're eating this stuff.

It's little better in Washington. Last month I sat down with Pollan, who consulted on "Food, Inc.," and Robert Kenner, who directed it. "The way farm policy gets made in this town is within a very tight group of people," Pollan said. "Industry, committees on the Hill, the USDA, and very little input from us."

A nice example came in January, when the USDA released its guidelines for producers who want to affix the "naturally raised" logo to their meat. Such companies would have to ensure that their animals "have been raised entirely without growth promotants, antibiotics (except for ionophores used as coccidiostats for parasite control), and have never been fed animal byproducts." I know that's what I think of when I imagine an animal living naturally.

"Transparency," Pollan said, "is one of the unifying themes. You can talk about personal responsibility all you want. But you need good information before you can exercise personal responsibility." And that's where this column comes in. Twice a month, we'll take a look at the evolving politics and policy of food: from farms to Congress, on land and in sea, within and without the District. Because it's not that something is wrong with our food. It's that particular things are wrong with our food. And knowing what those things are is the first step toward fixing them.

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