



## *Watershed Media Essay Series*

### **Conscious Eating** *By Dan Imhoff*

I am often asked what people can do to change our current food system, a discussion that almost inevitably leads to dietary decisions. I can only speak for myself, as someone who has considered these matters over most of my adult life. My initial thought is to do your best to Eat Consciously.

“Conscious” can be expressed as being aware, familiar with, acquainted with, mindful, observant, deliberate, intentional, willful, premeditated, calculated ... How do we translate this to eating? Here are a few general brush strokes, and this is by no means a complete list.

1. First there is the question of eating animals: vegan, vegetarian, or responsible omnivore; flexitarian, a vegetarian who doesn't make a fuss when out to dinner at someone's house; pescetarian, who eats fish but no other flesh; or simply a “lessmeatarian” like food writer Mark Bittman.
2. Then there are issues of fossil fuels, energy expenditures, and how far food travels: in-season and local sourcing, food miles, eating lower on the food chain by avoiding energy- or feed-intensive foods.
3. People are concerned about labels that certify certain types of production: organic, biodynamic, animal welfare approved, locally grown, antibiotic free. Which certification programs can be trusted?
4. There are food types to be avoided, either as a specific dietary approach (lactose- or gluten-free) or to help protect a species (predator-friendly, for example).

I know many intelligent people who struggle with the challenge of eating consciously and feeling good about it in these times. I know people who had been vegans for decades and suddenly became avid omnivores. I know many vegetarians. I have been a quasi-vegetarian egg, dairy, and fish eater for decades—a diet perhaps best described as Mediterranean. Luckily I live in a Mediterranean climate. As it has become harder to feel good about responsible seafood in an era of declining ocean health, I find myself replacing seafood more and more with meat and eggs that I raise myself.

As a livestock producer, I am a bit of a dumpster diver, well, a pre-dumpster diver to be exact. I stop at my local grocer and pick up—if I'm lucky, because I am competing with a number of other folks—a load of the discarded produce from the day. Sometimes I take home as much as 30 or 40 pounds of really spectacular produce. Then I head to the nearby bakery, where they

keep a trailer of unsold bread. I rummage the pile for the whole wheat walnut loaves and whole grain breads. This food is not for my family directly but for the pigs, chickens or ducks I might be raising at any time. They literally go bonkers for this so-called waste.

This is what the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization refers to as “default agriculture.” By default agriculture, the FAO means livestock production that is a co-product of farming: raising animals on grass (which humans can’t eat) as well as food waste and other byproducts (including slaughterhouse scraps not of the same species, particularly for pigs) that are not used to feed humans. It’s estimated in fact that up to half of all the food we now produce ends up as waste.

Conscious eating can appear in young people at a very early age. When I first began raising pigs, my then nine-year-old daughter waged a protest campaign the week they were scheduled to be slaughtered. She made “Save the Pigs” posters in protest. But as our household’s biggest fan of bacon, she has over time accepted the cycle of life that meat production inevitably entails.

To some of you, my dumpster diving may seem a little fanatical. It’s probably not, compared with the freegans, who eat only free vegan food, gleaned from farmers markets, restaurants, city gardens, and other sources. I am sure some freegans only take public transportation too (or walk or bicycle!), in pursuit of an energy-correct personal food policy. This is another end of the continuum of conscious eating altogether; one I would consider fairly extreme. I admire the freegan commitment, though it is not a diet that I would willingly adopt, at least not at the present time.

The point here is that we are all part of an ongoing continuum—human, animal, vegetable, mineral. Food is an amazing crucible where ethics, politics, stewardship, craft, economics, culture, health, democracy, and even medicine intersect and combine. Our palates, needs, and self-evaluations are continually evolving. The way we eat is certainly a defining aspect of our humanity. There are always people taking these issues to varying levels of practice and self-analysis. We only have to look at history.

According to his biographer, Vassari, Leonardo da Vinci was a vegetarian, not wanting any suffering to come to an animal for his benefit. He was known to frequent markets and purchase caged birds, only later to set them free and admire their powers of flight.

In a recent biography of Mahatma Gandhi, author Joseph Lelyveld explains the spartan discipline that dietary challenges required of the Indian leader, bent on leading a life driven by self-denial. Having taken a vow of celibacy, Brahmacharya, Gandhi even avoided foods such as milk or salt that he considered “hot” foods that might stimulate forbidden appetites. He also limited himself to a minimal intake of daily calories, sometimes allowing himself just one evening meal, and avoided spicy or exotic foods in an attempt to eat with the poor he so mightily tried to identify with.

Thomas Jefferson made it a point to always leave the dinner table hungry. He carried lettuce seeds in his pocket, a vegetable he’d brought back with him from France, so that he could sow greens on a weekly basis.

The beauty of conscious eating is that there are so many options. The challenge is that there are so many conflicting messages. The modern food movement is like a giant onion that is quickly morphing, and, like farming, is diverse, regional, and case specific. What is right for one person or piece of land or region of the country might not be applicable to another.

Some people agree on the value of eating locally and seasonally. This leads to some highly variable interpretations of local. For locavore Gary Nabhan, who was among the first high-profile writers to craft a book about a year of eating locally—*Coming Home to Eat*—it meant an area within 220 miles of his home in northern Arizona. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines a locavore as a resident who tries to eat food produced within a 100-mile radius. For Wal-Mart, local means statewide within California.

Here are a few things to consider when it comes to food miles. Carnegie Mellon researchers Chris Weber and Scott Matthews estimate that the average food item now travels 5,000 miles from field to fork. But contrary to what you might assume about the climate-changing implications of all this food crisscrossing continents and oceans, those transportation emissions are dwarfed by the production impacts of food production. Livestock production, land clearing and soil disturbance are the food system's biggest contributors to climate change. The impact is huge. Agriculture contributes at least 30 percent of all greenhouse gases worldwide, according to studies analyzed by Michael Bomford at Kentucky State University. Vandana Shiva places it as high as 40 percent.

There seems to be an inverse relationship between the energy use and climate contributions of food and agriculture. For example, of all energy used in the food system, just 14 percent is attributed to production. Yet food production, as was mentioned above, makes the biggest greenhouse gas contributions. If you want to reduce the climatic impacts of your diet, eliminating industrially produced animal foods might take priority over eating locally. Replace them with smaller amounts of higher quality animal foods that have been raised on pasture, where soils are protected, carbon is captured from the atmosphere, and nitrogen fertilizers are reduced.

If you want to really cut energy use in the food system get local—really local, as in inside the home. An increasing amount of the energy used by the food system comes from the way we now store and prepare meals at home and eat them on the run—with multiple fridges, microwaves, processed ingredients, appliance-heavy kitchens. Learning to eat less energy-intensive foods—fresh foods prepared from scratch at home—may be the best approach to energy conservation in the food system. Solar panels on the roof can make some of that electricity renewable as well.

When I speak about Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations as I travel the country, I often show photos of cave paintings—rather than the grim photos of factory farms you'll see in the book. You know them, those beautiful ochre and sienna colored images of buffalo, the ancient aurochs, mountain goats on the walls of famous places like Lascaux. For millennia this bond between human and animal ran deep into our cultures, so much so that it kept early peoples up at night, inspiring some of the most memorable human artistic creations. Notice that in 15,000 B.C. our ancestors were not drawing pictures of eggplant and arugula or even of wheat and corn

and rice. Like the domesticated livestock that followed the wild beasts, the plants we know of today would take thousands of years to cultivate and develop.

To give just one example of the long journey we have been on in the domestication of livestock, the jungle fowl from which the modern chicken originated laid only 18 to 20 eggs per year. The modern industrial hen lays 300 eggs per year today.

Think about what that took. Imagine the very best and brightest among us, carefully breeding and selecting pasture crops, building fences and planting shelter belts, raising guard animals, and problem solving on a daily basis to create sustenance from nature. Choosing plants that were prolific and flavorful and hardy, choosing animal breeds that were gentle, hard-working, with multiple uses—from traction to manure to milk, meat, hides, etc.

This was eating for survival, but I am certain that it also meant eating with a conscious awareness that few of us can even begin to imagine in today's world of manufactured foods and year-round supplies of lettuce, grapes, strawberries, and processed rolled baby carrots.

In the middle of last century, we began a shift that's truly remarkable in human history. After thousands and thousands of years we take animals off the pastures and out of the fields and orchards and confine them in warehouse buildings. The UN FAO refers to this as the "urbanization" of livestock. We pump them full of grain so they produce the most protein possible in the smallest amount of time. As their numbers increase, into the tens and then hundreds of thousands in single operations, their waste becomes a serious disposal problem. Their odors become a nightmare for rural residents who are unfortunate to live near them. Agriculture becomes the leading source of waterway pollution in America and CAFOs are defined by the EPA as point sources of pollution under the Clean Water Act.

Here's a story to lend some perspective on how a large concentration of animals can impact a community. I met in March with a group of activists in Rockford, Illinois, who were fighting the construction of a California mega-dairy corporation that is attempting to establish a dairy CAFO in Jo Daviess County. The corporation, AJ Bos, identified Illinois as CAFO-friendly. In fact, activists there refer to their state not as the Land of Lincoln but the Land of Stinkin'. The first thing AJ Bos did was to dig a series of manure pits, that, when combined, totaled an area 40 acres in size and 20 feet deep. Sixteen football fields would fit into that area. Imagine the waste that would fill those pits, the numbers of animals, the stench. The impacts on the waterways, particularly given the porous nature of the Karst geology that these pits were dug out of, as well as the potential for heavy rain, point to a frightening approach to regulatory oversight.

Consciousness here dictated that this community scratch together its precious resources to hire attorneys and start a nonprofit organization to defend itself. So far they have succeeded in keeping the mega-dairy from becoming operational. Mainly it has meant doing the job the government should be doing.

Antibiotics have also become essential tools to prevent the spread of disease in warehouses that hold 100,000 laying hens, or 55,000 turkeys, or 2,500 full-grown swine, or 100,000 fattening cattle. The regular administration of antibiotics—many related to the very same drugs used in

human disease treatment—leads to the creation of drug- and multi-drug-resistant pathogens. Just think of the recent stories we've heard about animal product recalls: 500 million eggs from just two CAFOs and 38 million pounds of Cargill turkey, both because of salmonella contamination. Experts warn that we are dangerously close to losing many of these drugs, tools that have been declared the most important medical discovery in the past 500 years.

We could talk for hours about this single particular type of food production, even within the context of conscious eating. But here are a few salient points to consider. Estimates are that between 90 and 95 percent of the 10 billion food animals we raise and slaughter every year in this country come from Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. So if you don't know where your ice cream or sausage or bacon was produced, there's a good chance it came from a facility that might not conform to the kind of world you hope your food choices would support.

Eating well is not easy. Everywhere you look there are foods you probably shouldn't eat. They are cleverly merchandized in attractive packages screaming for you to eat them. Salt! Fat! Sugar! Eat me, I'm delicious and cheap!

Responding to the obesity crisis, for example, the USDA's January 2011 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* offered this analysis:

On average, Americans of all ages consume too few vegetables, fruits, high-fiber whole grains, low-fat milk and milk products, and seafood and they eat too much added sugars, solid fats, refined grains, and sodium. SoFAS (solid fats and added sugars) contribute approximately 35 percent of calories to the American diet. This is true for children, adolescents, adults, and older adults and for both males and females. Reducing the intake of SoFAS can lead to a badly needed reduction in energy intake and inclusion of more healthful foods into the total diet.

The problem is that the people responsible for giving out farm subsidies and other production incentives at the USDA seem to have not read the memo. Most of the farm programs the agency doles out go to producers of animal feed, cotton (also an animal feed in the form of cotton seed) and tobacco, rather than fruits, nuts, and vegetables.

Michael Pollan has recently offered some common sense basic food rules of his own: *Eat food, mostly plants, not too much.*

Here are a few concepts that I leave you with on this topic of Eating Consciously.

**Keep peeling the onion.** Educating yourself is a lifelong journey. It's one of the most important steps that we can take in learning to become conscious eaters.

**None of us are saints.** California chef Jesse Cool talks about the 80/20 rule. She tries to eat well 80 percent of the time, knowing that she will splurge from her ideal diet every once in a while. In her incredible book, *This Life is In Your Hands*, Melissa Coleman writes about some of the chinks in the armor of her famous neighbors growing up. Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing motivated a lot of people to move back to the land in the 1960s, '70s and '80s with their chronicles and

prescriptions of living *The Good Life*. They were accomplished gardeners even in the most challenging northern climates and avid canners who notoriously ate out of their cold cellar. Yet, Melissa Coleman tells us, Helen Nearing also had a real soft spot for ice cream.

***Growing is knowing.*** Once you've raised animals or plants, and you understand what it takes to care for them and potentially lose them, you cross a threshold in conscious eating that is very hard to retreat from. It opens a door to both a whole new enjoyment of flavor and appreciation of food producers. For this I hope that we do succeed in revolutionizing schools around the country to develop a broad cultural understanding of gardening, cooking and healthy food preparation.

***Familiarity is the highest form of certification.*** This may sound elitist to those concerned about food justice for all. But it is one of the axioms we must all accept. Labels like organic and antibiotic-free are marketing programs deep down. They are important but also have their own serious concerns and limitations. The best way to learn about where something comes from is to go to the source: the place where it's grown.

***It matters whose side you're on.*** I'm on the side of the small farmers and the native bees and the predators and healthy oceans and fairly paid growers and preparers of food. I try to stay on their side by supporting them with food choices as much as humanly possible.

***A measure of society is how it treats its animals.*** I think this speaks for itself.

***Vote with your fork.*** Many of us can make decisions about the world we would like to see three times a day in the foods we eat and purchase. Eating is an agricultural act, as Wendell Berry wrote in his great essay "The Art of Eating." But conscious eating is also a political act, and at no time is that played out more obviously than every five years during the Farm Bill reauthorization.

I confess. I am a reluctant wonk. But I also realize that policies at the national level shape our food and farming system. If we don't press our representatives to vote for a farm bill that truly supports a healthy food system—conservation programs, environmental incentives, diversified agriculture, efforts to bring farmers and consumers together, healthy food programs for kids and low-income families—then Big Agribusiness will write one for us. The Farm Bill officially expires on September 30, 2012. There is still time to learn about it and find ways to pitch in.

***Eat to Live, Don't Live to Eat.*** When I was growing up in southern Pennsylvania, meals were the gathering place for my family and dinner time was a much-anticipated event. Still, we had a sign on our wall that read: "Eat to Live Don't Live to Eat."

Those are wise words, but in today's world things aren't so simple, aren't so black and white. Perhaps a sign for today would read: "Eat Consciously." And by that I mean, Eat with reverence, Eat with awareness, Eat with familiarity, and Eat so that others who come after us may also participate in this wonderful bounty and abundance that is ours.

*This essay was presented at the Northern Kentucky Farmer's Fair, August 2011.*