

## Study & Discussion Questions for *Omnivore's Dilemma*

### Introduction:

- What is meant by “national eating disorder”? Do you find the idea credible? Why?/why not?
- Pollan contrasts American eating habits with those of other cultures, particularly the French. Why? Do you think this is a valid comparison? Why?/Why not?
- Explain the concept of the omnivore’s dilemma.
- Summarize the ideas behind Pollan’s four meals.
- How do you think our industrial food chain could put our health at risk?

### Chapter 1:

- How are US-Americans “corn people”?
- What sort of problems might arise from having so much of our food/ingredients produced from one crop?
- How has corn domesticated us?

### Chapter 2:

- How has government policy shaped corn production and, thus, in part, what we eat?
- Explain the technological advances that led to these changes in farming.
- What do you see as being the upsides and downsides of these changes in agriculture?

### Chapter 3:

- Explain the differences between corn as food and corn as a commodity. Who had driven this shift to commodity and how?
- What effects might this commodification of corn have on our health?

### Chapter 4:

- Compare the natural versus the industrial diets for our beef.
- What effects on human health might be caused by this dietary shift and the accompanying use of medications on beef cattle?

### Chapter 5:

- Explain the concept of an “industrial eater.”
- Think about your own eating habits. Are the food processing companies successful in their tactics for overcoming your ability to eat a fixed maximum of food each year? How?/How not?

### Chapter 6:

- What health problems are associated with high fructose corn syrup?

- How have this and other highly processed ingredients come to be such a central part of the American diet?

#### Chapter 7:

- What are the pluses and minuses of such a corn-intensive diet? Taken into consideration our health, the environment, the economy, and even energy independence. Who wins? Who loses? How?
- Toward the end of this chapter (pg. 117), Pollan asks, “Why should it matter that we have become a race of corn eaters such as the world has never seen? Is this necessarily a bad thing?” How would Pollan likely answer these questions? You?

#### Chapter 8:

- Explain the concept of “grass farming” – how is this a different understanding of agriculture?
- Explain the concept of “industrial organic”?

#### Chapter 9:

- Explain and give examples of “grocery lit.” Does such “literature” affect the way you think about food and your buying decisions? Why/why not?
- Compare and contrast the industrial food chain from the first section of the book with the industrial organic described in this chapter. How different are they?
- What are the health and environmental (since environment is also connected to health) impacts of industrial organic? Is it worth the extra cost and effort to eat organic? Why?/Why not?

#### Chapter 10:

- Revisit your earlier (Ch. 8) definition of grass farming. With this more in-depth discussion, how would you now define it?
- Summarize the steps and things that must be taken into consideration for successful grass farming.

#### Chapter 11:

- As we saw on George Naylor’s corn farm in Iowa, most American farms no longer grow a wide variety of crops, but Joel Salatin’s approach to animal farming shows a deeply interconnected system. Explain the different aspects of the system and how each part contributes to the larger whole.
- What sort of health benefits might this different approach to animal husbandry (including the grass farming from Ch. 10) have on our health?

#### Chapter 12:

- What does Pollan tell us here about our food safety regulations? Do you think the regulations & regulatory system make sense? Why/Why not?
- How safe do you think our food supply is? Why?
- What changes do you think might be beneficial in the food safety regulatory system?

#### Chapter 13:

- What does Pollan suggest about the cost of industrial food versus Salatin's food?
- What do our food choices say about our priorities as a society?
- Does the idea that you may over the long term spend less on healthcare if you were to spend more on naturally produced foods seem credible to you? Why?/Why not?

#### Chapter 14:

- How does Pollan think his meal produced by Joel Salatin's farm might be nutritionally different from a similar meal grown on a regular, industrial farm? Do you agree? Why?/Why not?

#### Chapter 15:

- Do you agree with Pollan that the hunter-gatherer food chain is no longer sufficient for us?
- What would be the costs or benefits to trying to restore more of that food chain? Could that effort be viable? Why/Why not?

#### Chapter 16:

- What are the good and bad points to the omnivore's dilemma in Pollan's view?
- What are the influences of culture on what we eat? How might this affect our health?
- Pollan focuses quite narrowly on the United States in terms of the difficulties of food choices and the issues with our food production methods. Do you think the American diet is that different from that of other countries? Why?/Why not?
- According to [www.aboutmcdonalds.com](http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com), McDonald's is found in 118 countries – what does that say about our globalized food chain versus narrow American eating habits?

#### Chapter 17:

- Summarize the various ethical questions discussed with regard to eating meat.
- What are your own views on the ethical question of animal suffering and your (potential) meat consumption?

#### Chapter 18:

- What different emotions does Pollan experience while hunting?
- If you have hunted, have you experienced similar feelings? Explain.
- Do you think hunting your own food would give (or gives) you a different perspective as you eat? Why?/Why not?

### Chapter 19:

- What does mushroom foraging suggest about the omnivore's dilemma?

### Chapter 20:

- Pollan indicates that the meal he has produced is at the far opposite end of the human food chain from his first meal at McDonald's and that "the pleasures of one are based on nearly perfect knowledge; the pleasures of the other on an equally perfect ignorance." (pg. 410). Do you agree with Pollan? Why?/Why not?
- Why does Pollan say that both his first and last meals are "equally unsustainable" (pg. 411)? Do you agree? Why?/Why not? Do you think the industrial organic or locally grown are significantly more sustainable? Why?/Why not?
- Has reading this book changed the way you think about food or what you choose to eat? Why/How?/Why not?
- What connections do you see between what you eat and your health? How has the book affected your thinking in that regard?