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Looking at twenty years of American eating, from Big Macs to DIY bacon.

MELANIE REHAK

The holidays are fast approaching as I write this column, bringing the usual flurry of thoughts about what to cook for the rush of upcoming festive dinners. Whatever delicacies appear on my table (along with the family recipes that have been grandfathered in despite their dependence on canned soups), they're guaranteed to be pretty different from what I, and everybody else in America, was making in the kitchen twenty years ago (heritage-breed turkey, I'm looking at you). Between then and now, the way we eat has evolved in ways both wonderful and worrying, and how we write about what we eat has reflected that progression accordingly. We've gone from books that taught us simply how to cook, to books that told us the truth about the food others produced and cooked for us, to books telling us how we can eat better ourselves and make sure everyone else has the opportunity to do the same, both now and in the climate-challenged future.

But the change has not been wholesale, and awareness, as invariably happens, often remains eclipsed by practical realities. Leading up to Thanksgiving of 1994, an article in the *New York Times* about the growing interest in traditional American foods quoted the president of a California company that had just launched a line of "lost crops," who noted that "most people still do not know what quinoa and jicama are." I can't vouch for jicama, but I recently saw a six-pack of sodium-laden precooked quinoa pouches at Costco, which fairly neatly sums up the American food scene now. Even as better food becomes more widely known and available, we still find ways to overprocess and eat too much of it, and we still expect to do so both easily and inexpensively.

The fact that I can even write that last sentence is, of course, thanks to Eric Schlosser. In 1998, *Rolling Stone* published his two-part exposé of "the dark side of the all-American meal," which would go on to become *Fast Food Nation* (2001), opening the door to a new understanding of eating. Schlosser was the first to draw the attention of a mass audience to the subject of how food is made, and he did it, like Upton Sinclair before him, the old-fashioned way: through exhaustive reporting mixed with just the right dose of sensationalism. In an era of SnackWells cookies and the Atkins Diet, he forced us to look at food as more than just something that made us fat or thin, revealing the rotten inner workings of the system, previously unknown to most readers, that was feeding them. Whether or not you were a big consumer of meals from McDonald's or Taco Bell, what Schlosser had to say was impossible to ignore. I remember wandering in and out of grocery stores unable to buy anything for at least a week after I finished the book, because he'd made me call into question the political, economic, and environmental backstory of every product on the shelves. I got over it to a large degree—eventually you have to fill the refrigerator again—but never fully.

Clearly, I was not alone in this reaction. When Michael Pollan came along with *The Omnivore's Dilemma* in 2006, his complex book about corporate food behemoths, the food lobby, the environment, and nutrition was slyly marketed for maximum effect as an answer to the most basic of questions: "What should we have for dinner?" Pollan's follow-up, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (2008), gave the millions of people who were wondering what to do next a simple plan of action (repeat after me—as if you didn't already know it by heart—"Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants"). The reductiveness of this mantra was almost comforting as a defense mechanism against our new, terrifying knowledge of what our eating habits were doing to our bodies, our planet, and our fellow humans.

Just a few months after *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, David Kamp's *The United States of Arugula: How We Became A Gourmet Nation* appeared. An exploration of America's evolution from a place that "long struggled with the very idea of culinary sophistication" to one where you could get salsa and sushi in every supermarket, Kamp's book didn't make nearly as much of a mark as Pollan's. I suspect this was in part because it told us about where we had already been, not where we might be heading. Looking back, however, it's essential reading for understanding what has come to occupy the opposite end of the food spectrum from the cheap, mass-produced meals that Schlosser and Pollan warned us against. Taken together, these three writers explain the apparently endless craze—at least in certain very visible circles—for artisanal everything (Kamp), made in small batches and often by hand (Schlosser) from ingredients that tend to be, if not organic, at least locally grown (Pollan).

Much of the country, of course, is not strolling the local farmers' market snacking on hand

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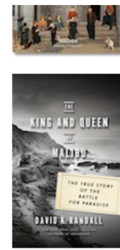
DOING
TONIGHT?

Much of the country, of course, is not strolling the local farmers' market snacking on hand-cut french fries made from heirloom potatoes dipped in handcrafted mayonnaise. Regardless of Schlosser, Pollan, Paul Greenberg, Alice Waters, and many others, the majority of Americans are still living in a fast-food nation, because it is where they are able to live. A recent study released by the Harvard School of Public Health shows that the "food gap"—"nutritional disparities between America's rich and poor," as *The Atlantic*'s James Hamblin explains it—doubled between 2000 and 2010. As some of us stand at the Whole Foods fish counter reading the labels detailing what's sustainable and "wild caught," trying to make conscientious decisions about our groceries, others are standing in line for a dollar meal at the golden arches because, whether due to convenience, price, or the sheer absence of anything else, it remains their best option. We know all of this and yet are still largely powerless, it seems, to stop it. If the recent proliferation of Dunkin' Donuts in New York City, where I live—each with the required, if useless, calorie postings next to the achingly sweet offerings—is anything to go by, the big business of American fast food is doing just fine.



Still from "The Dream of the 1890s." From *Portlandia*, Season 2, Episode 5.

So, what does it mean to live in a world where it's more effective to promote healthier eating through legislation (another major finding of the Harvard study) than through education? Where books about food, the thing that literally keeps us alive, have phrases like "in defense of" and "a manifesto" in their titles? Where those of us who have the means and the will to eat well fetishize it to an often ridiculous degree, or elevate it to the level of performance art à la Grant Achatz, even as other people are having trouble just getting a meal on the table? As in politics (not to mention because of them), the country is deeply polarized. We have small farmers struggling to survive while big agriculture steamrolls over them. Industrial factory farming continues to thrive, while hipster meat markets offer classes on butchering animals—something most of us will never need do except as a novelty—for $85 a pop, cold beers and permission to share the gory details on Instagram included. As the ever-astute *Portlandia* put it recently in a crooning musical number called "The Dream of the 1890s," filled with self-consciously bearded men in extremely retro clothes: "People raise their own chickens and cure their own meats. . . . Welcome to the sausage party!"

To me, all of this signifies that we're living in a kind of post-food world. In the same way that scientists often refer to our era as the Anthropocene, meaning a time in which human activities have affected all of Earth's ecosystems, even in places we think of as wild, we're now living in an era when food, whether it's mass-produced or carefully grown on a tiny plot, always represents a larger concept—not just something to eat. What used to be a pile of vegetables is now an emblem, and we can never go back to the time before it was so.

In the opening of *American Catch: The Fight for Our Local Seafood*, the latest addition to the shelf of books examining the damage we've done to our food supply and the ways we might be able to remedy it, Paul Greenberg writes: "It is a particularly American contradiction that the thing we should be eating most is the thing most absent from our plates." He's talking about fish and shellfish, but to my mind the statement applies to pretty much everything Americans have learned to eat over the last twenty years. It will take at least another generation before we know if the opposite ends of the food spectrum have a chance of leveling out into any kind of happy medium, wherein good food is available to everyone and we can all just sit down to dinner without quite so much baggage. By then, who knows what Costco will be selling.

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