

## “Unhappy Meals”

By Michael Pollan

*The New York Times Magazine*, January 28, 2007

(This is an excerpt. For the full article, go to <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/unhappy-meals/> )

Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

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To medicalize the diet problem is of course perfectly consistent with nutritionism. So what might a more ecological or cultural approach to the problem recommend? How might we plot our escape from nutritionism and, in turn, from the deleterious effects of the modern diet? In theory nothing could be simpler — stop thinking and eating that way — but this is somewhat harder to do in practice, given the food environment we now inhabit and the loss of sharp cultural tools to guide us through it. Still, I do think escape is possible, to which end I can now revisit — and elaborate on, but just a little — the simple principles of healthy eating I proposed at the beginning of this essay, several thousand words ago. So try these few (flagrantly unscientific) rules of thumb, collected in the course of my nutritional odyssey, and see if they don't at least point us in the right direction.

1. **Eat food.** Though in our current state of confusion, this is much easier said than done. So try this: Don't eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. (Sorry, but at this point Moms are as confused as the rest of us, which is why we have to go back a couple of generations, to a time before the advent of modern food products.) There are a great many foodlike items in the supermarket your ancestors wouldn't recognize as food (Go-Gurt? Breakfast-cereal bars? Nondairy creamer?); stay away from these.
2. **Avoid even those food products that come bearing health claims.** They're apt to be heavily processed, and the claims are often dubious at best. Don't forget that margarine, one of the first industrial foods to claim that it was more healthful than the traditional food it replaced, turned out to give people heart attacks. When Kellogg's can boast about its Healthy Heart Strawberry Vanilla cereal bars, health claims have become hopelessly compromised. (The American Heart Association charges food makers for their endorsement.) Don't take the silence of the yams as a sign that they have nothing valuable to say about health.
3. **Especially avoid food products containing ingredients that are a) unfamiliar, b) unpronounceable c) more than five in number — or that contain high-fructose corn syrup.** None of these characteristics are necessarily harmful in and of themselves, but all of them are reliable markers for foods that have been highly processed.
4. **Get out of the supermarket whenever possible.** You won't find any high-fructose corn syrup at the farmer's market; you also won't find food harvested long ago and far away. What you will find are fresh whole foods picked at the peak of nutritional quality. Precisely the kind of food your great-great-grandmother would have recognized as food.
5. **Pay more, eat less.** The American food system has for a century devoted its energies and policies to increasing quantity and reducing price, not to improving quality. There's no escaping the fact that better food — measured by taste or nutritional quality (which often correspond) — costs more, because it has been grown or raised less intensively and with more care. Not everyone can afford to eat well in America, which is shameful, but most of us can: Americans spend, on average, less than 10 percent of their income on food, down from 24 percent in 1947, and less than the citizens of any other nation. And those of us who can afford to eat well should. Paying more for food well grown in good soils — whether certified organic or not — will contribute not only to your health (by reducing exposure to pesticides) but also to the health of others who might not themselves be able to afford that

sort of food: the people who grow it and the people who live downstream, and downwind, of the farms where it is grown.

”Eat less” is the most unwelcome advice of all, but in fact the scientific case for eating a lot less than we currently do is compelling. ”Calorie restriction” has repeatedly been shown to slow aging in animals, and many researchers (including Walter Willett, the Harvard epidemiologist) believe it offers the single strongest link between diet and cancer prevention. Food abundance is a problem, but culture has helped here, too, by promoting the idea of moderation. Once one of the longest-lived people on earth, the Okinawans practiced a principle they called ”Hara Hachi Bu”: eat until you are 80 percent full. To make the ”eat less” message a bit more palatable, consider that quality may have a bearing on quantity: I don’t know about you, but the better the quality of the food I eat, the less of it I need to feel satisfied. All tomatoes are not created equal.

6. **Eat mostly plants, especially leaves.** Scientists may disagree on what’s so good about plants — the antioxidants? Fiber? Omega-3s? — but they do agree that they’re probably really good for you and certainly can’t hurt. Also, by eating a plant-based diet, you’ll be consuming far fewer calories, since plant foods (except seeds) are typically less ”energy dense” than the other things you might eat. Vegetarians are healthier than carnivores, but near vegetarians (”flexitarians”) are as healthy as vegetarians. Thomas Jefferson was on to something when he advised treating meat more as a flavoring than a food.
7. **Eat more like the French.** Or the Japanese. Or the Italians. Or the Greeks. Confounding factors aside, people who eat according to the rules of a traditional food culture are generally healthier than we are. Any traditional diet will do: if it weren’t a healthy diet, the people who follow it wouldn’t still be around. True, food cultures are embedded in societies and economies and ecologies, and some of them travel better than others: Inuit not so well as Italian. In borrowing from a food culture, pay attention to how a culture eats, as well as to what it eats. In the case of the French paradox, it may not be the dietary nutrients that keep the French healthy (lots of saturated fat and alcohol?!) so much as the dietary habits: small portions, no seconds or snacking, communal meals — and the serious pleasure taken in eating. (Worrying about diet can’t possibly be good for you.) Let culture be your guide, not science.
8. **Cook.** And if you can, plant a garden. To take part in the intricate and endlessly interesting processes of providing for our sustenance is the surest way to escape the culture of fast food and the values implicit in it: that food should be cheap and easy; that food is fuel and not communion. The culture of the kitchen, as embodied in those enduring traditions we call cuisines, contains more wisdom about diet and health than you are apt to find in any nutrition journal or journalism. Plus, the food you grow yourself contributes to your health long before you sit down to eat it. So you might want to think about putting down this article now and picking up a spatula or hoe.
9. **Eat like an omnivore.** Try to add new species, not just new foods, to your diet. The greater the diversity of species you eat, the more likely you are to cover all your nutritional bases. That of course is an argument from nutritionism, but there is a better one, one that takes a broader view of ”health.” Biodiversity in the diet means less monoculture in the fields. What does that have to do with your health? Everything. The vast monocultures that now feed us require tremendous amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to keep from collapsing. Diversifying those fields will mean fewer chemicals, healthier soils, healthier plants and animals and, in turn, healthier people. It’s all connected, which is another way of saying that your health isn’t bordered by your body and that what’s good for the soil is probably good for you, too.

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**Suggested Reading:** [The Omnivore’s Dilemma](#) by Michael Pollan

**Suggested Watching:** [Fed Up](#) (2014), [King Corn](#) (2007), and [Food Inc.](#) (2008)