

Omnivore's Dilemma Chapter by Chapter Summary.docx

by Jennifer Cook

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Book: Omnivore's Dilemma by: Michael Pollan

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Chapter by Chapter Summary

In this book, Michael Pollan presents various philosophical points to entice his readers and audience to question their current eating habits.

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Part I: Industrial Corn

Chapter 1: The Plant – Corn's Conquest

1. **How have Americans become "people of the corn?"** Society relies on corn for a variety of different things, not just food products. Mexicans have utilized corn heavily in their diet for 1,000's of years. However, Pollan states at one point, "But carbon 13 doesn't lie, and researchers who have compared the isotopes in the flesh or hair of Americans to shoes in the same tissues of Mexicans report that it is now we in the North who are the true people of corn" (p. 23). "So that's us: processed corn, walking," Pollan asserts (p. 23). Corn is a staple in many of the products on the market today. Some of these products include chicken, pig, turkey, goat, and cow feed, it is the source for flour and some cooking oils, coloring in some processed foods, the sweetener in soft drinks, the shine on shiny magazines, linoleum and fiberglass adhesives, and so much more. I think Americans underestimate just how many products actually come from the use of corn.
2. **Can there be problems for America from relying so much on the use of corn?** If society will think about this in the correct perspective, they will see just how many problems can arise from relying so heavily on corn. First of all, let's just say there is a drought. There will be a lack of food (corn) due to this. This will cause prices to go up on everything. It will then be difficult for people to feed their farm animals, produce certain magazines, and build certain structures. Everything will go up to support the fact that there is less corn available to produce these products. Another problem could be the pesticides that are used to keep bugs away from the corn crops. It could cause disease to people relying on these particular crops. "There are some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket and more than a quarter of them now contain corn," Pollan states. (p. 19). That is a large number of products that we rely on and expect to always be available. That is a pretty scary number.
3. **Has corn made American people more domesticated?** Corn has domesticated American people, but people have also domesticated the corn over the years. Society has

produced numerous hybrid forms of corn, and dedicates a large portion of our land to continue producing it in high numbers.

Chapter 2: The Farm

1. **How has government shaped how corn is produced; therefore influencing what society eats?** The food pyramid was produced by the government. Because of this, it has dictated to people what is supposedly healthy to eat. However, some things are not what society would naturally eat.
2. **What technological advances led to changes in farming?** Better equipment allowed the farmers to plant even more corn and faster. More and more corn led to prices falling. Because of the falling prices of the corn, the corn farmer had to continue growing even more corn to keep up with their own bills and standards of living. Therefore, less and less of their land was used to plant other plants. It was and still is a vicious circle.

Chapter 3: The Elevator

1. **What are the differences between corn as food and corn as a commodity?** Corn as a food was grown more on a personal level from farmer to consumer. The consumer always knew the origin of the corn. It was actually taste tested before the consumer bought it. This gave the farmers the incentive to produce “quality” corn, if they wanted to sell their corn. Commodity corn is more industrialized. It is fed through the corn “elevator,” which leaves much of the corn wasted on the ground and elsewhere. This consists mainly of No. 2 “field corn.” It is produced more for quantity rather than quality.
2. **Who drove the shift of corn to a commodity and how?** Companies such as Cargill train and ADM continue to drive the shift in corn to commodity. They are able to do this, because they are the people that provide the farmers with pesticides and fertilizers operate most of America’s grain elevators, and other things in relation to corn production. “These companies are the true beneficiaries of the “farm” subsidies that keep the river of cheap corn flowing,” Pollan explains (p. 63).
3. **How does corn as a commodity affect the health of society?** It can affect the health of society, because it is no longer sold on a personal level; therefore, the quality of the corn is being compromised. Instead of knowing how and where the corn comes from, society no longer has the privilege of knowing this. Due to the demand of needing to grow the corn faster and faster, corn is probably grown with many more chemicals than it once was.

Chapter 4: The Feedlot – Making Meat (54,000 Kernels)

1. **What is the difference in natural versus the industrial diets for our beef?** The natural diet for beef consists mainly of grass. The industrial diet is more or less grain fed. Beef cows are less frequently grown out on grass now, because it takes them longer to reach

the correct weight for the slaughter house. Speed is the main factor in the use of grains to feed cattle. Corn⁴ fed beef also displays more marbling, which is considered a good attribute in beef. The USDA's grading system has been designed to reward marbling, Pollan asserts (p. 73). Not to mention, corn is a cheaper method of feeding the cattle than some of the other options and also provides a way to use the excess corn that is produced.

2. **What kind of health problems can the use of medications and the dietary shift on beef cattle cause for humans?** Antibiotics are used to keep cattle healthy enough to tolerate the high amount corn feed that is fed to them on a feedlot (Pollan, p. 78). The use of these antibiotics in cattle and other animals is the reason society is facing antibiotic-resistant superbugs. This is a huge problem in the US and is going to continue getting worse in the years to come, if agriculture continues down the same path. As a nurse, I already see the problem with antibiotic-resistance daily.

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Chapter 5: The Processing Plant – Making Complex Foods (18,000 Kernels)

1. **What does being an “industrial eater” mean?** I believe that an “industrial eater” is one who consumes processed foods. Unfortunately for the consumer, this means just about everything that is in the supermarket. One cannot really trust the “all natural” or “organic” labels on foods either. More than likely, even these foods have been processed at some point along the way.
2. **Do you think that the food processing companies want us to eat more?** Yes, I do feel that the food processing companies want us to eat more. They do this by adding other ingredients to the processed foods that allow us to eat more. The reason they want us to eat more is pretty obvious to me. The more we eat, the more money they make. Food processing companies have everyone tricked into believing that what they are feeding us is the most beneficial for our health. This is simply not the case.

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Chapter 6: The Consumer – A Republic of Fat

1. **How does high fructose corn syrup affect your health?** High fructose corn syrup can contribute to obesity, high blood pressure, coronary disease, and diabetes.
2. **How has high fructose corn syrup and other processed foods become such a focal point in American diets?** Fructose is cheaper than sugar. Therefore, it has been put into more and more products. Because it is cheaper, providing more bang for the buck, lower income families buy these products more. This is how these foods end up becoming staples in the American diet. It all goes back to the fact that the excess corn needs to be pushed somewhere in order to get rid of it.

Chapter 7: The Meal – Fast Food

1. **What is the upside and downside of a corn-intensive diet?** Look at health, the environment, the economy, and energy independence. After reading this chapter and the rest of the book thus far, I do not really feel there is an upside to a corn-intensive diet. It is unhealthy in so many ways and continues to get worse. It is unhealthy for the environment, as it is wreaking havoc on the farmer's land due to growing more and more corn. It is unhealthy for the economy, because society is being sucked into a never ending trap. In regards to energy, we are wasting a large amount of corn which is energy wasted. This is also detrimental to our planet. I love my corn, do not get me wrong, but I may just have to reconsider my own eating habits after reading this information.
2. **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" (p. 117)? How would you answer this question?** I agree with Pollan that this depends on who you are. If you are the businesses, then it matters because the high production rate of corn means more money to them. However, if you are the consumer, the more corn and processed foods that you eat, the less healthy you become. Unfortunately, many continue to do this even though they know it is bad for them, because it is what they can afford. In addition to this, fast food has also become popular for many working people due to time constraints. Fast food is nothing but empty calories. For the farmer, the more corn that is sold, the lower the price of the corn becomes, which then makes them have to grow even more corn to keep up with their own finances. This eventually leads to poorer soil on their land from growing so much corn. Once again, it is a vicious cycle.

References

Pollan, M. (2006). *The omnivore's dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York: Penguin Press.

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