



# KANSAS CITY FOOD CIRCLE

The KCFC Update: Spring 2008

## Farmer pledges program going well

This year the KC Food Circle introduced a requirement that producer members sign a *farmers pledge* signifying adherence to a more detailed set of farming practices that generally correspond to organic and free-range food production. In the past we had relied on a verbal understanding in this regard. In order to smooth the transition we provided an opportunity for our producers to list exceptions.

We made this change for two reasons. First we became concerned that the existing system was subject to misunderstanding of what we meant by “organic” and “free range.” Secondly we sensed that the rapid increase in interest in locally grown food was creating a drift away from the farming practices that have been the central focus of the KC Food Circle since its inception almost 20 years ago. In other words we stand inseparably for locally-grown, organic and more humane treatment of farm animals.

We are pleased to report that almost all our existing and new members signed the applicable pledge. While we had the usual number who did not renew this year, only two expressed reservations about the pledge. Only six producers listed exceptions and they were generally minor.

For example several beef producers use some synthetic fertilizers on hayfields, and one producer uses treated seeds for a couple for vegetables. We had a few exceptions for the limited use of pesticides with detailed explanations for why they thought it essential. While this is of greater concern, the coordinating committee’s inclination was, for the most part, to accept these for one year only, and work with these producers to see what changes could be made. By April you should be able to access our producers pledges on the *Know Your Growers* section of our website.

Our thanks to John Kurmann who conceived and led this effort, and to David Lawrence who is handling the considerable work of incorporating this information onto our website.

### In Defense of Food:

#### An Eater’s Manifesto by Michael Pollan

Due to his occasional articles in *The New York Times Magazine* and his book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Michael Pollan (MichaelPollan.com) is likely the foremost writer in America today focusing on the damage being done by the conventional food system. He also writes about the alternatives to it, particularly industrial organic agriculture and locally-based, “beyond organic” food systems.

Pollan’s new book, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, lives up to his past work, but I expect it will be

useful to a larger number of people than *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Most aren’t likely to read a 464-page book about the food system. Fortunately, *In Defense of Food* is just 256 pages, and it’s also a distinctly different sort of book.

Pollan begins by laying out the meager evidence which underlies modern nutritional science and the enormous flaws in the reductionist methods it uses to reach its conclusions. You may be shocked to see how weak the foundations have been of the nutritional guideline to “eat a lowfat diet,” for starters. Pollan also adopts the term “nutritionism” from Australian sociologist of science Gyorgy Scrinis to name the nutritional ideology that has become pervasive in the U.S. over the last few decades.

“Nutritionism” is based on the assumption that what’s important about foods are the amounts of individual identified nutrients they contain—both those deemed “good” and those deemed “bad”—not their entire evolved complex of chemical compounds—their **wholeness**.

Nutritionism has multiple destructive effects, not the least of which is that it allows highly-processed “edible food-like substances” (Pollan’s apt term) to be considered nutritionally equivalent to whole foods once they’re fortified with the “good” nutrients of the moment (even if those added nutrients are of synthetic origin) and stripped of the “bad” ones.

After demolishing “nutritionism,” Pollan explores the damage done to our health by the switch from the traditional ethnic diets of our ancestors to the modern Western diet, which manifests in what are commonly called “the diseases of civilization.” By his reckoning, five major dietary transformations form the core of that dietary transition: from whole foods to refined; from complexity to simplicity; from quality to quantity; from leaves to seeds; from food culture to food science.

All of these have had the effect of reducing the nutritional value of our food supply, though that wasn’t the reason for them. This loss of nutritional quality occurred out of ignorance while farmers and food processors pursued yield increases, longer shelf-lives, and profits.

Pollan makes a telling point about refined foods: “Store food is food designed to be stored and transported over long distances, and the surest way to make food more stable and less vulnerable to pests is to remove the nutrients from it.” Seems to me that’d be a good thing to remind yourself of as you walk through the supermarket, deciding what to put in your cart.

While explaining how we’ve gone “from complexity to simplicity” and “From quality to quantity,” Pollan explores the evidence that conventionally-grown food has become less nutritious over the last century and the theories about the role conventional farming practices have played in causing this decline. Here’s how he puts the nutrient decline in concrete terms:

“...You now have to eat three apples to get the same

amount of iron as you would have gotten from a single 1940 apple, and you'd have to eat several more slices of bread to get your recommended daily allowance of zinc than you would have a century ago."

Pollan explains the destructive impact of the transformation from a diet with green plants at the base to a diet based on seeds—particularly grains—not only those we eat directly but also the corn and soybeans we feed to farm animals confined in meat, milk, poultry, and egg factories. This has dramatically changed the proportions of Omega-3 and Omega-6 essential fatty acids people eat, with devastating health effects.

Pollan goes on to offer up what he calls "eating algorithms—mental programs that, if you run them when you're shopping for food or deciding on a meal, will produce a great many different dinners, all of them 'healthy' in the broadest sense of that word." He formulates an elegantly simple yet substantive nutshell prescription to encompass **all** these eating algorithms: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

The only major reservation I have is that Pollan doesn't advocate a place-based diet—one centered on the foods that are well-suited to be grown in one's particular part of the world—in the book. It seems to me that the only truly sustainable diets are place-based, and the sooner we develop one here, at the confluence of the Missouri and Kaw Rivers, the better off we'll be.

*In Defense of Food* should be readily available from all the usual booksellers (though I'll put in a plug for locally-owned, independent shops over national chains). I'm confident you can get it through your local library branch, too, though there may be a wait given that it was published within the last couple months.—*John Kurmann*

### **Dangers from food imports**

Imports of food into the US have doubled since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed in 1993 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1994, according to Public Citizen of Washington, D.C. In 2005, the US became a net food importer for the first time. While Congress wrings its hands about the safety of imported food, it keeps approving trade deals that prioritize increasing the volume of imports over food safety. The FDA will conduct border inspections on only 0.6% of imported fruits and vegetables, seafood, grains and dairy in 2007, down from 8% prior to NAFTA and the WTO.

Americans are three times more likely to be exposed to dangerous pesticide residues on imported foods as compared to domestically-produced foods. With energy costs soaring, why are we importing all this food anyway? Staying away from these risks is another reason to buy local and organic these days. For more info, contact Public Citizen at [Citizen.org](http://Citizen.org).—CV

### **"Natural" is a meaningless term for processed food**

The USDA and FDA are in the process of updating their rules qualifying food products for the label "natural," which has led chicken producers to fight over what constitutes "natural" chicken. The big guys, Tyson and Pilgrim's Pride, want to call their chicken "natural" even though it is

pumped up 15% by weight with an injected solution of salt, broth and seaweed extract. About 30% of chicken is now "enhanced" in this manner.

The USDA approved the label saying these are "natural" ingredients. Small producers have cried foul (fowl?), saying real chickens don't contain that much salt and eaters are being deceived. According to them, an untreated chicken contains 40-80 mg of sodium per four oz. while treated chicken contains 180 to 330 mg, not so good for blood pressure (Source: [Bloomberg.com](http://Bloomberg.com)). Hmm. How "natural" are the antibiotic-resistant bacteria that coat many supermarket chickens?

Currently the FDA will allow a food to be labeled "natural" if the product does not contain artificial color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances. The USDA also says meat products with this label must be "minimally-processed." Meanwhile, cane and beet sugar manufacturers want high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) disqualified from being considered "natural" under the new rules on the basis that the original chemical state of this sweetener is greatly altered during processing. We agree that HFCS is not exactly "natural" (for more info on HFCS, see the *Summer 2006 Update* article by nutritionist Jill McLaughlin in our *Update* archive at [KCFoodCircle.org](http://KCFoodCircle.org)). In any event, all this sugar in the American diet is widely thought to be a major contributing factor in the epidemic of obesity and diabetes that has swept the nation over the last few decades. We'll take our sweets in their original fruit, veggie, and honey packages granted by Mother Nature and supplied by local farmers.—CV

## **Briefs**

**Pest resistance to GE crops.** Scientists at the University of Arizona have discovered the first documented case of pest resistance to genetically engineered crops. They found populations of boll worms resistant to Bt toxins in genetically engineered cotton fields. The report can be found in *Nature Biotechnology*. Source: *The Financial Times*, Feb. 2008.

**Arsenic in chicken feed.** A Duquesne University Researcher has discovered a link between a chicken feed additive containing arsenic and possible human health impacts. He found that the antibiotic arsenic compound roxarsone, which promotes growth of blood vessels in chicken to produce pinker meat, does the same thing to human cells. This same process occurs in many diseases and cancers. More than 95% of roxarsone in feed passes through chickens and can threaten workers as manure dust or contaminate water supplies. In response to previous studies identifying risks to health and environment, Tyson Foods stopped using arsenic additives in 2004 and Perdue Farms in 2007. Source: *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Feb. 2008

***This is a KC Food Circle original publication. Past issues are archived at [www.KCFoodCircle.org](http://www.KCFoodCircle.org) For more information, you are welcome to write to KC Food Circle, P.O. Box 45195, KCMO, 64171, or call our hotline at 816-374-5899.***