

BOOKS



Eat natural: a farmer and his son on their organic pig farm in New Hampton, Iowa

Corbis

Something to chew over

Although often priced cheaply, mass-produced food costs us far more dearly than we think, says Sarah Murray

Food, glorious food! What is there more handsome? Gulp, swallowed or chewed – still worth a king's ransom!" sing the hungry workhouse boys in the musical *Oliver!*. Sadly, such an unreservedly joyous approach to eating is becoming harder to countenance. As the environmental impact of agribusiness emerges and an obesity epidemic sweeps across the globe, food is at the heart of fierce debates.

These debates have spawned plenty of books. Marion Nestle, Eric Schlosser and Morgan Spurlock are among those to have highlighted the more unsavoury aspects of our industrialised food supply. Joining them are Michael Pollan with *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and Princeton bio-ethicist Peter Singer and his co-author Jim Mason with *The Way We Eat*.

Both books explore the social and environmental impact of what we eat, using small lenses through which to scrutinise big issues: Pollan analyses a series of meals, while Singer and Mason take the food purchases of four families and examine how they were produced.

Singer and Mason's prose is straightforward and clear although, at times,

THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA: The Search for a Perfect Meal in a Fast-food World (UK title)

A Natural History of Four Meals (US title)

by Michael Pollan

Penguin Press/Bloomsbury \$26.95/£12.99, 464 pages

THE WAY WE EAT: Why Our Food Choices Matter

by Peter Singer and Jim Mason

Rodale \$25.95, 328 pages

unexciting. The authors evidently feel – and with some justification – that the facts speak for themselves. Certainly, the descriptions of factory farming need no embellishment. Tales of chickens being debeaked and pigs castrated make for extremely unpleasant reading.

Such material is not new. In 1980, Singer and Mason themselves published horrific accounts of the cruelty

inflicted on animals in their controversial *Animal Factories* and others have since written extensively on the practices of the meat industry. But if the authors – both animal rights advocates – appear to be embarking on a familiar attack on factory farming, there are surprises in store. For a start, they constantly challenge conventional wisdom. One might, for example, think buying organic is the answer, but at an organic egg producer the authors are alarmed to find hens still crowded into a large shed.

Organic farming might foster biodiversity, but organically fed cows eat a higher proportion of grass and hay than conventionally fed cows. As a result, the burps of organically fed cows contain larger quantities of methane, a greenhouse gas that is at least 20 times more toxic than carbon dioxide (interestingly, cattle are thought to be responsible for almost half the world's methane emissions).

Buying locally produced food would seem an obvious ethical choice, reducing "food miles" and supporting local farms. But a better option might be to buy snow peas from Zimbabwe, where if even a small percentage of the retail price goes to growers, it can signifi-

cantly boost their annual income. We are constantly assailed with such conflicting choices in *The Way We Eat*. At times, the task of making ethical purchasing decisions seems impossible. What on earth can we eat when even vegetarianism claims its victims in the thousands of small creatures that per-

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ish beneath harvesting machines?

Fortunately, a neat summary of the issues covered appears at the end of the book, along with a section under the heading "Food is an ethical issue – but you don't have to be fanatical about it." This suggests we simply make more thoughtful choices about what we eat (which generally means buying more expensive food), even if

we err occasionally. This, say the authors, is better than forgetting the whole thing simply because one day we could not resist the smell of frying bacon. There is also a section on where to find "ethical food".

In an altogether more personal journey in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan examines many of the problems that worry Singer and Mason. Pollan also gets his hands dirty, making hay, killing chickens and hunting pigs. In between, the story of US farming unfolds as we learn how the industrialised food chains that shape what we eat emerged.

As is so often the case with technological advances, bad follows good. The development of synthetic fertiliser, for example, augmented natural sources of nitrogen, thereby creating a more stable food supply. But fertilisers require energy to manufacture, so this breakthrough also marked a dramatic change: instead of "eating exclusively from the sun", says Pollan, "humanity now began to sip petroleum."

As well as engaging with history, Pollan also explores market economics (why cheap staples have penetrated every corner of the food chain), sociology (how organic labelling seduces consumers longing to connect with a pas-

toral idyll) and farming philosophy (is "industrial organic" a contradiction in terms?). He throws in a healthy dose of self-deprecation along the way.

It is easy to predict which of Pollan's meals will be found more nutritionally and philosophically satisfying: a McDonald's, an "industrial organic" dinner, a meal of local, sustainably farmed ingredients or one he has hunted and gathered himself. But this misses the point. The most compelling part of the book is what comes between meals – a fascinating exploration of everything from industrial feedlots to how plants produce poisons to fend off potential predators.

Although written in different styles and crossing swords on animal rights, both books have a recurring theme: the hidden cost of cheap food. The 99¢ hamburger comes at a high price if you count the carbon emissions, agricultural pollution, human healthcare and animal suffering that are its by-products. In totting these up, cheap mass-produced food starts to look, as the workhouse boys put it, "worth a king's ransom".

Sarah Murray is writing a book about food, *Moveable Feasts: The Incredible Journeys of the Things We Eat*