

Michael Pollan's latest book is *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, published in January 2008 by Penguin Press. Pollan is a contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine* and is a professor of journalism at UC Berkeley. His previous books include *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *The Botany of Desire*, *Second Nature*, and *A Place of My Own*.

When you think about it, it is odd that something as important to our health and general well-being as food is so often sold strictly on the basis of price. Look at any supermarket ad in the newspaper and all you will find in it are quantities--pounds and dollars; qualities of any kind are nowhere to be found. The value of relationship marketing is that it allows many kinds of information besides price to travel up and down the food chain: stories as well as numbers, qualities as well as quantities, values rather than "value." And as soon as that happens, people begin to make different kinds of buying decisions, motivated by criteria other than price. But instead of stories about how it was produced accompanying our food, we get bar codes--as illegible as the industrial food chain itself, and a fair symbol of its almost total opacity.

Much of our food system depends on our not knowing much about it, beyond the price disclosed by the checkout scanner. Cheapness and ignorance are mutually reinforcing. And it's a short way from not knowing who's at the other end of your food chain to not caring--to the carelessness of both producers and consumers that characterizes our economy today. Of course, the global economy couldn't very well function without this wall of ignorance and the indifference it breeds. This is why the American food industry and its international counterparts fight to keep their products from telling even the simplest stories ("dolphin safe," "humanely slaughtered," etc.) about how they were produced. The more knowledge people have about the way their food is produced, the more likely it is that their values--and not just "value"--will inform their purchasing decisions.

To talk to the customers and farmers working together at small local farms to rebuild a local food chain is to appreciate it is a movement and not merely a market. Or rather it is a novel hybrid, a market-as-movement, for at its heart is a new conception of what it means to be a "consumer." It is an attempt to redeem that ugly word, with its dismal colorings of selfishness and subtraction.

Many of the customers I've spoken with have come to see their decision to buy a chicken from a local farmer rather than from Wal-Mart as a kind of civic act, even a form of protest. A protest of what exactly is harder to pin down, and each person might put it a little differently, but the customers I met have gone to some trouble and expense to "opt out"--of the supermarket, of the fast-food nation, and, standing behind that, a globalized industrial agriculture. Their talk of distrusting Wal-Mart, resenting the abuse of animals in farm factories, insisting on knowing who was growing their food, and wanting to keep their food dollars in town--all this suggested that for many of these people spending a little more for a dozen eggs was a decision inflected by a politics.

"Eat your view!" is a bumper sticker often seen in Europe these days; as it implies, the decision to eat locally is an act of land conservation as well, one that is probably a lot more effective (and sustainable) than writing checks to environmental organizations.

[www.michaelpollan.com](http://www.michaelpollan.com)