

Food—The Rest of the Story

By Kay Bushnell

Stanford University to feature Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, and Peter Singer in its series on “The Ethics of Food and the Environment.”

Stanford has put together an outstanding collection of films, speakers, and discussions on the ethical aspects of food and the environment in February, March, and April. The events are listed in the calendar on page _____. They are free and open to the public.

In March and April three eminent speakers will address industrial food production and the environment and explore issues relating to organic food, processed food, genetically modified food, and food choices. The speakers are Michael Pollan, Knight Professor of Science and Environmental Journalism at U.C. Berkeley and author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* and *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*; Marion Nestle, Ph.D. M.P.H., Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University and author of *What to Eat*; and Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and author of *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*.

The first three films in the series, described below, have already been shown.

The Real Dirt on Farmer John

Both John Peterson, a fourth-generation Illinois farmer, and the farm he inherited as a teenager undergo a transformation through painful trial and error. John faces tough decisions after his father dies and leaves him to carry on with the farm. The scenes in the film are taken over a period of 25 years of John’s convoluted life as he passes through a turbulent period in America’s history. Eventually John’s experimental and independent attitudes are rewarded. Today, John’s now much-reduced acreage is flourishing as a Community Supported Agriculture farm, providing fresh organic produce to hundreds of families in the Chicago area.

King Corn

A DNA test of a snip of hair from the head of the young filmmaker, a city-bred descendant of an Iowa farm family, reveals that he is “made of corn.” Thus begins his quest in the film, *King Corn*, to understand this strange diagnosis. He travels to Greene, Iowa where his great-grandfather once farmed, to learn more about corn and how it came to be a part of him. One

of the most memorable scenes from his film occurs when he bites into a fresh cob of corn grown on the small plot of land he rents in Greene. He spits out the kernels, and learns that this cob of “commodity corn” and trillions more like it that are grown in America, are not meant to be eaten fresh by people.

He and his co-producer, coincidentally also with genealogical roots in the same farming community, track down where their sample harvest and most of Iowa’s corn harvest ends up. By consulting experts they begin to understand what it takes to grow this tasteless corn, the subsidies involved, the chemicals applied, the effect it has on the animals raised for meat that consume 50-60% of it, and how the processed corn syrup derived from it affects Americans’ waistlines and health. (<http://www.kingcorn.net>)

Our Daily Bread

Our Daily Bread was made in Europe between 2003 and 2005. From one point of view it showcases the wonder of high tech agriculture that produces plentiful food efficiently. From another point of view it reveals some of the disturbing elements of highly mechanized agriculture — alienation and disrespect for animals and nature in general. One cannot help but wonder how access was gained to document scenes of what is generally out of the public eye.

The only sounds that are heard in the continuous stream of images are the processes being filmed, and they seem muted. Humans play a supporting role to the dispassionate humming, swishing, whirring, and clattering created by the non-human action. It is left to the viewers to form their own conclusions about the trend toward increased mechanization in massive food production. Certainly the scenes lead one to wonder what is the best way to feed the world and what values must we must preserve or lose in the process.

These films are samples of the unusual and enlightening events taking place at Stanford this January, February, March, and April. Food is a subject of major importance to most of us. This series promises to raise our consciousness about our own food choices. Parking at Stanford is free after 4pm.

More information: see The Loma Prieta Calendar on page____; 650-723-0997, joanberry@stanford.edu, or <http://ethicsinsociety.stanford.edu>

Loma Prieta Chapter member Kay Bushnell has taught plant-based cooking and was the Garden Gourmet in a community-access television cooking series.

