

Experts Extol Ethical Eating

By Kay Bushnell

Crowds arrived at the Stanford auditorium expecting to hear journalist Michael Pollan talk about food. To the surprise of many, all seats in the auditorium and even standing room were taken early. Hundreds of disappointed individuals, myself included, milled about in the lobby and peered through the windows at the seats, aisles, and windowsills completely covered with humanity. Stanford's series of films and lectures on The Ethics of Food and the Environment held in January through April 2008 was a resounding success.

The guest speakers in the series, Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, and Peter Singer, challenged their audiences to think about the food they eat and the role that popular culture and habit play in their food choices. All speakers cast a wary eye on the mechanized mass production and processing of most food today. Become informed about your food, they urge. Ask yourself and others where it comes from, how it is produced and at what environmental cost. Is it healthy for you and other forms of life on our planet? Is unwarranted animal suffering involved?

Michael Pollan, author of *In Defense of Food: An Eaters Manifesto*, participated in a public meeting with Stanford Dining representatives before he delivered his main address. He emphasized the role of institutions in reforming America's food habits and their potential to make an impact in the larger world. Institutions must be willing to pay more, says Pollan. "The tipping point will come when institutions such as universities vote with their money" and when healthful food has the support of the "highest levels at the university." Eric Montell of Stanford Dining described Stanford's "education through information" program about food that involves students and chefs. The program invites farmers to campus to talk about the food they grow, and dining halls feature a new, regionally grown item each month. Pollan feels that learning about food and its carbon footprint is as important as other kinds of learning at a university.

Marion Nestle, Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University and author of *What We Eat*, cautions us to avoid excessive consumption of calories and to enter supermarkets fully aware that junk food (aka "food of minimal nutritional value") beckons in the center aisles. "Shop the perimeter," she counsels. "Don't buy anything found in the center aisles, [anything] with more than five ingredients, with health claims, or with cartoons on the package."

Apparently Stanford organizers of the series were surprised by the high attendance and enthusiasm generated by the events, but not Nestle. She sees food as a part of a social movement directly related to contemporary issues such as childhood obesity and the global marketing of junk foods.

The final speaker in the series was Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and author of *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*. Singer argues that ethical consideration of animals should affect our food choices. In addition to the evidence for animal consciousness, says Singer, the rationale for preventing animal suffering by our food choices is that “pain is pain, no matter what being experiences it.”

Singer has been a vegetarian since the early 1970s when he was at Oxford University. He was eating meat and asked his colleague why he wasn't eating it. His friend's explanation based on ethics convinced Singer of the merit of plant-based food. Today, Singer remembers his own moral awakening on that occasion and advises others to “explain when you are asked [why you are vegetarian]...don't push...don't be shy about setting an example...let others know what you are doing...and remember, factory farming is a wasteful form of production that requires a lot of fossil fuel, so eating fewer - or no - animal products will cut the amount of emissions for which you are responsible.” Twice Singer mentioned that on their ballots this coming November Californians will have a chance to ban factory farms from confining hens, pregnant sows, and calves in cages that are so restrictive the animals cannot turn around or extend their limbs.

At the end of Singer's presentation students sprang into lines to ask him questions. Many of the questions were personal and practical, such as how to keep to a plant based diet while living in a culinary and social culture that is still dominated by animal-based foods. One student posed his question bluntly: “Professor Singer, do you ever cave?” Singer advised him to hold to his ethical standards as much as possible but not to be fanatical about it. His closing message to his audience was, “Living an ethical life gives you purpose and meaning. One's beliefs and practices are in harmony, which yields satisfaction in life.”

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