

# THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

## A Natural History of Four Meals

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### FACTS AND FIGURES

- The great edifice of variety and choice that is an American supermarket turns out to rest on a remarkably narrow biological foundation comprised of a tiny group of plants that's dominated by a single species: Zea Mays, the giant tropical grass most Americans know as corn.
- Of the 38 ingredients it takes to make a McNugget, there are at least 13 that are derived from corn. 45 different menu items at McDonald's are made from corn.
- One in every three American children eats fast food every day.
- One in every five American meals today is eaten in the car.
- The food industry burns nearly a fifth of all the petroleum consumed in the United States, more than our cars; more any other industry.
- It takes ten calories of fossil fuel energy to deliver one calorie of food energy to an American plate.
- A single strawberry contains about five calories. To get that strawberry from a field in California to a plate on the east coast requires 435 calories of energy.
- Industrial fertilizer and industrial pesticides both owe their existence to the conversion of the World War II munitions industry to civilian uses—nerve gases became pesticides, and ammonium nitrate explosives became nitrogen fertilizers.
- Two out of every five people now alive owe their existence to an invention few of us have even heard of: The Haber-Bosch process for turning atmospheric nitrogen into synthetic fertilizer, arguably the most important invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Without it, the earth's population would have stagnated at 1920 levels.
- Because of the obesity epidemic, today's generation of children will be the first generation of Americans whose life expectancy will actually be shorter than their parents'.
- In 2000 the UN reported that the number of people in the world suffering from overnutrition—a billion—exceeded for the first time in history the number suffering from

undernutrition—800 million. The great food problem of our time is that there is too much of it, not too little.

- Since 1985 America's annual consumption of High Fructose Corn Syrup has gone from 45 to 66 pounds—not bad for a “food” no human had experienced till 1980. In the same period, consumption of refined sugar also went up by five pounds; consumption of all sugars rose from 128 to 158 pounds per person.
- Super-sizing works as a marketing strategy because people presented with larger portions don't stop eating when they are full, but rather will eat more than 30% than they otherwise would. Why? Probably because our bodies evolved in an environment of feast or famine, when it made sense to eat as much as possible when food was available.
- The cheapest calories in the supermarket are precisely the most fattening. A dollar can buy 1200 calories of potato chips and cookies, but only 250 calories of a whole food like carrots.
- The average item of food travels 1500 miles before arriving on an American's plate.
- The human brain accounts for 2% of our body weight yet is responsible for consuming 18% of the energy we ingest, all of which must be in the form of carbohydrates. Food faddists take note.
- Cooking is what made us human. By making plants and animal flesh more digestible, it vastly increased the amount of energy available to early humans, a nutritional bonanza that probably accounts for the dramatic increase in the size of the hominid brain 1.9 millions years ago.
- Disgust, in the words of one scientist, is “intuitive microbiology”—it helps keep us from ingesting substances that might sicken us. The substances that disgust all humans all come from animals—bodily fluids and secretions, corpses, decaying flesh, feces. Curiously, the one bodily fluid from other people that does not disgust us is the one produced by humans alone: tears.
- The French Paradox really isn't a paradox at all. We call it that because the French experience—a population of wine-swilling cheese-eaters with lower rates of heart diseases and obesity—confounds our own strange orthodoxy about food. That orthodoxy regards certain tasty foods as “poisons” (carbs now, fats then), failing to appreciate that how we eat, and even how we feel about eating, may in the end be just as important as what we eat.