What should we have for dinner?

This book is a long and fairly involved answer to this seemingly simple question. Along the way, it also tries to figure out how such a simple question could ever have gotten so complicated. As a culture we seem to have arrived at a place where whatever native wisdom we may once have possessed about eating has been replaced by confusion and anxiety. Somehow this most elemental of activities—figuring out what to eat—has come to require a remarkable amount of expert help. How did we ever get to a point where we need investigative journalists to tell us where our food comes from and nutritionists to determine the dinner menu?

For me the absurdity of the situation became inescapable in the fall of 2002, when one of the most ancient and venerable staples of human life abruptly disappeared from the American dinner table. I'm talking of course about bread. Virtually overnight, Americans changed the way they eat. A collective spasm of what can only be described as carbopho-
bria seized the country, supplanting an era of national lipophobia dating to the Carter administration. That was when, in 1977, a Senate committee had issued a set of “dietary goals” warning beef-loving Americans to lay off the red meat. And so we dutifully had done, until now.

What set off the sea change? It appears to have been a perfect media storm of diet books, scientific studies, and one timely magazine article. The new diet books, many of them inspired by the formerly discredited Dr. Robert C. Atkins, brought Americans the welcome news that they could eat more meat and lose weight just so long as they laid off the bread and pasta. These high-protein, low-carb diets found support in a handful of new epidemiological studies suggesting that the nutritional orthodoxy that had held sway in America since the 1970s might be wrong. It was not, as official opinion claimed, fat that made us fat, but the carbohydrates we’ve been eating precisely in order to stay slim. So conditions were ripe for a swing of the dietary pendulum. In the summer of 2002, the New York Times Magazine published a cover story on the new research entitled “What if Fat Doesn’t Make You Fat?” Within months, supermarket shelves were restocked and restaurant menus rewritten to reflect the new nutritional wisdom. The blamelessness of steak restored, two of the most wholesome and uncontroversial foods known to man—bread and pasta—acquired a moral stain that promptly bankrupted dozens of bakeries and noodle firms and ruined an untold number of perfectly good meals.

So violent a change in a culture’s eating habits is surely the sign of a national eating disorder. Certainly it would never have happened in a culture in possession of deeply rooted traditions surrounding food and eating. But then, such a culture would not feel the need for its most august legislative body to ever deliberate the nation’s “dietary goals”—or, for that matter, to wage political battle every few years over the precise design of an official government graphic called the “food pyramid.” A country with a stable culture of food would not shell out millions for the quacker (or common sense) of a new diet book every January. It would not be susceptible to the pendulum swings of food scares or fads, to the apotheosis every few years of one newly discovered nutri-

ent and the demonization of another. It would not be apt to confuse protein bars and food supplements with meals or breakfast cereals with medicines. It probably would not eat a fifth of its meals in cars or feed fully a third of its children at a fast-food outlet every day. And it surely would not be nearly so fat.

Nor would such a culture be shocked to discover that there are other countries, such as Italy and France, that decide their dinner questions on the basis of such quaint and unscientific criteria as pleasure and tradition, eat all manner of “unhealthy” foods, and, lo and behold, wind up actually healthier and happier in their eating than we are. We show our surprise at this by speaking of something called the “French paradox,” for how could a people who eat such demonstrably toxic substances as foie gras and triple-cream cheese actually be slimmer and healthier than we are? Yet I wonder if it doesn’t make more sense to speak in terms of an American paradox—that is, a notably unhealthy people obsessed by the idea of eating healthily.

To one degree or another, the question of what to have for dinner assails every omnivore, and always has. When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer, deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the potential foods on offer are liable to sicken or kill you. This is the omnivore’s dilemma, noted long ago by writers like Rousseau and Brillat-Savarin and first given that name thirty years ago by a University of Pennsylvania research psychologist named Paul Rozin. I’ve borrowed his phrase for the title of this book because the omnivore’s dilemma turns out to be a particularly sharp tool for understanding our present predicaments surrounding food.

In a 1976 paper called “The Selection of Foods by Rats, Fumans, and Other Animals” Rozin contrasted the omnivore’s existential situation with that of the specialized eaters, for whom the dinner question could not be simpler. The koala doesn’t worry about what to eat: If it looks and smells and tastes like a eucalyptus leaf, it must be dinner. The koala’s culinary preferences are hardwired in its genes. But for
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omnivores like us (and the rat) a vast amount of brain space and time must be devoted to figuring out which of all the many potential dishes nature lays on are safe to eat. We rely on our prodigious powers of recognition and memory to guide us away from poisons (isn’t that the mushroom that made me sick last week?) and toward nutritious plants (The red berries are juicer, sweeter ones). Our taste buds help too, predisposing us toward sweetness, which signals carbohydrate energy in nature, and away from bitterness, which is how many of the toxic alkaloids produced by plants taste. Our inborn sense of disgust keeps us from ingesting things that might infect us, such as rotten meat. Many anthropologists believe that the reason we evolved such big and intricate brains was precisely to help us deal with the omnivore’s dilemma.

Being a generalist is of course a great boon as well as a challenge; it is what allows humans to successfully inhabit virtually every terrestrial environment on the planet. Omnivory offers the pleasures of variety, too. But the surfeit of choice brings with it a lot of stress and leads to a kind of Manichean view of food, a division of nature into The Good Things to Eat, and The Bad.

The rat must make this all-important distinction more or less on its own, each individual figuring out for itself—and then remembering—which things will nourish and which will poison. The human omnivore has, in addition to his senses and memory, the incalculable advantage of a culture, which stores the experience and accumulated wisdom of countless human tasters before him. I don’t need to experiment with the mushroom now called, rather helpfully, the “death cap,” and it is common knowledge that that first intrepid looser sat on to something very good. Our culture codifies the rules of wise eating in an elaborate structure of taboos, rituals, recipes, mannerisms, and culinary traditions that keep us from having to reenact the omnivore’s dilemma at every meal.

One way to think about America’s national eating disorder is as the return, with an almost atavistic vengeance, of the omnivore’s dilemma. The cornucopia of the American supermarket has thrown us back on a bewildering food landscape where we once again have to worry that some of those tasty-looking morsels might kill us. (Perhaps not as quickly as a poisonous mushroom, but just as surely.) Certainly the extraordinary abundance of food in America complicates the whole problem of choice. At the same time, many of the tools with which people historically managed the omnivore’s dilemma have lost their sharpness here—or simply failed. As a relatively new nation drawn from many different immigrant populations, each with its own culture of food, Americans have never had a single, strong, stable culinary tradition to guide us.

The lack of a steady diet is food leaves us especially vulnerable to the blandishments of the food scientist and the marketer, for whom the omnivore’s dilemma is not so much a dilemma as an opportunity. It is very much in the interest of the food industry to exacerbate our anxiety about what to eat, the better to then assuage with new products. Our bewilderment in the supermarket is no accident; the return of the omnivore’s dilemma has deep roots in the modern food industry, roots that, I found, reach all the way back to fields of corn growing in places like Iowa.

And so we find ourselves where we do, confronting in the supermarket or at the dinner table the dilemmas of omnivorosity, some of them ancient and others never before imagined. The organic apple or the conventional? And if the organic, the local one or the imported? The wild fish or the farmed? The trans fats or the butter or the “no butter”? Shall I be a carnivore or a vegetarian? And if a vegetarian, a lacto-vegetarian or a vegan? Like the hunter-gatherer picking a novel mushroom off the forest floor and computing his sense memory to determine its edibility, we pick up the package in the supermarket and, no longer so confident of our senses, scrutinize the label, scratching our heads over the meaning of phrases like “heart healthy,” “no trans fats,” “cage-free,” or “range-fed.”

What is “natural grill flavor” or TBHQ or xanthan gum? What is all this stuff, anyway, and where in the world did it come from?

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My wager in writing The Omnivore’s Dilemma was that the best way to answer the questions we face about what to eat was to go back to the very
beginning, to follow the food chains that sustain us all the way from the earth to the plate—to a small number of actual meals I wanted to look at the getting and eating of food at its most fundamental, which is to say, as a transaction between species in nature, eaters and eaten. ("The whole of nature," wrote the English author William Ralph Inge, "is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and passive.") What I try to do in this book is approach the dinner question as a naturalist might, using the long lenses of ecology and anthropology, as well as the shorter, more intimate lens of personal experience.

My premise is that like every other creature on earth, humans take part in a food chain, and our place in that food chain, or web, determines to a considerable extent what kind of creature we are. The fact of our omnivorosity has done much to shape our nature, both body (we possess the omniscient teeth and jaws of the omnivore, equally well suited to tearing meat and grinding seeds) and soul. Our prodigious powers of observation and memory, as well as our curious and experimental stance toward the natural world, owe much to the biological fact of omnivorosity. So do the various adaptations we’ve evolved to defeat the defenses of other creatures so that we might eat them, including our skills at hunting and cooking with fire. Some philosophers have argued that the very open-endlessness of human appetite is responsible for both our savagery and civility, since a creature that could conceive of eating anything (including, notably, other humans) stands in particular need of ethical rules, manners, and rituals. We are not only what we eat, but how we eat, too.

Yet we are also different from most of nature’s other eaters—markedly so. For one thing, we’ve acquired the ability to substantially modify the food chains we depend on, by means of such revolutionary technologies as cooking with fire, hunting with tools, farming, and food preservation. Cooking opened up whole new vistas of edibility by rendering various plants and animals more digestible, and overcoming many of the chemical defenses other species deploy against being eaten. Agriculture allowed us to vastly multiply the populations of a few favored food species, and therefore in turn our own. And, most recently, industry has allowed us to reinforce the human food chain, from the synthetic fertility of the soil to the microwavable can of soup designed to fit into a car’s cup holder. The implications of this last revolution, for our health and the health of the natural world, we are still struggling to grasp.

The Omnivore’s Dilemma is about the three principal food chains that sustain us today: the industrial, the organic, and the hunter-gatherer. Different as they are, all three food chains are systems for doing more or less the same thing: linking us, through what we eat, to the fertility of the earth and the energy of the sun. It might be hard to see how, but even a Twinkie does this—constitutes an engagement with the natural world. As ecology teaches, and this book tries to show, it’s all connected, even the Twinkie.

Ecology also teaches that all life on earth can be viewed as a competition among species for the solar energy captured by green plants and stored in the form of complex carbon molecules. A food chain is a system for passing those calories on to species that lack the plant’s unique ability to synthesize them from sunlight. One of the themes of this book is that the industrial revolution of the food chain, dating to the close of World War II, has actually changed the fundamental rules of this game. Industrial agriculture has suplanted a complete reliance on the sun for our calories with something new under the sun: a food chain that draws much of its energy from fossil fuels instead. (Of course, even that energy originally came from the sun, but unlike sunlight it is finite and irreplaceable.) The result of this innovation has been a vast increase in the amount of food energy available to our species; this has been a boon to humanity (allowing us to multiply our numbers), but not an unalloyed one. We’ve discovered that an abundance of food does not render the omnivore’s dilemma obsolete. To the contrary, abundance seems only to deepen it, giving us all sorts of new problems and things to worry about.

Each of this book’s three parts follows one of the principal human food chains from beginning to end: from a plant, or group of plants, photosynthesizing calories in the sun, all the way to a meal at the din-
What to expect

Upon entering the room, you will notice a spacious and well-lit area. The room is furnished with a comfortable chair and a small table. You will also find a selection of books and reading materials to choose from.

Our team of experts will be available to assist you with any questions or concerns you may have. We are dedicated to providing you with a personalized and engaging experience.

What to do

Take a moment to relax and explore the materials provided. You can peruse the books, read articles, or engage in discussion with our staff. We encourage you to take notes and participate in any activities that interest you.

What to expect

During your visit, you can expect to:

- Engage in interactive activities
- Participate in group discussions
- Receive feedback on your progress
- Explore new ideas and concepts

We are committed to helping you achieve your goals and making your experience as enjoyable as possible.

What to do

After your visit, we encourage you to reflect on what you have learned and consider how you can apply this knowledge to your daily life. You can also consider seeking out additional resources or activities to further explore the topics discussed.

We hope you enjoy your visit and feel empowered to pursue your goals.
ner end of that food chain. Reversing the chronological order, I start with the industrial food chain, since that is the one that today involves and concerns us the most. It is also by far the biggest and longest. Since monoculture is the hallmark of the industrial food chain, this section focuses on a single plant: Zea mays, the giant tropical grass we call corn, which has become the keystone species of the industrial food chain, and so in turn of the modern diet. This section follows a bushel of commodity corn from the field in Iowa where it grew on its long, strange journey to its ultimate destination in a fast-food meal, eaten in a moving car on a highway in Marin County, California.

The book’s second part follows what I call—o to distinguish it from the industrial—the pastoral food chain. This section explores some of the alternatives to industrial food and farming that have sprung up in recent years (variously called “organic,” “local,” “biological,” and “beyond organic”), food chains that might appear to be preindustrial but in surprising ways turn out in fact to be postindustrial. I set out thinking I could follow one such food chain, from a radically innovative farm in Virginia that I worked on one recent summer to an extremely local meal prepared from animals raised on its pastures. But I promptly discovered that no single farm or meal could do justice to the complex, branching story of alternative agriculture right now, and that I needed also to reckon with the food chain I call, oxymoronicall, the “industrial organic.” So the book’s pastoral section serves up the natural history of two very different “organic” meals: one whose ingredients came from my local Whole Foods supermarket (gathered there from as far away as Argentina), and the other tracing its origins to a single polyculture of grasses growing at Polyface Farm in Swoope, Virginia.

The last section, titled Personal, follows a kind of neo-Paleolithic food chain from the forests of Northern California to a meal I prepared (almost) exclusively from ingredients I hunted, gathered, and grew myself. Though we twenty-first-century eaters still eat a handful of hunted and gathered food (notably fish and wild mushrooms), my interest in this food chain was less practical than philosophical: I hoped to shed fresh light on the way we eat now by immersing myself in the way we ate then. In order to make this meal I had to learn how to do some unfamiliar things, including hunting game and foraging for wild mushrooms and urban tree fruit. In doing so I was forced to confront some of the most elemental questions—and dilemmas—faced by the human omnivore: What are the moral and psychological implications of killing, preparing, and eating a wild animal? How does one distinguish between the delicious and the deadly when foraging in the woods? How do the alchymies of the kitchen transform the raw stuffs of nature into some of the great delights of human culture?

The end result of this adventure was what I came to think of as the Perfect Meal, not because it turned out so well (though in my humble opinion it did), but because this labor- and thought-intensive dinner, enjoyed in the company of fellow foragers, gave me the opportunity, so rare in modern life, to eat in full consciousness of everything involved in feeding myself: For once, I was able to pay the full karmic price of a meal.

Yet as different as these three journeys (and four meals) turned out to be, a few themes kept cropping up. One is that there exists a fundamental tension between the logic of nature and the logic of human industry, at least as it is presently organized. Our ingenuity in feeding ourselves is prodigious, but at various points our technologies come into conflict with nature’s ways of doing things, as when we seek to maximize efficiency by planting crops or raising animals in vast monocultures. This is something nature never does, always and for good reasons practicing diversity instead. A great many of the health and environmental problems created by our food system owe to our attempts to oversimplify nature’s complexities: both the growing and the eating ends of our food chain. At either end of any food chain you find a biological system—a patch of soil, a human body—and the health of one is connected—literally—to the health of the other. Many of the problems of health and nutrition we face today trace back to things that happen on the farm, and behind those things stand specific government policies few of us know anything about.

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I don’t mean to suggest that human food chains have only recently
come into conflict with the logic of biology; early agriculture and, long before that, human hunting proved enormously destructive. Indeed, we might never have needed agriculture had earlier generations of hunters not eliminated the species they depended upon. Folly in the getting of our food is nothing new. And yet the new follies we are perpetrating in our industrial food chain today are of a different order. By replacing solar energy with fossil fuel, by raising millicans of food animals in close confinement, by feeding those animals foods they never evolved to eat, and by feeding ourselves foods far more novel than we even realize, we are taking risks with our health and the health of the natural world that are unprecedented.

Another theme, or premise really, is that the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds. Agriculture has done more to reshape the natural world than anything else we humans do, both its landscapes and the composition of its flora and fauna. Our eating also constitutes a relationship with dozens of other species—plants, animals, and fungi—with which we have coevolved to the point where our fates are deeply entwined. Many of these species have evolved expressly to gratify our desires, in the intricate dance of domestication that has allowed us and them to prosper together as we could never have prospered apart. But our relationships with the wild species we eat—from the mushroom woods we pick in the forest to the yeasts that leaven our bread—are no less compelling, and far more mysterious. Eating puts us in touch with all that we share with the other animals, and all that sets us apart. It defines us.

What is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections. To go from the chicken (Gallus gallus) to the Chicken McNugget is to leave this world in a journey of forgetting that could hardly be more costly, not only in terms of the animal’s pain but in our pleasure, too. But forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat.

"Eating is an agricultural act," as Wendell Berry famously said. It is also an ecological act, and a political act, too. Though much has been done to obscure this simple fact, how and what we eat determines a great extent the use we make of the world—and what is to become of it. To eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden, but in practice few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction. By comparison, the pleasures of eating industrially, which is to say eating in ignorance, are fleeting. Many people today seem perfectly content eating at the end of an industrial food chain, without a thought in the world; this book is probably not for them. There are things in it that will ruin their appetites. But in the end this is a book about the pleasures of eating, the kinds of pleasure that are only deepened by knowing.
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Another theme, or premise really, is that the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds. Agriculture has done more to reshape the natural world than anything else we humans do, both its landscapes and the composition of its flora and fauna. Our eating also constitutes a relationship with dozens of other species—plants, animals, and fungi—with which we have coevolved to the point where our fates are deeply entwined. Many of these species have evolved expressly to gratify our desires, in the intricate dance of domestication that has allowed us and them to prosper together as we could never have prospered apart. But our relationships with the wild species we eat—from the mushrooms we pick in the forest to the yeasts that leaven our bread—are no less compelling, and far more mysterious. Eating puts us in touch with all that we share with the other animals, and all that sets us apart. It defines us.

What is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections. To go from the chicken (Gallus gallus) to the Chicken McNugget is to leave this world is a journey of forgetting that could hardly be more costly, not only in terms of the animal’s pain but in our pleasure, too. But forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat.

"Eating is an agricultural act," as Wendell Berry famously said. It is also an ecological act, and a political act, too. Though much has been done to obscure this simple fact, how and what we eat determines to a great extent the use we make of the world—and what is to become of it. To eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden, but in practice few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction. By comparison, the pleasures of eating industrially, which in too many cases are fleeting. Many people today seem perfectly content eating at the end of an industrial food chain, without a thought in the world; this book is probably not for them. There are things in it that will ruin their appetites. But in the end this is a book about the pleasures of eating, the kinds of pleasure that are only deepened by knowing.