

Food Inc – Transcript

Michael Pollan, Author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*:

The way we eat has changed more in the last 50 years than in the previous 10,000. But the image that's used to sell the food, it is still the imagery of agrarian America. You go into the supermarket and you see pictures of farmers, the picket fence, the silo, the '30s farmhouse and the green grass. It's the spinning of this pastoral fantasy.

The modern American supermarket has on average 47,000 products. There are no seasons in the American supermarket. Now there are tomatoes all year round, grown halfway around the world, picked when it was green, and ripened with ethylene gas. Although it looks like a tomato, it's kind of a notional tomato. I mean, it's the idea of a tomato. In the meat aisle, there are no bones anymore.

Eric Schlosser, Author of *Fast Food Nation*:

There is this deliberate veil, this curtain, that's dropped between us and where our food is coming from. The industry doesn't want you to know the truth about what you're eating, because if you knew, you might not want to eat it.

Pollan:

If you follow the food chain back from those shrink-wrapped packages of meat, you find a very different reality. The reality is a factory. It's not a farm. It's a factory. That meat is being processed by huge multinational corporations that have very little to do with ranches and farmers.

Schlosser:

Now our food is coming from enormous assembly lines where the animals and the workers are being abused. And the food has become much more dangerous in ways that are being deliberately hidden from us.

Troy Roush, Farmer:

You've got a small group of multinational corporations who control the entire food system. From seed to the supermarket, they're gaining control of food.

Schlosser:

This isn't just about what we're eating. This is about what we're allowed to say, what we're allowed to know. It's not just our health that's at risk.

Carole Morison, Perdue Grower:

The companies don't want farmers talking. They don't want this story told.

Fast Food to All Food

Schlosser:

My favorite meal to this day remains a hamburger and french fries. I had no idea that a handful of companies had changed what we eat and how we make our food. I've been eating this food all my life without having any idea where it comes from, any idea how powerful this industry is. And it was the idea of this world deliberately hidden from us.

I think that's one of the reasons why I became an investigative reporter, was to take the veil— lift the veil away from important subjects that are being hidden.

The whole industrial food system really began with fast food. In the 1930s, a new form of restaurant arose and it was called the drive-in. The McDonald brothers had a very successful drive-in, but they decided to cut costs and simplify. So they fired all their carhops, they got rid of most of the things on the menu and they created a revolutionary idea to how to run a restaurant.

They basically brought the factory system to the back of the restaurant kitchen. They trained each worker to just do one thing again and again and again. By having workers who only had to do one thing, they could pay them a low wage and it was very easy to find someone to replace them. It was inexpensive food, it tasted good and this McDonald's fast food restaurant was a huge, huge success.

That mentality of uniformity, conformity and cheapness applied widely and on a large scale has all kinds of unintended consequences. When McDonald's is the largest purchaser of ground beef in the United States and they want their hamburgers to taste, everywhere, exactly the same, they change how ground beef is produced. The McDonald's corporation is the largest purchaser of potatoes and one of the largest purchasers of pork, chicken, tomatoes, lettuce, even apples.

These big, big fast food chains want big suppliers. And now there are essentially a handful of companies controlling our food system. In the 1970s, the top five beef-packers controlled only about 25% of the market. Today, the top four control more than 80% of the market. You see the same thing happening now in pork.

Even if you don't eat at a fast food restaurant, you're now eating meat that's being produced by this system. You look at the labels and you see Farmer this, Farmer that—it's really just three or four companies that are controlling the meat.

We've never had food companies this big and this powerful in our history. Tyson, for example, is the biggest meat-packing company in the history of the world. The industry changed the entire way that chicken are raised. Birds are now raised and slaughtered in half the time they were 50 years ago, but now they're twice as big. People like to eat white meat, so they redesigned the chicken to have large breasts.

They not only changed the chicken, they changed the farmer. Today, chicken farmers no longer control their birds. A company like Tyson owns the birds from the day they're dropped off until the day that they're slaughtered. Let me go to the top.

Richard Lobb, National Chicken Council:

The chicken industry has really set a model for the integration of production, processing and marketing of the products that other industries are now following because they see that we have achieved tremendous economies.

In a way, we're not producing chickens; we're producing food. It's all highly mechanized, so all the birds coming off those farms have to be almost exactly the same size.

What the system of intensive production accomplishes is to produce a lot of food on a small amount of land at a very affordable price. Now somebody explain to me what's wrong with that.

Vince Edwards, Tyson Grower:

Smells like money to me.

16 chicken houses sit here. And Chuck's son has four over the top of this hill. The chicken industry came in here and it's helped this whole community out. Here's my chicken houses here. I have about 300,000 chickens.

We have a contract with Tyson. They've been growing chickens for many, many years. It's all a science. They got it figured out. If you can grow a chicken in 49 days, why would you want one you gotta grow in three months? More money in your pocket.

These chickens never see sunlight. They're pretty much in the dark all the time.

Filmmaker:

So you think they just want to keep us out?

Edwards:

I don't know. If I knew, I'd tell you. It would be nice if y'all could see what we really do, but as far as y'all going in, we can't let you do that.

Carole Morison, Perdue Grower:

I understand why farmers don't want to talk—because the company can do what it wants to do as far as pay goes since they control everything. But it's just gotten to the point that it's not right what's going on and I've just made up my mind. I'm going to say what I have to say. I understand why others don't want to do it. And I'm just to a point that it doesn't matter anymore. Something has to be said.

It is nasty in here. There's dust flying everywhere. There's feces everywhere. This isn't farming. This is just mass production, like an assembly line in a factory. When they grow from a chick and in seven weeks you've got a five-and-a-half-pound chicken, their bones and their internal organs can't keep up with the rapid growth. A lot of these chickens here, they can take a few steps and then they plop down. It's because they can't keep up all the weight that they're carrying.

There's antibiotics that's put into the feed and of course that passes through the chicken. The bacteria builds up a resistance, so antibiotics aren't working anymore. I have become allergic to all antibiotics and can't take 'em.

When it's dark inside the houses, the chickens lay down. It's less resistance when they're being caught. Traditionally, it's been African-American men. Now we're seeing more and more Latino catchers—undocumented workers. From their point of view, they don't have any rights and they're just not going to complain. The companies like these kind of workers.

It doesn't matter if the chickens get sick. All of the chickens will go to the plant for processing.

The companies keep the farmers under their thumb because of the debt that the farmers have. To build one poultry house is anywhere from \$280,000 to \$300,000 per house. And once you make your initial investment, the companies constantly come back with demands of upgrades for new equipment, and the grower has no choice. They have to do it or you're threatened with loss of a contract.

This is how they keep the farmers under control. It's how they keep them spending money, going to the bank and borrowing more money. The debt just keeps building. To have no say in your business, it's degrading. It's like being a slave to the company.

A Cornucopia Of Choices

Pollan:

The idea that you would need to write a book telling people where their food came from is just a sign of how far removed we've become. It seems to me that we're entitled to know about our food—"Who owns it? How are they making it? Can I have a look in the kitchen?"

When I wanted to understand the industrial food system, what I set about doing was very simple. I wanted to trace the source of my food. When you go through the supermarket, what looks like this cornucopia of variety and choice is not. There is an illusion of diversity. There are only a few companies involved and there're only a few crops involved.

What really surprised me most as I followed that food back to its source, I kept ending up in the same place, and that was a cornfield in Iowa. So much of our industrial food turns out to be clever rearrangements of corn.

Corn has conquered the world in a lot of ways. It is a remarkable plant. 100 years ago, a farmer in America could grow maybe 20 bushels of corn on an acre. Today, 200 bushels is no problem. That's an astonishing achievement for which breeders deserve credit, for which fertilizer makers deserve credit, for which pesticide makers all deserve credit.

Roush:

In the United States today, 30% of our land base is being planted to corn. That's largely driven by government policy, government policy that, in effect, allows us to produce corn below the cost of production.

The truth of the matter is we're paid to overproduce, and it was caused by these large multinational interests. The reason our government's promoting corn—the Cargills, the ADMs, Tyson, Smithfield—they have an interest in purchasing corn below the cost of production. They use that interest and that extensive amount of money they have to lobby Congress to give us the kind of farm bills we now have.

Pollan:

A "farm bill," which should really be called a "food bill," codifies the rules of the entire food economy. Farm policy is always focused on these commodity crops because you can store them. We encourage farmers to grow as much corn as they can grow, to get big, to consolidate. We subsidize farmers by the bushel.

Roush:

We produced a lot of corn and they came up with uses for it.

Larry Johnson, Center for Crops Utilization, Iowa State University:

We are now engineering our foods. We know where to turn to for certain traits likemouth feel and flavor. And we bring all of these pieces together and engineer new foods that don't stale in the refrigerator, don't develop rancidity.

Of course the biggest advance in recent years was high-fructose corn syrup. You know, I would venture to guess if you go and look on the supermarket shelf, I'll bet you 90% of them would contain either a corn or soybean ingredient, and most of the time will contain both.

Pollan:

Corn is the great raw material. You get that big fat kernel of starch and you can break that down and reassemble it. You can make high-fructose corn syrup. You can make maltodextrin and diglycerides and xanthan gum and ascorbic acid. All those obscure ingredients on the processed food label—it's remarkable how many of them can be made from corn. Plus, you can feed it to animals.

Roush:

Corn is the main component in feed ingredients whether it's chicken, hogs, cattle—you name it.

Pollan:

Increasingly, we're feeding the corn to the fish whether we're eating the tilapia or the farmed salmon. We're teaching fish how to eat corn. The fact that we had so much cheap corn really allowed us to drive down the price of meat. I mean, the average American is eating over 200 lbs of meat per person per year. That wouldn't be possible had we not fed them this diet of cheap grain.

Since you're selling corn at below the price of production, the feedlot operator can buy corn at a fraction of what it costs to grow, so that all the animals are sucked off of all the farms in the Midwest. There is a spider web of roads and train tracks all around the country moving corn from where it's being grown to these CAFOs. Cows are not designed by evolution to eat corn. They're designed by evolution to eat grass. And the only reason we feed them corn is because corn is really cheap and corn makes them fat quickly.

Filmmaker:

Where are you putting your hand?

Allen Trenkle, Ruminant Nutrition Expert, Iowa State University:

I'm actually inside the rumen—that first compartment of the stomach. And it's—it's not—it's kind of hard to see. You can see the liquid part here.

Filmmaker:

Wow.

Trenkle:

There's microorganisms—bacteria in the rumen, millions of them. The animals evolved on consuming grass. There's some research that indicates that a high-corn diet results in E. coli that are acid-resistant. And these would be the more harmful E. coli.

Pollan:

So you feed corn to cattle and E. coli, which is a very common bug, evolves, a certain mutation occurs and a strain called the "E. coli 0157:h7" appears on the world stage. And it's a product of the diet we're feeding cattle on feedlots and it's a product of feedlot life.

The animals stand ankle deep in their manure all day long. So if one cow has it, the other cows will get it.

When they get to the slaughterhouse, their hides are caked with manure. And if the slaughterhouse is slaughtering 400 animals an hour, how do you keep that manure from getting onto those carcasses? And that's how the manure gets in the meat. And now this thing that wasn't in the world is in the food system.

Unintended Consequences

Schlosser:

E. coli isn't just in ground beef now—it's been found in spinach, apple juice—and this is really because of the runoff from our factory farms.

For years during the Bush administration, the chief of staff at the USDA was the former chief lobbyist to the beef industry in Washington; the head of the F.D.A. was the former executive vice president of the National Food Processors Association. These regulatory agencies are being controlled by the very companies that they're supposed to be scrutinizing.

There's always been food poisoning. As more and more technology is being applied to the production of food, you would think it would be getting safer, not more contaminated. But the processing plants have gotten bigger and bigger. It's just perfect for taking bad pathogens and spreading them far and wide.

In the 1970s, there were literally thousands of slaughterhouses in the United States. Today we have 13 slaughterhouses that process the majority of beef that is sold in the United States.

The hamburger of today, it has pieces of thousands of different cattle ground up in that one hamburger patty. The odds increase exponentially that one of those animals was carrying a dangerous pathogen.

It's remarkable how toothless our regulatory agencies are when you look closely at it, and that's how the industry wants it.

Patricia Buck, Food Safety Advocate:

This is the USDA building up here.

Barbara Kowalczyk, Food Safety Advocate:

Did Josh say how much time he thought we'd get?

Buck:

Well, maybe as much as 15. Got to be on time for that meeting.—It starts at 4:00. So if I start going like that—or start shuffling papers, it's time. Thank you! Thank you.

Kowalczyk:

I'm a registered Republican. I've always been fairly conservative. I never thought I would be doing this and I certainly never thought I would be working so closely with my mom.

My mom and I, our relationship has taken on a whole new dimension.

Diana DeGette, Congresswoman from Colorado:

After the first big push to establish food standards, people just got complacent. We reduced funding for the FDA. We've relied increasingly on self-policing for all of these industries. And now we just have, really, lost our system.

Kowalczyk:

You're really one of the champions on the hill for food safety and it's a very important cause. It's very personal to me and my family.

Our food safety advocacy work started six years ago when my two-and-a-half-year-old son Kevin was stricken with E. coli O157:h7 and went from being a perfectly healthy beautiful little boy—and I have a small picture with me today that was taken two weeks before he got sick. He went from that to being dead in 12 days.

In July 2001, our family took a vacation. Had we known what was in store for us, we would have never gone home. We ended up eating three hamburgers before he got sick. We started to see blood in Kevin's diarrhea, so we took him to the emergency room. And they said, "We've gotten the culture back from Kevin's stool, and he has hemorrhagic E. coli."

They came in and informed us that Kevin's kidneys were starting to fail. Kevin received his first dialysis treatment. He was not allowed to really drink water. We had these little sponges and we were allowed to dip that into a cup of water and then give him that. He bit the head off of one of them. You've never seen someone beg. He begged for water. It was all he could talk about. They wouldn't let anybody bring any beverage into the room because—I mean, it was all he would talk about, was... water.

I don't know if he knew what was happening to him... and I hope—I don't know. To watch this beautiful child go from being perfectly healthy to dead in 12 days—it was just unbelievable that this could happen from eating food. What was kind of adding more insult to injury.

It took us almost two or three years and hiring a private attorney to actually find out that we matched a meat recall. On August 1st, my son was already in the hospital. They did an E. coli test at the plant that was positive. They didn't end up recalling that meat until August 27th, 16 days after he died.

DeGette:

If we have some more hearings—which I'm sure we will—I'd love to have you come and testify.

Kowalczyk:

You never get over the death of your child. You find a new normal.

We put faith in our government to protect us, and we're not being protected at a most basic level.

In 1998, the USDA implemented microbial testing for salmonella and E. coli O157:h7. The idea was that if a plant repeatedly failed these tests, that the USDA would shut the plant down because they obviously had an ongoing contamination problem. The meat and poultry associations immediately took the USDA to court. The courts basically said the USDA didn't have the authority to shut down the plants.

What it meant was that you could have a pound of meat or poultry products that is a Petri dish of salmonella and the USDA really can't do anything about it. A new law was introduced in direct response and this law became known as Kevin's Law.

It seems like such a clear-cut, common sense type thing. We've been working for six years and it still hasn't passed. I sense that there may be an opportunity— an enhanced opportunity—to get this signed into law this time.

Phil English, Congressman from Pennsylvania:

I think that from the standpoint of the consumer, a lot of people would support the idea of paying a little more if they could be guaranteed a higher standard of safety. That there are other players ...that tend to worry about that, because it's going to be seen as an add-on to their costs. I think the advantage here is—

Kowalczyk:

Sometimes it does feel like industry was more protected than my son. That's what motivated me to become an advocate.

In the past year alone, there have been a multitude of food-borne illness outbreaks which have resulted in significant losses. Clearly our current approach to food oversight and protection is not meeting the needs of American families.

It's really hard for me to tell Kevin's story. But the only way I'm going to be able to prevent it from happening to other people is to go out there and speak about it.

It will be seven years since my son died. All I wanted the company to do was say "We're sorry. We produced this defective product that killed your child, and this is what we're going to do to make sure it doesn't happen again." That's all we wanted, and they couldn't give us that.

Pollan:

The industrial food system is always looking for greater efficiency, but each new step in efficiency leads to problems. If you take feedlot cattle off of their corn diet, give them grass for five days, they will shed 80% of the E. coli in their gut.

But of course that's not what the industry does. The industry's approach is—when it has a systematic problem like that—is not to go back and see what's wrong with the system, it's to come up some high-tech fixes that allow the system to survive.

Eldon Roth, Founder of Beef Products Inc (BPI):

This is our operations center. We control all of our plants from here. Where's Chicago? Here's Chicago, Georgia, Utah, Kansas, Nebraska, Texas, L.A., Ohio. We control all levels of the gearboxes, the speed of motors—we can change those all from here.

We built something that—from a food-safety standpoint, we think we're ahead of everybody. We think we can lessen the incidents of E. coli O157:h7.

But I just started working with ammonia and ammonia hydroxide. Ammonia kills bacteria, so it became a processing tool. I'm really a mechanic. That's really what I am. We design our own machinery.

This is our finished product.

Filmmaker:

Is your meat in most of the hamburgers in the country?

Roth:

70%. In five years, we think we'll be near 100%. We do have some competitors. I think we're going to beat them. Again, it's a marriage of science and technology.

The Dollar Menu

Maria Andrea Gonzalez, Mother of two:

We didn't even think about healthy eating because we used to think everything was healthy.

Now that I know that the food is really unhealthy for us, I feel guilty giving it to my kids. But we don't have time to cook because we leave at 6:00. We don't get home until 9:00, 10:00 at night.

When you have only a dollar to spend and you have two kids to feed, either you go to the market and try to find something that's cheap or just go straight through a drive-thru and get two small hamburgers for them and "Okay, here. Eat them." This is what's going to fill her up, not that one single item at the market.

We can find candy that's cheaper. We can find chips that are cheaper. The sodas are really cheap. Sometimes you look at a vegetable and say "Okay, we can get two hamburgers over here for the same amount of price."

Pollan:

Why is it that you can buy a double-cheeseburger at McDonald's for 99 cents, and you can't even get a head of broccoli for 99 cents?

We've skewed our food system to the bad calories and it's not an accident. I mean, the reasons that those calories are cheaper is because those are the ones we're heavily subsidizing. And this is directly tied to the kind of agriculture that we're practicing and the kind of farm policies we have. All those snack-food calories are the ones that come from the commodity crops—from the wheat, from the corn and from the soybeans.

By making those calories really cheap, that's one of the reasons that the biggest predictor of obesity is income level. Over the course of human history, we were struggling to make sure we had enough food and enough calories for a sizable percentage of the human race. Now the problem is too many calories.

The industry blames obesity on a crisis of personal responsibility. But when you're engineering foods you are pressing our evolutionary buttons. The fact is we're hardwired to go for three tastes—salt, fat and sugar. These things are very rare in nature.

Now sugar is available 24/7 in tremendous quantities. We're eating hundreds of pounds of the stuff a year. This diet of high-fructose corn syrup and refined carbohydrates leads to these spikes of insulin and, gradually, a wearing down of the system by which our body metabolizes sugar.

Gonzalez:

My husband's diabetic. One of my main concerns is he could lose his sight. He does get into—sometimes he's shaking, so I'm afraid that he's going to start not being able to drive, 'cause that's what he does for a profession.

We have to consider his medicine. What is it, \$70?

But he's on two different types of pills. \$100-and-something for one pill and then \$100- and-something for another. That takes a lot of our income away.

We're really tight from either paying for his medicine to be healthy or buying vegetables to be healthy. So which one should we do?

In The Grass

Joel Salatin, Polyface Farms Owner:

Everything we've done in modern industrial agriculture is to grow it faster, fatter, bigger, cheaper. Nobody's thinking about E. coli, type 2 diabetes and the ecological health of the whole system.

We're outsourcing autonomous farmer decision-making—we're outsourcing that to corporate boardrooms in big cities 1,000 miles away where people make decisions and don't live with the consequences of those decisions.

Everything is grass based. You know, they don't eat corn, dead cows or chicken manure like they feed right here in the valley—or dead chickens. They actually eat grass, forage—you know, clover, grass, herbs. They're herbivores. If they were eating corn, you're going to have to harvest that corn, transport that corn, then you're going to have to haul all that manure somewhere that comes out the back end.

Here... it's—there—there is the whole thing. I mean the cow is—she's fertilizing. She's mowing. We don't have to spread any manure. We don't have to harvest it—she's harvesting it. It's all real time—real solar dollars.

The industrial food system gradually became so noisy, smelly, not a person-friendly place, that the people who operate those plants don't want anybody to go there, because then people would see the ugly truth. When that occurred, then we lost all the integrity and all the accountability in the food system. If we put glass walls on all the mega-processing facilities, we would have a different food system in this country.

We have allowed ourselves to become so disconnected and ignorant—...as the food that we eat. What a difference this is to be out here in the fresh air, sunshine, birds singing in the trees, you know? But you see, according to the U.S.D.A, this is unsanitary because it's open to the air. They tried to close us down. One of the biggest showdowns we had was when they tried to close us down because this was unsanitary. Can you imagine? So we had them cultured at a local microbiology lab. Ours averaged 133C.F.U. and the ones from the store averaged 3600. Of course, those have been through 40 trillion baths. Ours haven't seen any chlorine.

A lot of people wonder "Is this real? I mean, can you really feed the world?" That whole thing is such a specious argument because, yes, we're every bit as efficient, especially if you plug in all of the inefficiencies of the industrial system.

I've had people come up at farmer's markets and say "What? \$3 a dozen for eggs?" And they're drinking a 75¢ can of soda.

I'm always struck by how successful we have been at hitting the bull's-eye of the wrong target. I mean we have learned—for example, in cattle we have learned how to—how to plant, fertilize and harvest corn using global positioning satellite technology, and nobody sits back and asks “But should we be feeding cows corn?”

We've become a culture of technicians. We're all into—we're all into the how of it and nobody's stepping back and saying “But why?”

I mean, a culture that just views a pig as a pile of protoplasmic inanimate structure to be manipulated by whatever creative design that humans can foist on that critter will probably view individuals within its community and other cultures in the community of nations with the same type of disdain, disrespect and controlling-type mentality.

Eduardo Pena, Union Organizer:

The town where the plant is located is a small town called Tar Heel in the middle of a very economically-depressed area. Smithfield has mastered the art of picking and choosing a workforce that they can exploit, initially from the local workforce—the poor whites, the poor blacks. They went through that workforce very quickly. Now they have to bus their workers all the way from Dentsville, South Carolina, to Clinton, North Carolina. You have to draw a circle 100 miles in diameter, and that's where all of your workers are coming from

Worker:

They have the same mentality towards workers as they do towards the hogs.

Worker:

You know, the hog, they don't really have to worry about their comfort because they're temporary. They're going to be killed. And they have the same viewpoint to the worker. You're not worried about the longevity of the worker because, to them, everything has an end.

Worker:

When you've got 2000 hogs a hour going through employees, because they're handling these guts so much, they get infections in their fingernails and all. All their fingernails separate from their fingers. With blood, feces, urine. It's easy to get hurt down there.

Worker:

You're doing that same movement for that same piece of the hog and it's nonstop, you know. Basically you're treated as a human machine. You get people that can't afford to leave from out there, and Smithfield knows this. And that's what they hold over you.

Schlosser:

100 years ago when Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* there was a beef trust that wielded enormous power. Immigrants from Eastern Europe were being abused in the absence of any kind of government regulation. There were horrible disfiguring injuries and even deaths.

Pollan:

Things got better. They slowly got better.

Schlosser:

Teddy Roosevelt took on the beef trust. Labor unions slowly organized meatpacking workers and turned it into one of the best industrial jobs in the United States. By the 1950s to be a meatpacking worker was like being an auto worker who has a good wage, good benefits, pension.

And then what happened? Well, the meat-packing companies got bigger in order to serve the needs of the fast-food industry, which was its biggest customer. Some of the meat-packing companies like IBP borrowed the same sort of labor practices from the fast food industry—cutting wages, making sure there were no unions, speeding up production, and having the worker do the same task again and again and again. And meat-packing is now one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States.

The meat-packing industry also recruited a new set of immigrants—illegal immigrants and recent immigrants from Mexico. Many of the illegal immigrants coming to America were corn farmers in Mexico. NAFTA led to a flooding of the Mexican market with cheap American corn. It's put more than a million and a half Mexican farmers out of work. They couldn't compete with this cheap corn coming from America.

Pollan:

So what happens to those million and a half Mexican farmers?

Schlusser:

Meat packers like IBP, National Beef and Monfort began actively recruiting in Mexico. Companies advertised on the radio and in newspapers. IBP set up a bus service in Mexico to bring workers into the United States. For years the government turned a blind eye to the recruitment of immigrants by the meat-packing industry.

But now, when there's an anti-immigrant movement, they're cracking down all of a sudden, but they're not cracking down on these companies. The government's cracking down on the workers.

Pena:

Immigration agents are arresting Smithfield workers.

This is an agreement between Smithfield and Immigrations authorities. They get rid of 15 workers per day, but you don't see any massive raids. That way it doesn't affect the production line.

I don't see anybody arresting no Smithfield managers. Nobody in the plant that had anything to do with the fact that those workers were hired is being arrested. What we see today is workers who were producing for this company and working hard—Those are the people who get arrested.

We want to pay the cheapest price for our food. We don't understand that that comes at a price. These workers, they've been here for 10, 15 years processing your bacon, your holiday ham and now they're getting picked up like they're criminals. And these companies are making billions of dollars.

Hidden Costs

Salatin:

Is cheapness everything that there is? Who wants to buy the cheapest car? We're willing to subsidize the food system to create the "mystique" of cheap food, when actually it's very expensive food when you add up the environmental costs societal costs, health costs.

The industrial food is not honest food. It's not priced honestly. It's not produced honestly. It's not processed honestly. There's nothing honest about that food.

I have no desire to scale up or get bigger. My desire is to produce the best food in the world and heal. And if in doing so more people come to our corner and want stuff, then heaven help me figure out how to meet the need without compromising the integrity.

That—that's where I am. I have absolutely no desire to be at Wal-Mart. As soon as you grasp for that growth, you're going to view your customer differently, you're going to view your product differently, you're going to view your business differently. You're going to view everything that is the most important—you're going to view that differently.

Gary Hirshberg, CEO of Stonyfield Farms:

Organic's been growing over 20% annually. It's one of the fastest-growing segments in the food industry.

We're not going to get rid of capitalism. Certainly we're not going to get rid of it in the time that we need to arrest global warming and reverse the toxification of our air, our food and our water. We need to be much more urgent. If we attempt to make perfect the enemy of the good and say we're only going to buy food from the most-perfect system within 100 miles of us, we're never going to get there.

As an environmentalist, it was pretty clear to me that business was the source of all the pollution, business was the source of basically all the things that were destroying this world. In college I came across this little institute called New Alchemy Institute, which was a group of renegade biologists.

We were preaching a kind of a new religion, trying to develop food and waste-treatment alternatives, but we were preaching to the convinced. We were depending on sources of support that were dried up and we weren't reaching the audience that really needed these messages. I realized we need to not be David up against Goliath. We need to be Goliath.

When we started out, we were a seven-cow farm. We wanted to prove that business could be part of the solution to the globe's environmental problems. At the same time we had to prove that we could be highly profitable. Today in 2008, not only are in America, but we're among the most profitable.

These large companies don't grow organically. They grow by acquisition. Coke, Pepsi, Kellogg's, General Mills—all of them are running, not walking, into the organic food business.

For me, when a Wal-Mart enters the organic space, I'm thrilled. It's absolutely one of the most exciting things. I have dreamed of the day when I could sit with corporate titans and have conversations about organics and sustainability.

Wal-Mart is terribly sensitive to their reputation. They've obviously been vilified, probably more than any retailer in our current economy.

Tony Airose, Walmart Executive:

Actually, it's a pretty easy decision to try to support things like organic, or whatever it might be, based on what the customer wants. We see that and react to it. So if it's clear the customer wants it, it's really easy to get behind it, to push forward and try to make that happen

Hirshberg:

When I run into my old environmental friends, many are initially horrified by the kinds of company that I'm keeping these days. But when I then go on to explain what the impact of one purchase order from Wal-Mart is, in terms of not pounds but tons of pesticide, tons of herbicide, tons of chemical fertilizer, the discussion—we get away from the emotion and we get down to the facts.

I have no illusions about this. I don't believe that Wal-Mart has come here because they've suddenly had a moral enlightenment. It's because of economics. I can debate with my radical friends all day long, but nobody can challenge the fact that a sale of another million dollars to Wal-Mart helps to save the world.

The Veil

Pollan:

Back around the turn of the last century, the average farmer could feed six or eight people. Now the average American farmer can feed 126 people, okay? These are the most productive humans that have ever lived. The changes down on the farm have been momentous and radical but invisible to most of us, 'cause who knows a farmer anymore? But their way of life has been revolutionized.

Roush:

10,000 years ago, farmers started saving their best seeds and planted again in the following year. That's how seeds have been developed. That's how corn was developed from a useless grass for the most part to the extremely productive plant it is today.

Pollan:

The idea that any corporation could own a food crop is a very new idea. It wasn't until the 1980s that the Supreme Court said you could patent life. And that opened the floodgates—efforts to patent the most valuable parts of life, which is to say the crops on which we depend.

Roush:

Monsanto is a chemical company. They produced DDT, Agent Orange in Vietnam, and then they developed a product called "Roundup."

We started hearing rumblings about genetically-engineered soybeans that could resist the application of Roundup. When the Roundup was sprayed over top of it, it killed every weed out there except for this Roundup Ready soybean.

I can remember when the first prohibition against seed saving came into being. Most farmers were just absolutely disgusted with the whole concept. It's been interesting over the course of 11 years to watch us go from utter contempt for the notion that we can't save our own seed to acceptance.

Filmmaker:

What happens if a farmer saves the seeds?

Roush:

Well, you know, really there's only one company involved in this now and that's Monsanto. Monsanto is... They've got a team of private investigators that kind of roam the country and they've got a little 1-800 hotline they take calls on. If they get a call and somebody alleges that somebody saved seed, they'll send an investigator out to look into the matter. If you save your own seed, you're going to get a call from somebody from Monsanto.

David Runyon:

Two men drove in my driveway at 7:00, 7:30 at night, presented a black card to me and they never told me that they were from Monsanto.

Farmer:

They said that they had had a surveillance team, caught me cleaning beans.

Moe Parr:

I found it necessary to get up at 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning before the investigators are on the road following me.

Runyon:

They were—I'm going to say maybe ex-military or ex-police. They were large and they were intimidating.

Man:

I don't know whether they had their surveillance team or whether it was my neighbor that turned me in. I don't know. Now as I turned to walk in the house, one of them said— I could hear in the back—He's guilty.

Runyon:

It's a real ingenious device designed back in the 1800s, and Monsanto's going to close all of them out.

Filmmaker:

So how many seed cleaners are out there in the country do you think?

Runyon:

In the state of Indiana, there may be six. Maybe. I'm not aware of—

Filmmaker:

Have they all been put out of business?

Runyon:

There's nobody left.

When Monsanto soybeans first came on the market, I just never really switched over. I was getting pretty good yield with the conventional soybeans I'd been using, so I thought "Well, I'll just stay where I'm at."

My neighbors all around me are all GMOs. If the pollen goes in, if the seed moves in, I am still held accountable.

Pollan:

When you genetically modify a crop, you own it. We've never had this in agriculture.

Roush:

Used to be that your land-grant universities, they developed what was called public seed. The vast majority of the plant breeding was actually done in these public institutions.

Pollan:

Monsanto is very much like Microsoft. The same way Microsoft owns the intellectual property behind most computers in America, they set out to own the intellectual property behind most of the food in America.

Roush:

Public plant breeding is a thing of the past. There virtually are no public seeds anymore.

Runyon:

There's only like four or five varieties that I can actually plant. Now I have some of the last soybeans coming out of the state of Illinois—When it comes to the point that I can't buy any more certified seed, what do I do? What are my options?

Roush:

Monsanto falsely accused us of violating their patent and breach of contract. None of it was true. You go into a market, you find a dominant farmer and if you can ruin them, you scare the rest of them to following the line.

My family spent \$400,000 fighting the battle, pretrial. And we were told it would take another million to take the thing to trial. We settled out of court. The way the system appeared to work to me was Lady Justice had the scales and you piled cash on the scales and the one that piled the most cash on the scales, hired the most experts and was most willing to tell the biggest lies, that was the winner.

That seems to be how our justice system functions now. It's terrible. It's terrible. How can a farmer defend himself against a multinational corporation like Monsanto?

I talked to a young man just three days ago. They'd been to his farm, you know? And this poor kid, he's just starting out. His fiancée was there. I talked to her and tried to give them the best advice I could. Unfortunately the best advice I could give them was "Try to get out of this thing with your skin intact. Don't fight 'em. You've got to rollover and give them what they want, 'cause you can't defend yourself."

In the case of Monsanto, their control is so dominant. If you want to be in production agriculture, you're going to be in bed with Monsanto. They own the soybean. They are going to control that product from seed to the supermarket. They are, in effect, gaining control of food.

Pollan:

There has been this revolving door between Monsanto's corporate offices and the various regulatory and judicial bodies that have made the key decisions.

Roush:

Justice Clarence Thomas was a Monsanto attorney. That wouldn't be such a big deal if it weren't for one court case that really decided this whole seed-saving issue. Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the majority opinion in a case that allowed these companies to prevent farmers from saving their own seed.

Pollan:

Monsanto had very close ties to the Bush administration... and the Clinton administration. This goes to why we haven't had much political debate over this radical change to our food system. For the last 25 years, our government has been dominated by the industries that it was meant to be regulating.

Schlosser:

The challenge is as soon as you have people with expertise in industry, they may turn out to be very good regulators. It's really about what interests they decide to represent.

You're talking about power—centralized power and that power is being used against the people who are really producing the food like the farmers. It's being used against the workers who work for these companies and it's being used against consumers who are deliberately being kept in the dark about what they're eating, where it comes from and what it's doing to their bodies.

Schlosser:

Good afternoon, Madame Chair and members. SB-63 is a consumer right-to-know measure. It simply requires that all foods that are cloned must be labeled as cloned foods. These cloned animals are a fundamentally new thing. But I find it incredible that the FDA not only wants to allow the sale of meat from cloned animals without further research, but also wants to allow the sale of this meat without any labeling.

Noelle Cremers, California Farm Bureau:

And if I can point out—the reason that we are concerned with labeling is it creates unnecessary fear in a consumer's mind. Until the industry has an opportunity to educate why we want to use this technology and the value of the technology, we don't feel that consumers just having a warning label will help them.

Pollan:

These companies fight tooth and nail against labeling. The fast food industry fought against giving you the calorie information. They fought against telling you if there's trans fat in their food. The meat packing industry for years prevented country-of-origin labeling. They fought not to label genetically modified foods, and now 78% of the processed food in the supermarket has some genetically-modified ingredient.

I think it's one of the most important battles for consumers to fight—is the right to know what's in their food and how it was grown. Not only do they not want you to know what's in it, they have managed to make it against the law to criticize their products.

Filmmaker:

Can you tell me how you've changed how you eat?

Kowalczyk:

Yeah, we—you'll probably have to talk to an attorney before you would put this in there. What? You can say this is—we've stopped—I know, but—I could have the meat and poultry industry coming after me and I really—

Yeah, I'm sorry, Robbie, but I get asked this all the time. Initially, my reaction was "I don't care. Let them sue me. Let them try and sue the mother of a dead child and see."

Filmmaker:

It's pretty amazing that you can't say—how you and your family have changed—

Kowalczyk:

The food industry has different protections than other industries do. We have a lot of questions about this mad cow disease.

If you recall the case where Oprah was sued by the meat industry for something she said on her show.

Schlosser:

In Colorado it's a felony if you're convicted under a veggie libel law. So you could go to prison for criticizing the ground beef that's being produced in the state of Colorado. There is an effort in several farm states to make it illegal to publish a photo of any industrial food operation, any feedlot operation.

At the same time, they've also gotten bills passed that are called cheeseburger bills that make it very, very difficult for you to sue them. These companies have legions of attorneys and they may sue even though they know they can't win just to send a message.

Man:

We are on record for the deposition of Maurice Parr in the matter of Monsanto Company and Monsanto Technology versus Maurice Parr.

Maurice Parr:

I'll tell you, what really scared me the most today was the fact that they have every check that I have written from every bank account that I've used in the last 10 years.

Stephen Pennell:

This is the first case in which a seed company is suing the person who does the cleaning of the seed. So if Monsanto's claims are upheld in this case, that would not only put Moe out of business, but it would prohibit every grower in the country from doing what Moe does as a precedent in future cases.

Parr:

This essentially puts me out of business.

Shocks To The System

Pollan:

We've had a food system that's been dedicated to the single virtue of efficiency, so we grow a very small number of crops, a very small number of varieties, a very small number of companies. And even though you achieve efficiencies, the system gets more and more precarious. You will have a breakdown eventually. And where the breakdown comes in the system we don't always know.

Roush:

Modern production agriculture is highly dependent on large amounts of petroleum. Our farm, we're going to use about 40,000 gallons of diesel fuel a year.

Pollan:

We eat a lot of oil without knowing it. To bring a steer to slaughter, it's 75 gallons of oil. So what we're seeing is that this highly-efficient machine does not have the resilience to deal with shocks such as the spike in oil prices. Food prices last month were 3.9% higher than they were a year ago. Take corn, another basic source of food, up to a 12-year high.

For a while, we could sell grains so cheaply anywhere in the world, farmers in other countries who aren't being subsidized could not compete with us. So their capacity to grow food for themselves was compromised.

Roush:

The world's running out of food and nobody's talking about it. We have no reserves.

Pollan:

A month doesn't go by where there isn't a story in the news that peels back the curtain on how that industrial food is made.

Every time one of these stories comes out, America learns a little bit more—what's going on in the kitchen where their food is being prepared. And every time they turn away in revulsion and start looking for alternatives.

Hirshberg:

The irony is that the average consumer does not feel very powerful. They think they are the recipients of whatever industry has put out there for them to consume. Trust me, it's the exact opposite. When we run an item past the supermarket scanner, we're voting for local or not, organic or not.

At Wal-Mart, we made a decision about a year ago to go through a process of becoming rBST-free in our milk supply. We made that decision based on customer preference.

Hirshberg:

Individual consumers changed the biggest company on earth and in so doing, probably put the last nail in the coffin for synthetic growth hormone.

Pollan:

To eat well in this country costs more than to eat badly. It will take more money and some people simply don't have it. And that's one of the reasons that we need changes at the policy level, so that the carrots are a better deal than the chips.

Schlosser:

People think, "These companies are so big and so powerful, how are we ever going to change things?" But look at the tobacco industry. It had huge control over public policy and that control was broken. The battle against tobacco is a perfect model of how an industry's irresponsible behavior can be changed.

Salatin:

Imagine what it would be if, as a national policy, we said we would be only successful if we had fewer people going to the hospital next year than last year. How about that for success? The idea then would be to have such nutritionally dense unadulterated food that people who ate it actually felt better, had more energy, and weren't sick as much. Now see, that's a noble goal.

Kowalczyk:

I can't change the fact that Kevin's dead. When you tell somebody you've lost a child, I really don't like that look of pity that comes into their eyes, that they feel sorry for me. I can have a pity party all by myself very well, thank you. I don't need it from other people.

What I need them to do is listen and help me effect a change.

Roush:

You have to understand that we farmers, we're going to deliver to the marketplace what the marketplace demands. If you want to buy \$2 milk, you're going to get a feedlot in the backyard. It's that simple. People have got to start demanding good, wholesome food of us. And we'll deliver. I promise you. We're very ingenious people. We'll deliver. That's all I had to say.