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LGF REVIEW:

## Food Industry "Issues"

by Alex Limanowski

*This spring, some friends of ours asked if Learn Great Foods had an opinion about "the issues" in the food industry. "Issues?" we asked. "This isn't a political campaign." But they insisted, and presented us with three recent articles, each concerned with food consumption in America. These articles approach the industry from three different angles, each of which is interesting, and if you would like to read their full texts, the links are below.*

The articles:

### *Paradise Sold, a Critic At Large*

by Steven Shapin in the May 15 *New Yorker*.  
Full text: [http://www.newyorker.com/printables/critics/060515crat\\_atlarge](http://www.newyorker.com/printables/critics/060515crat_atlarge)

### *Food Fight*

Opinion piece by Katherine Mangu-Ward in the June 9 *Wall Street Journal*.  
Full text: <http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110008494>

### *Supermarket Sleuth*

June 12 interview with Marion Nestle by Katharine Mieszkowski, on *Salon.com*.  
Full text: [http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2006/06/12/marion\\_nestle/index\\_np.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2006/06/12/marion_nestle/index_np.html)  
(You'll have to view a short ad if you aren't a Salon member.)

Steven Shapin, in *Paradise Sold*, does a thorough and balanced job of presenting the "issue" to his readers. Drawing much of his presentation from Michael Pollan's book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Shapin describes how the organic movement has left behind its roots in "small, family-owned, local" farms and has become Big Organic, distinguishable from its past by revenue and support from major corporations like WalMart. Shapin says, "For many who participated in the early phase of organic farming, its subsequent history is a story of paradise lost—or worse, sold—in which cherished ideals have simply become part of the sales pitch." The ideals Shapin refers to can still be found today in the European Union's definition of "sustainable" farming (first outlined at the 1995 World Summit on Social Development), but American organics went the American business route, which takes as a given that it is better business to sell to 300 million people rather than the hundred or so that attend the local farmers' market. It's better business, but as Shapin points out, it undercuts the ecological good that the ideal of 'selling locally' accomplishes.

After outlining the toxicological benefit to the earth that a Big Organic operation has, Shapin points out the fuel consumption required for transport. This makes "the net benefit of all this to the planet...hard to assess." But growing organically foregoes the use of chemicals, which is more than a conventional operation of similar size—of which there are many—can say it does for the environment. The net benefit to the earth of Big Organic is precisely what

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### For Reservations or More Information

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[www.learngreatfoods.com](http://www.learngreatfoods.com)



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## CONTINUED: Food Industry “Issues”

Shapin quotes—the chemicals that don’t get into our drinking water, and the gas that isn’t used to make those chemicals. That’s not hard to assess.

But this is where Katherine Mangu-Ward, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, finds her “food fight.” In her view interpretation of the industry, “local” and “organic” are mutually exclusive, and therefore are competitors. But organic can be local, and local isn’t always organic. They are not just buzz-words thrown around in Mangu-Ward’s colorful portrait of the food industry. Both have a benefit to the environment, and both are a vast improvement over large-scale, conventional farming techniques.

Salon’s interview with Marion Nestle (author of *What To Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*) looks at a different, but no less complicated, problem with food: the general lack of information about the very complicated subject of nutrition that producers oversimplify for the sake of marketing. In Nestle’s view, such marketing pitches are “misleading.” That’s probably true, but Learn Great Foods tries to sidestep that problem. Instead of learning every ingredient that prepared food producers use, a simple cooking class can outfit the cook with four or five recipes and a little kitchen know-how, which should serve to cut down on the reliance on prepared products that contain these mysterious (and potentially harmful) ingredients.

As for the “fight” that Mangu-Ward outlines, we don’t believe it exists. It is a classic example of a false dichotomy, in which only two choices out of the many are offered, in order to force a “decision”

where one is unnecessary and even harmful to the search for truth. Unfortunately, her views are reinforced by the conventional food industry. If local farmers fight Big Organic, no progress will be made. In our effort to encourage progress, Learn Great Foods lets the farmers, producers, and sellers themselves tell you what they do and what they call it (be it “organic,” “local,” “sustainable,” “biodynamic,” or anything else). We won’t tell you what to eat, and we won’t tell you which “side” is good and which bad. It’s all food, but some of it comes at a higher cost to the earth, and to our health as well.

Shapin rightly points out that considering this when buying food is “biting off more than most people are able and willing to chew.” Not everyone is as interested in touring and learning as our guests are!

The Pollan book that Shapin summarizes outlines four separate meals, each with a higher level of awareness of whence and how the food has come. What Learn Great Foods offers falls between the second meal—provided by Big Organic—and third meal—farmed by Pollan himself. We do not rely on Big Organic for ingredients, and we are not farmers. We are just regular people who are able to buy direct from local farmers whose practices we know. The food is fresh and the farmers are ecologically conscious, and that makes for a delicious meal we (and you!) can feel good eating.

For someone who isn’t sure which “side” to take, we suggest starting in the middle. Look for us when you get there. ■

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