
RUMINATIONS

BY REGAN BATUELLO

ADVOCATING LOCAL

The source is the story.

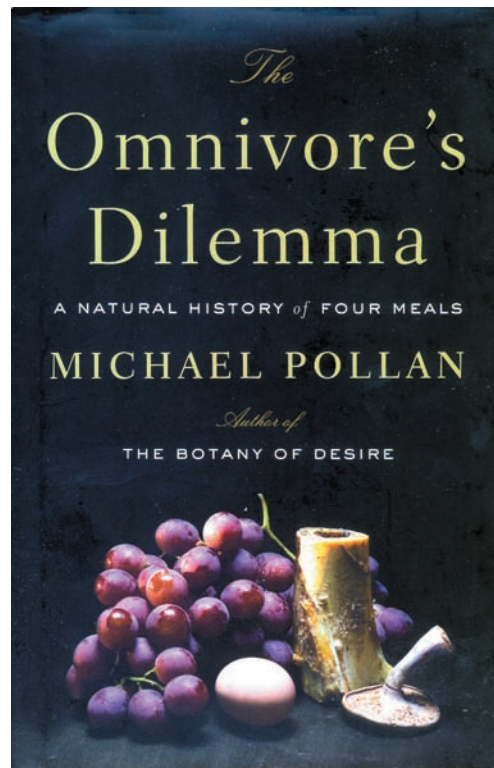
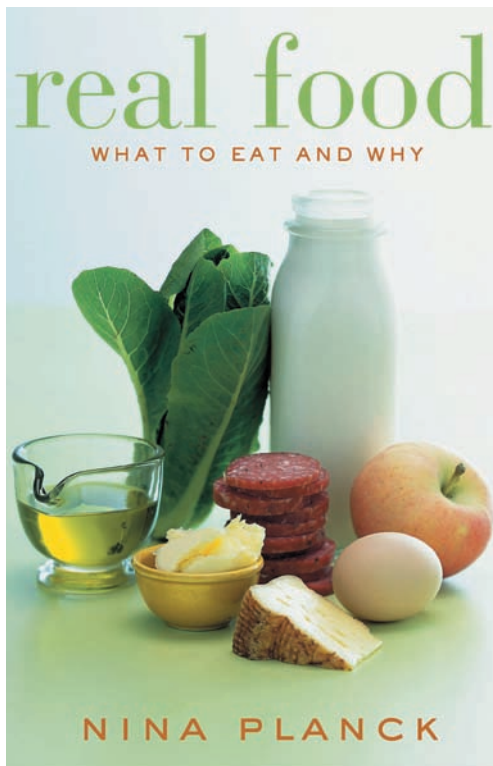
Jung says every 20 years we reinvent ourselves. The macrobiotics say it takes seven years for all the cells in our bodies to regenerate. As Americans we have been inventing and reinventing ourselves since the beginning of our stay on this continent. Like teenagers we rejected our family's culinary ways and thrashed around for a couple of hundred years in search of our own identity. We invented all kinds of nifty things. Do you remember when Tang was all the rage? I remember when the first McDonald's came to Manhattan and freeze-dried food went to space with the astronauts. It was cool. Many of us have at some point given up meat, dairy, nightshades, soy products, fish, sugar, carbohydrates or fruit. Or perhaps we have existed wholly on grapefruits, watermelons, high fat, low fat, raw foods, protein shakes, bars, juices or even water.

Is it possible that, in the culinary sense anyway, we have reached our early 20s now and are beginning to look around and notice that maybe not *everything* our parents had to say was wrong? If the most recent offerings in the literary world are any barometer this would seem to be the case. Sitting on my desk (otherwise known as my kitchen table) are four books. Each one of them is a look back at where we came from and a salute to the foods that we ate before we became so caught up in the rejection of all things simple and perhaps even (sigh) slow. Yes, we are getting older as an eating people and the speed of adolescence is catching up with us. Maybe we'll just stay home tonight and cook. Or read.

The Omnivore's Dilemma—A Natural History of Four Meals by Michael Pollan was the first of the four that I picked up. "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 everything nature has to offer, deciding what you *should* eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the potential foods on offer are

likely to sicken or kill you. This is the omnivore's dilemma..." Hmm...so much food, so little time. Pollan divides these choices into three sections, each one concluded by a meal. He begins with a fast food meal, moves from there to a meal procured at a large health food chain and then cooked and eaten at home with his family. In that same section he goes a step farther out into the "beyond organic" to the small farm procured meal. Finally he hooks up with the mushroom gathering, prosciutto hunters (this is my kind of hunter) and "hunter gathers" his own feast. In all of these sections Pollan takes the reader with him as he traces the origins of the food; not always an easy feat.

There is a huge amount of information in this book, some of which we have always known, instinctively (you know you didn't really think that triple McCheeseburger, fries, and a Coke was good for you). But Pollan is going to tell you why, and make it interesting. There are many "Aha" moments to be had.



The second section, for this reader, was the most interesting. As a large chain health food store shopper I followed the paths of those fabulous bags of pre-washed baby lettuces with fascination. It was in this section that I began to really like Pollan. He doesn't come up with pat answers to complex questions, nor does he just ignore the questions because they have no right answers. It probably goes without saying that we'd all like to have the time and the affluence to allow us to

feed ourselves, or our children, the purest most humanely raised animals (okay you vegetarians, work with me), and most lovingly raised vegetables. Is it always an option? No. Pollan gives us enough information on the origins of our food to make better-informed decisions without telling us what we *should* be doing.

The third section is the most fun, and by this time I am ready to

go on and on. I would like to spend more time tramping around the country searching for the origins of food with Michael Pollan.

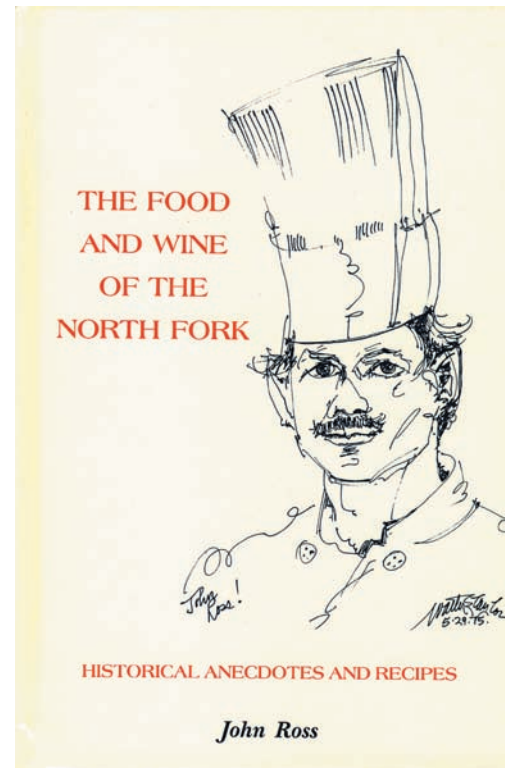
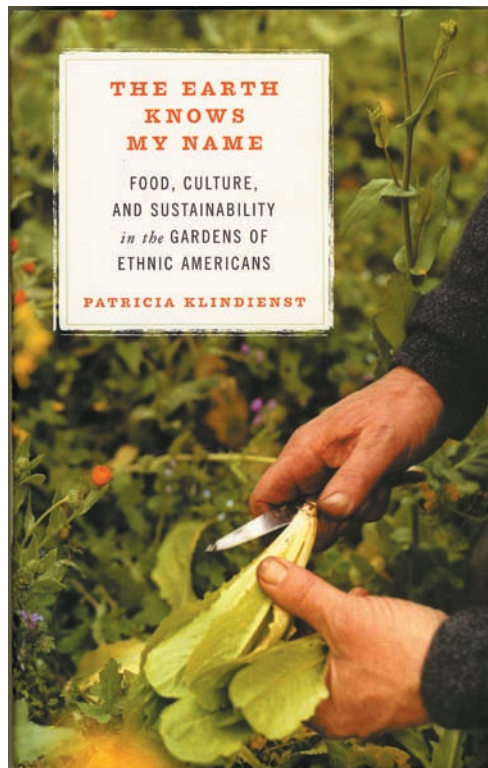
Nina Planck, greenmarket goddess, organizer extraordinaire, booster of small farmers on three continents and the people who love to eat their goods, has written a book that pretty much says it all in the title, *Real Food—What to Eat and Why*. Okay. That's pretty clear. In this book Planck talks about growing up on a small farm, eating all the things people have eaten for centuries, but which somehow we've drifted away from.

Meat, eggs, fresh vegetables, whole grains and most importantly, fat. She too joined many of us in her culinary journey through vegetarianism, very low fat, etc., until she realized that she was thinner and felt better when she ate a diet that was closer to what her mother fed her. This book is an homage to a way of eating that will have some people shuddering in disbelief. She wants us to put away that skim milk, eat that chicken skin. Beef? Yes. And it's time to pull out that outcast from most American kitchens...lard.

There are a lot of "facts" in Planck's dense book. There's a lot of advice and a certain "I have seen the light" enthusiasm that, if you've grown up reading Adele Davis and Lappé's *Diet For A Small Planet* (Planck and I share these counter-culture rights of passage) and the thousands of books that came after, *Real Food* seems like it might be the next in a continuum. Sure, she uses lots of statistical charts to back up her claims, but anyone who has taken even the most basic statistics course knows that you can pretty much prove anything. This is a book whose heart is in the right place and is worth reading. While some of the information and sources overlap with *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, it certainly gives food for thought.

Another book with its very tender heart in the right place is Patricia Klindienst's *The Earth Knows My Name—Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*. Whew. This is a sweet book that hasn't quite decided who it wants to be when it grows up. In it, Klindienst travels to eight diverse American gardens and talks to the people that have created them. They talk about the farming practices, many of them brought over from cultures very different from our own, or so old that we forgot them many years ago.

When Klindienst is immersed in the people she's interviewing the book sings: a woman in the Southwest who has turned her family's love of gardening into a thriving farmers market stand recounts, "My grandma knows. In fact, I had this conversation with her last week, because



I went over to her house. She had roasted chilies that day and you need fresh tortillas to go with them. She doesn't make tortillas very often anymore, but she did that day. You can have the recipe, but it's the technique—you have to do it every day for ten thousand days in a row to get them to taste like my grandma's."

Klindienst is at her best when she is talking with the farmers and gardeners, otherwise she has a tendency to wander off on tangents that give this book the unfortunate feel of a bright student's dissertation. There's a reason we don't read too many of those.

Okay, we know where it came from, now what do we do with it? John Ross has the answer. Anyone who's spent any time at all on the North Fork has heard the name John Ross. There was a time (not that long ago) that his restaurant was pretty close to the only place to go for a good meal (how much changes in such a short amount of time). His book, *The Food and Wine of the North Fork—Historical Anecdotes and Recipes* is a must-have for anyone who loves to cook, loves to eat, or just loves the North Fork. Ross writes, "...our overall food strategy was to keep it as simple as possible, emphasize seasonal and local products, and start from scratch." The recipes in this book are very accessible and delicious without being fussy.

The real fun of this book begins in the second part that is an historical homage and reference to North Fork eating establishments past and present. It's wonderful to read and you might see someone you know in the marvelous old pictures.

We know its origins. We know what it's made of. We know what to do with it. Now let's eat. □