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Silicon Valley Reads: In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto

Early one evening, eighty-two year old Gomathi, my great-aunt, said she was tired and retired to bed early. She passed away peacefully the next morning. She had never visited a doctor or dentist in her life. She had perfect, strong teeth and never suffered from any disease, except for occasional headaches. Her secret? She was a strict vegetarian and ate judiciously in small portions three times a day. She skipped dinner a couple of nights a week and ate fruits instead. This is what came to my mind when I read Michael Pollan's words "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants," in his book In Defense of Food. It is a simple, easy to follow message.

That is what I thought until I began to read health magazines and browse the Internet, only to come across multitudes of "scientific" articles about food and health, some of which contained contradicting information. Now, I was plagued by an uneasy conscience. I began to wonder if I was getting enough DHA and other Omega-3 fatty acids. What could I do to get more fiber?

While my mind is chewing on this, I go to the supermarket and flashy labels claiming to make me healthy attract me. I pick up the "items" that grab my attention -- cereals with large red hearts pledging that the product may help reduce the risk of Coronary Heart Disease, and packages that scream "fat free" in bright letters. I march out of the supermarket triumphantly, convinced that I am providing my family with nutritious meals. Am I being sensible in choosing such foods? Or am I slowly drifting away from tradition? The thought bewilders me. Born in a family deeply rooted in tradition and culture, I followed what my grandmother and great-aunt taught me even after I moved to America.

One might argue that in today's fast paced, high-tech world, few have the time or the energy to put wholesome meals on the table. This is true. It takes a lot of time, effort, and money, not to mention patience, to prepare wholesome meals and eat at the table. But as Pollan points out, it is well worth the money and effort. He says that the dinner table is not only a place to eat, but also a place where children are taught manners and the art of conversation.

We've all heard the phrase "You are what you eat," but Michael Pollan takes it to a new level. He says, "You are what you eat eats." One has to remember that the food industry cannot thrive if it does not get support from the public. A well informed consumer will be careful in choosing his or her food. Though Pollan's attacks on the food industry were a little too harsh, his efforts to bring awareness to the public has to be applauded. Overall, Pollan's In Defense of Food is an eye-opening book released at just the right time to pull society out of the quicksand of the Western diet.