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## Michael Pollan's Response to Whole Foods Market

Last month, John Mackey, the president of Whole Foods, wrote me a letter (also published on the Whole Foods Web site), taking issue with some of the points I have made about his grocery chain—in my book *"The Omnivore's Dilemma,"* in my column for TimesSelect and in some of my public remarks. What follows is my response to Mr. Mackey.

June 12, 2006

Dear John Mackey,

Thank you for your letter, and for the time you spent with me in Austin last month. I was delighted to have a chance to meet and to learn more about Whole Foods. Thank you, too, for the \$25 gift certificate, which more than makes up for the \$6 I spent on the disappointing Argentine organic asparagus. Though I know you are troubled by some of the critical things I have written and said publicly about Whole Foods, it was clear from our conversation that we agree about a great many things, including our concerns about the future direction of organic agriculture. Since you are in a position to do much to shape that future, that cheers me no end.

I want to take this opportunity to address some of the points you made in your letter, and to pose a few of the questions that it begs. I hope you will take my remarks in the spirit in which they are offered — as constructive criticism of an important institution that can do much to advance what you call the "reformation" of the American food system, something we both want.

Let me start by explaining why I did not seek to interview anyone from Whole Foods for my book, which you imply in your letter represents a journalistic lapse. (You should know I have interviewed people from the company several times in the past, particularly in connection with an April 2001 story I did for *The New York Times Magazine* "Naturally," for which I interviewed Margaret Wittenberg. Over the years I have also interviewed several store employees of Whole Foods and a great many of its suppliers.) For the purposes of *"The Omnivore's Dilemma,"* I approached Whole Foods less as a journalist than a consumer, since my goal was to capture how the store represents itself and the food it sells to a typical shopper: the signs and displays, the brochures, the labels, the photographs on the walls. Admittedly, this is not a systematic way to describe a supermarket chain—it depends on the sample of stores I visited and what they happened to be selling on any given day. It could be you have stores that sell substantially more local food than the stores I observed. But the fact remains that what I observed I observed, and that is what I wrote in the book. Nothing in your letter leads me to believe my account of what you sell in my local Whole Foods or the farms it comes from is inaccurate.

I do appreciate your offer of journalistic access and "transparency," though you may be interested to know that other journalists have not found you and other Whole Foods executives to be so accessible in the past. When researching his important new book *"Organic, Inc.,"* Sam Fromartz was turned down in his effort to arrange an interview with you. He was told (in an email from Amy Hopfensperger): "...we do not grant interviews for book requests at this time for several reasons. With the explosive growth in the organic and natural food industry and Whole Foods Market's position as the leader in this industry,

we are not interested in leaking any competitive information that may benefit our competitors." I would hope this does not accurately reflect your feelings about talking to journalists, and to judge from my recent contacts with you, it does not. Transparency at every level is critical to reforming the food system.

I confess I am of two minds in deciding how to respond to the substance of your letter: whether I should attempt to cast doubt on your claims that Whole Foods wholeheartedly supports local, artisanal, and grass-based agriculture, or whether to simply applaud and encourage your inclinations in that direction. I take heart in the fact that you feel compelled to defend a commitment to these forms of agriculture, not only because I share it, but because you are in as strong a position as any individual in America today to help rebuild local food chains and build a market for pasture-based livestock farming. I don't need to tell you how important these two things are – or that the survival of local agriculture is critical to preserving farmland near America's metropolitan areas; to reducing our consumption of fossil fuel (17 percent of U.S. fossil fuel consumption goes to feeding ourselves); and to making the food system better able to withstand threats, whether from pathogens or terrorists (or both). The decentralization of the food system is not just a matter of sentiment or political correctness but of national security. Further, as we discussed, grass farming represents one of the most encouraging trends in American agriculture today, holding out great promise for improving the health of the animals, of the American land, and of the American consumer.

Yet, to be perfectly candid, I have trouble squaring some of your claims of support for local agriculture with what I see when I shop at Whole Foods. I see more signage about the importance of local produce than I see actual items of local produce. You write that 45 percent of your suppliers are local, i.e. located within 200 miles of the store – an impressive statistic, but perhaps a misleading one. Given the concentration of organic produce in a tiny handful of corporate hands (with Cal-Organic/Grimmway and Earthbound dominating the market nationally), it's not surprising that you would have a relatively high number of local suppliers among your vendors – since just two of those vendors could supply the great bulk of your produce sales. The more telling statistic would be this: As a percentage of sales (rather than of vendors), how much of the produce sold at Whole Foods is produced locally? My guess is that number is considerably lower than 45 percent, even if you count Cal-Organics and Earthbound as "local farmers" in California, a claim that strikes me (and would probably strike them) as a stretch. Leaving aside food miles, these are not the sorts of corporations most people have in mind when they talk about local agriculture.

After visiting a great many large organic farms to research my book, many of them your suppliers, it seems to me undeniable that organic agriculture has industrialized over the past few years, and that Whole Foods has played a part in that process—for good and for ill. (Sam Fromartz's "*Organic Inc.*" demonstrates as much, as I think does "*The Omnivore's Dilemma*," especially in Chapter Nine.) Big supermarket chains will naturally find it easier and therefore more profitable to buy from big farms selling lots of one thing. This is the way of the world, or at least of capitalism. And as I tried to make clear in my account of the organic industry, much is gained when organic gets big; I offer the story of Earthbound Farms as a positive case in point. The water and soil in California are in far better shape because of large-scale organic farms like Earthbound, as you point out in your letter. (The statistics you cite in your letter speak eloquently to this point.) But surely we can recognize all these important gains without turning a blind eye to the costs: the sacrifice of small farmers and of some of the founding principles of organic farming (its commitment to polyculture, for example; to "whole" rather than highly processed foods; to social and economic sustainability, etc.)

We both know other executives in the organic industry who accept these trade-offs as inevitable and necessary. They call themselves realists, and believe that those of us who regret the passing of local organic agriculture and the founding values of the organic movement should just get over it – that the organic Twinkie or organic Coca Cola is good news for the environment, case closed. You obviously don't feel this way. Your letter and our conversation make clear that you care deeply about the values behind the organic movement, that much more is at stake here than pesticide residues. That's why I would rather not get into an argument about "how local are you." What I would much rather do is applaud you for carrying however much local food you carry, and to urge you to make it possible for your stores to carry much more.

As we discussed, the company's shift a few years ago from "backdoor sales" to a regional distribution system has made it more difficult, if not impossible, for small local farmers to sell directly to individual Whole Foods stores. For some farmers, this may be a boon as you suggest, but for the many Bay Area farmers I have spoken to, it has shut them out – they don't grow enough to supply a distribution center, or the centers are too far from their farms. You write that all of your stores are in fact free to buy locally, which I was surprised and delighted to hear. I hope you'll take steps to encourage them in that direction. I have interviewed dozen of organic farmers for whom selling to Whole Foods over the years has been critical to their success; for what it's worth, they feel much less welcome since you moved to the regional distribution model. Which leads me to my next question: is there anyone, at the regional level, charged with the specific mission of locally sourcing as much food as possible? And do Whole Foods buyers have the authority to pay a premium for local produce, in the same way they now routinely pay a premium for organic? Such a commitment by Whole Foods to local sourcing – not everything, but whatever and whenever possible – could go a long way toward rebuilding local food systems across America.

The issues in pastured meat and milk are similar in some ways, different in others. I was pleased to hear you speak of the importance of grass in both beef and milk production, and applaud your efforts to push the organic dairy industry to make grazing mandatory and reject the organic feedlot model. The story in beef is more complicated. I recognize the economic advantages of sourcing grass-fed beef from overseas; it is a commodity in New Zealand while still an artisanal product here. Yet Whole Foods' commitment to developing an American grass-fed meat industry would have such a profound impact, both on the environment and the welfare of the animals, that I would urge you to take a broader view of the matter. I am not, contrary to what you might think, an absolutist on local food. I recognize that there are times and cases when supporting local agriculture in other countries is the best way to go; Slow Food calls it "virtuous globalization" when the power of a global market can be used to defend an endangered local food or food culture. But that's not what's happening in the case of grass-fed beef.

To build a viable grass-fed beef industry in America would do so much for the land – not just remove the insult of chemicals and ruinous commodity crop production, but also actually restore the land to health. It would also do wonders for the health and happiness of millions of America cattle that now live in misery on feedlots, and encourage farmers to convert cropland back to grassland. I also believe that, by organizing a national supply chain based around regional differences in the season that grass-fed meat should ideally be harvested, Whole Foods could develop a 12-month national supply of fresh, high-quality domestic grass-fed meat. True, the meat would not always be local, but the local effect, as the source of it shifted from one region to another over the course of the year, would be profound. Whole Foods has the power and know-how to do things in this area no one else can do.

As you point out several times in your letter, Whole Foods' freedom of action is constrained by the desires of its consumers, who want asparagus in January, fresh berries all year long, convenience foods,

etc. I appreciate that you "don't try to channel our customers into adopting any particular dietary regime." And yet your stores – with their extensive information, signage, and well-informed counter help – are clearly in the business of educating people. You are selling information and stories as well as food, which is to say, you have set yourself the mission of leading, not just following, the consumer. Any retailer can treat the consumer as a dumb beast that wants what we wants when we wants it – appealing to the narrowest conception of our self-interest. Such an approach to the consumer has done much to create the debased industrial food chain we now have - the "pile it high and sell it cheap" philosophy that ramifies up and down the food chain, degrading the land, emiserating the animals, and making us fat and sick. But as Whole Foods recognized before many others did, there is another consumer being born out there, one who takes a broader view of his interests, understands that spending more on higher-quality food is worth it on so many levels, and who treats his food purchases as a kind of vote for a better world. You have helped to create that new consumer, educating him about organics and persuading him to spend more for better food-something we will have to do if the food system is ever to be put on a truly sustainable footing.

In the same way we now need (as you pointed out in our meeting) to raise the bar again on American agriculture, we need to raise it on the American eater too, teaching him about the satisfactions (and nutritional benefits) of eating in season, from his locality, and from a food chain based on grass rather than corn. I think we agree that this is where the "reformation" now is headed; you are in a position to lead rather than to follow it there. To do so is also, I daresay, in your company's self-interest: as competitors like Wal-Mart and Safeway move into selling industrial organic food, Whole Foods can distinguish itself by moving to the next stage, doing things they can't possibly do. "Local" surely is one of those things: and your buyers already know exactly how to do it. All Wal-Mart knows is how to source industrial organic food from China.

After spending time with you and reading your letter, I've wondered if perhaps I did, as you imply in your letter, present a unfair caricature of Whole Foods in "*The Omnivore's Dilemma*," suggesting a store where organic, local and artisanal food is just window dressing to help sell a much more ordinary industrial product. Indeed, nothing would please me more than to conclude I owe you and the company an apology. I'm not quite there yet. But I sincerely hope you will prove my portrait of Whole Foods wrong, that the company has not thrown its lot in with the industrialization, globalization and dilution of organic agriculture, but rather stands for something better. For my own part, I stand ready to write that apology, and look forward to doing it.

I also look forward to continuing this dialog, and to following Whole Foods progress. Here's to the "reformation"!

Yours very truly,

Michael Pollan

Posted by John Mackey on June 26, 2006

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