



## Food, Inc. Discussion Guide

Director: Robert Kenner

Year: 2008

Time: 94 min

**You might know this director from:**

America's Endangered Species: Don't Say Goodbye (1998)

## FILM SUMMARY

FOOD, INC. takes the viewer on a terrifying ride through the disturbing and often hidden landscape of industrial food production in the U.S. The film takes a broad look at the wide range of issues most of us don't consider when going food shopping at the local grocery store or ordering a meal at a favorite restaurant. From factory farms and slaughterhouses where animals are raised under cruel conditions and injected with antibiotics and other chemicals that have long-term, disastrous health effects on consumers to the dangerous, exploitative working conditions for undocumented workers in meat-processing plants, FOOD, INC. will open your eyes and turn your stomach.

Leading us on this voyage are two of the most well-respected and outspoken writers on the subject: Eric Schlosser (Fast Food Nation) and Michael Pollan (The Omnivore's Dilemma). They provide a revealing and unsettling account of a food supply system heavily subsidized and protected by government policies, requiring almost no accountability to any public food safety or regulatory body. The film also explores the growing epidemic of obesity, as well as the increasing demand for organic and locally produced foods. Riveting, shocking, and vitally important, FOOD, INC. shows the high costs of cheap food and rouses the viewer to demand better.

## FILM THEMES

FOOD, INC. asks viewers to rethink their relationship to food by exploring the dramatic shift from family farms to mega agribusiness. Ultimately, this film empowers us all to use our purchasing power, supporting local farmers and buying organic foods when possible.

### FOOD DESERTS

When there are 5 to 10 times more fast-food restaurants and convenience stores than farmers' markets, and when the majority of food in stores is processed and unhealthy, what kind of choice do people have? FOOD, INC. explores the disproportionate impact of illness and obesity on the poor who are more likely to live in "food deserts" – concentrated areas with little access to affordable, healthy food like fresh produce and meat, but with convenience stores and fast-food chains on every corner.

### GENETICALLY MODIFIED SEEDS

Companies like Monsanto genetically modify their seeds to ensure the highest yielding crops. Then they patent them. From the company's perspective, it's expensive to "engineer" these seeds that ensure a farmer's success. In the U.S., Monsanto's seeds are considered "intellectual property," meaning they are creations of the mind—such as music, art, writing, designs, or names—that have commercial value. They are legally protected and cannot be sold or used without the permission of the owner. Thus, farmers are not allowed to collect seeds from their own harvest in preparation for the next season. Instead, they must buy new seeds from Monsanto.

### THE RISE OF AGRIBUSINESS

The U.S. is currently the #1 corn-growing nation in the world, with more acres devoted to corn than any other crop. In the 1960s, food scientists began to develop a number of corn-based by-products, including a low-cost sweetener known as high-fructose corn syrup. Recognizing corn as a raw material, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) began offering direct payments, or subsidies, to American farmers who grew more corn. Between 1970 and 2007, corn production increased by 40%, and supermarkets filled up with corn-based, high-calorie processed food products that contain little nutritional value but are generally much cheaper than fresh fruits and vegetables.

### OBESITY EPIDEMIC

FOOD, INC. makes a direct connection between government subsidies in the U.S. that lead to the overproduction of cheap corn which end up in the form of high-fructose corn syrup in so many food products. For example, the iconic American meal of a cheeseburger, fries, and shake includes several corn-based ingredients: the hamburger patty (corn-fed beef), the cheese (cornstarch), the bun (high-fructose corn syrup), the ketchup (high-fructose corn syrup and corn syrup), the fries (corn oil), and the shake (corn syrup solids and cellulose gum).

**“You have to understand that we farmers... we’re gonna deliver to the marketplace what the marketplace demands. If you wanna buy \$2 milk, you’re going to get a factory farm in your backyard. It’s that simple. People have got to start demanding good, wholesome food of us, and we’ll deliver; I promise you.”**

VP of American Corn Growers Association

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What's easier to find where you live: fresh fruit and vegetables or fast food? Why is that? Has it always been this way?
2. Think about the last three meals you ate. How is this food different from what your grandparents might have eaten 50 years ago?
3. What are some of the most serious health problems in your community? Do you have family members or close friends with diabetes or who are very overweight? If you have children, do you worry that they will face these sorts of diseases?
4. When people are unhealthy because of the food they eat, who do you believe is responsible? How has your opinion changed after viewing this film?
5. How much do you know about the ingredients in the packaged or processed foods you buy? How often do you read the labels? Are they easy to read, and do you trust them?
6. Should companies like Monsanto be able to own the DNA contained in plant seeds? What would this look like in 20 years? Or in 50?
7. Agri-companies fought not to label genetically modified foods, and now 70% of processed food in the supermarket has some genetically modified ingredient. Do you think they should be required by law to label GMO ingredients? How would that impact your choices?
8. The film reveals the human cost of cheap food, how undocumented workers are heavily exploited and kept in a state of fear over deportation. What kind of immigration reform is needed to protect these workers' rights?
9. Purchasing organic foods isn't always an option for many Americans, especially because of its high cost compared to non-organic foods. What are some solutions in ensuring wider access to affordable healthy food for more people?
10. CEO of Stonyfield Farm organic yogurt, Gary Hirshberg, states in the film: "The consumer does not feel very powerful, but it's the exact opposite. When we run an item past the supermarket scanner, we're voting for local or not, organic or not." How powerful do you feel as a consumer? How can you influence the food industry?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas, was an attorney at Monsanto from 1976 to 1979. After his appointment to the Supreme Court, Justice Thomas wrote the majority opinion in a case that helped Monsanto enforce its seed patents.
- McDonald's is the world's largest distributor of toys, with one included in 20% of all sales.
- During the Bush administration, the head of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which ensures the safety of the American food supply, Lester M. Crawford Jr., was the former executive VP of the National Food Processors Association.
- In 1996, when Monsanto introduced Round-Up Ready Soybeans, the company controlled only 2% of the U.S. soybean market. Now, over 90% of soybeans in the U.S. contain Monsanto's patented gene.
- Prior to renaming itself an agribusiness company, Monsanto was a chemical company that produced, among other things, DDT and Agent Orange.
- The modern supermarket stocks, on average, 47,000 products, most of which are being produced by only a handful of food companies.
- According to the United Nations' World Food Programme in 2013, there are 870 million undernourished people worldwide. That's 1 in every 8 people who suffer from chronic hunger and undernourishment.
- About 70% of processed foods have some genetically modified ingredient. According to the Huffington Post, "Much of the corn, soybean, sugar beets and cotton cultivated in the United States today contains plants whose DNA was manipulated in labs to resist disease and drought, ward off insects and boost the food supply. Though common in the U.S., they are largely banned in the 28-nation European Union."
- The average meal travels 1,500 miles from the farm to your dinner plate. Transporting food over long distances requires significant amounts of fossil fuels and generates carbon dioxide emissions.
- Poverty among farm workers is more than twice that of all wage and salary employees. According to the Christian Science Monitor, "Agriculture employs more than 1 billion people worldwide—about 34% of global workers—making it the second-largest source of employment globally."

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Learn about the common pesticides sprayed on fruits and vegetables and what health concerns they raise. Also learn what hormones and other unnatural chemicals are given to industrially raised animals. [What's On My Food](#) is a good place to start.
2. Pledge to start eating more REAL food, sustainable and ethically raised by people who are paid fairly. You can also participate in Real Food Fridays: a global network of people who cook and share real food.
3. Plant a garden. As Wendell Berry said, "I can think of no better form of personal involvement in the cure of the environment than that of gardening. A person who is growing a garden, if he is growing it organically, is improving a piece of the world. He is producing something to eat, which makes him somewhat independent of the grocery business, but he is also enlarging, for himself, the meaning of food and the pleasure of eating."
4. Exercise your power as a consumer: purchase more local, organic foods and less processed industrial foods.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**