

A BOOK REVIEW OF FOOD RULES, BY MICHAEL POLLAN

Written by David G. Schwartz, M.D.

Are you confused about low-fat, low-carb, vegan, vegetarian, paleo, food-combining, blood-type diets, etc.? Our confusion is financially profitable for the “Food Industrial Complex” because that distracts us from eating real foods and provides opportunity to market to us all manner of specially designed foods supposed to make us healthier.

Food Rules, an Eater’s Manual, a number one New York Times best seller, is a timely manifesto for real food in contrast to “edible substances that resemble food.”

Michael Pollan is a journalist who has written many books about food and food production, many from a scientific perspective. He has taken many principles common to these “diets” which appear to be in conflict with each other and condensed them into a concise, clever, simple, practical presentation of recommendations for eating, also gleaning from the folk wisdom of our grandmothers that is consistent with modern science. This is a small, (140 page, almost pocket-size), easy to read presentation of 64 “rules.”

The whole premise can be summarized in 7 words: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” The book fills out each of these 3 sentences into 3 sections, the largest of which is the first one, advocating eating food in its most natural, unprocessed state.

The following are some of the most eye-catching rules, mostly quoted verbatim, some paraphrased:

Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother would not recognize as food.

Avoid things that have some form of sweetener listed in the top 3 ingredients.

Avoid products that contain more than five ingredients.

Avoid food products containing ingredients a third-grader cannot pronounce.

Don’t get your fuel at the same place your car does.

Avoid food products that make health claims. (It’s likely to be packaged and processed.)

Avoid foods you see advertised on T.V.

Eat only foods that will eventually rot. (“If bugs don’t want it, why would I.”)

Get out of the supermarket whenever you can.

Buy your snacks at the farmers’ market.

Eat only foods that have been cooked by humans (not corporations).

It's not food if it came through the window of your car.

It's not food if it is called by the same name in every language.

Eat mostly plants, especially leaves.

Treat meat as a flavoring or a special occasion food.

Eat your colors.

Eat animals that have eaten well themselves.

If you have space, buy a freezer.

Eat well-grown food from healthy soil.

Eat wild foods when you can.

Eat some foods that have been predigested by bacteria or fungi.

Sweeten and salt your food yourself.

Eat all the junk food you want as long as you cook it yourself.

Eat more like the French or the Japanese or the Italians or the Greeks
(Most traditional foods are less processed than modern "Western" diets.)

Spend as much time enjoying the meal as it took to prepare it.

Stop eating before you're full.

Eat when you're hungry, not when you're bored. Consult your gut.

The banquet is in the first bite.

Limit your snacks to unprocessed plant foods.

Do all your eating at a table.

Treat treats as treats.

Try not to eat alone.

Get smaller plates.

Plant a vegetable garden if you have space, a window box if you don't.

Cook.

Break the rules once in a while.

Dr. Schwartz's Commentary

I would recommend adding one more rule.

Avoid GMO's (Nearly all corn, soy, and canola products in the U.S. have them if they are not labeled organic or non-GMO).

All the recommendations in this book I heartily endorse except #43 Have a glass of wine with dinner and #40 Eat like the kind of person who takes supplements - then skip the supplements.

It is true that people who eat the more healthful traditional diets, French, Italian, etc. often have wine with dinner, and they are more commonly not alcoholics. Also the evidence we have about alcohol in moderation correlates it with lower rates of heart disease, diabetes etc., probably due to its anti-inflammatory effects. There are many other non-toxic supplements and foods that also reduce inflammation, heart disease, etc. There are no randomized controlled double-blind placebo-controlled studies to prove alcohol's health benefits. This would be preferable before recommending its consumption, especially since ethanol is a toxin and should be considered to be a drug, which should require good science behind any recommendation to consume it, and risks and benefits need to be carefully calculated. Probably there will never be such scientific trials because of the difficulty producing a credible blinding placebo. The culture is so permeated with alcohol that when any scientist or professional promotes the benefits of ethanol consumption, a healthy skepticism has to question whether there is personal or cultural bias in the evaluation.

Any suggestion of the benefits of alcohol needs to have a caveat about uncovering alcoholism, because many non-drinkers are either alcoholics or potential alcoholics.

Alcohol consumption, even in moderation, is correlated with increasing risk of breast cancer and cancers of the digestive tract. Even in small amounts in some individuals, it can impair judgment, coordination, reaction time, etc. That does not support optimal health.

Regarding supplements, they are no substitute for real food or a remedy for an unhealthful lifestyle, but they do have benefits. The author does make an exception to the rule, that people over 50 and those with special health problems may need supplements. I would add that most people have some health problems or risks, even at younger ages. To say that supplements are not relevant, all of the following would have to apply:

1. One would have to follow all the food rules carefully with few exceptions.
2. There would have to be no genetic polymorphisms for detoxification (a common occurrence).
3. No 1st generation ancestors that passed on epigenetic defects that arose from their dietary and lifestyle indiscretions and other environmental insults to their genome.
4. No toxic chemicals obtained from birth or breast-feeding.
5. Food would have to be organic or to come from soils of 100 years ago. Most soils are now significantly depleted of minerals, and vegetables grown on them have severely decreased mineral content (Journal fo the American College of Nutrition 2004 Dec 23(6): 669-82).
6. Water and air obtained from a different planet that is not polluted. (Even the most remote Arctic regions have toxic chemicals.)
7. Never getting injuries or infectious diseases.

Many supplements are actually concentrates of foods or spices (garlic, cayenne pepper, cinnamon, whey protein concentrate, green powders, etc.) Many herbal supplements are from plants that can be used for food (Hawthorne, elderberry, nettles, astragalus, etc.) There are volumes of research showing the benefits of supplements, and I have personally witnessed remarkable recovery from severe chronic illnesses with supplements.

Rule # 40 could be interpreted as demeaning of supplement takers as if they are naïve and gullible. They eat good food out of intelligent choices, and likewise they take supplements out of intelligent choices, notwithstanding the mainstream news media (that derive ad revenue from the agri-pharmaceutical-medical industry), and which bash supplements and avoid reporting on the plethora of positive research evidence for supplements.

Moreover, even without taking supplements, implementing these rules can go a long way to improving one's health.

There are some parts of the population that would find it challenging to follow these rules, and to some others, the rules would be downright daunting, but following only some of them is far ahead of the "Standard American Diet" (SAD).

For a large portion of the population who do have disposable income and spacious living conditions, the challenges would be to cultivate an interest in food, to prioritize time for cooking, food shopping, and gardening and to spend less time in virtual reality, electronics, T.V., and other activities. As Michael Pollan says in one of his books, Cooked, "Stop watching cooking shows and start cooking."

On the other hand, homeless people, people living in 300 square foot urban apartments, and people working 2 or 3 minimum wage jobs to survive are limited in time, space, and money to cook, to garden, or to have a freezer. This is increasingly a problem

with further migration to urban areas and with downward economic mobility, a shrinking middle class, and increasing poverty.

This is an eye-opener on our whole society, culture, and politic, with its fast-paced, monetized approach to everything including food, a culture that overvalues material things and undervalues the necessary connection to and stewardship for our natural environment and compassion for the working poor, honoring Wall Street bankers more than organic farmers. The food industry pays little attention to health, and the “health” care industry pays little attention to food. If the old adage from Hippocrates holds true, “Let your food be your medicine and let your medicine be your food,” then we’re “skewered” if we eat what the food industry sells us.

This book is mainly founded on excellent evidence and is a straightforward, reader friendly manual for the general public to follow. It is also a call to action for our whole society for transforming our culture to honor real food and the plants, animals, and farmers from whence it comes.