

Anatomy of Chicken Nuggets

By Michael Pollan

(Excerpts from Michael Pollan's book 'The Omnivore's Dilemma')

The meal at the end of the industrial food chain that begins in an Iowa cornfield is prepared by McDonald's and eaten in a moving car. The myriad streams of commodity corn, after being variously processed and turned into meat, converge in all sorts of different meals people eat at KFC, or Pizza Hut or Applebee's or bought at the supermarket. Industrial meals are all around us, after all; they make up the food chain from which most of us eat most of the time.

Chicken nuggets constitute its own genre of food for American children, many of whom eat nuggets every day. A lot of thought goes into a nugget, that and a lot of corn. Of the thirty-eight ingredients it takes to make a McNugget, thirteen are derived from corn: the corn-fed chicken itself; modified cornstarch; mono- and diglycerides; dextrose; lecithin; chicken broth; yellow corn flour; filler; vegetable shortening; hydrogenated corn oil; and citric acid as a preservative.

McNuggets also contain several synthetic, quasi-edible substances. These chemicals are what make modern processed food possible. Listed first are the sodium aluminum phosphate, mono-calcium phosphate, sodium acid pyrophosphate and calcium lactate. Then there are anti-foaming agents like dimethylpolysiloxane. The most alarming ingredient in a chicken McNugget is tert-butylhydroquinone or TBHQ, an antioxidant derived from petroleum that is sprayed on the nugget to help preserve freshness. TBHQ is a form of butane which can cause nausea, vomiting and ringing in the ears. Five grams of TBHQ can kill a person.

With so many exotic elements, chicken nuggets can do more than taste good to a child. What it has done, of course, is to sell an awful lot of chicken for companies like Tyson,

which invented the nugget. If our children come from lower rungs of America's economic ladder, they are more likely to eat food with cheap calories in a variety of attractive forms like chicken nuggets. In the long run, however, the eater pays a high price for these cheap calories: obesity, Type II diabetes and heart disease.



It is another story for the lower end of the world's economic ladder. People in many parts of the world eat corn directly and not through chicken nuggets. To eat corn directly is to consume all the energy in that corn, but when we feed that corn to a steer or a chicken, 90 percent of its energy is lost – to the bones or feathers or fur. This is why vegetarians advocate eating “low on the food chain.” Every step up the chain reduces the amount of food energy by a factor of ten. Processing food also burns energy. What this means is that the amount of food energy lost in the making of Chicken McNuggets could feed a great many more children.

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