I Think, Therefore I Am Hungry: The Mind, Food, and Evolution

A review of

The Omnivorous Mind: Our Evolving Relationship With Food

by John S. Allen


Reviewed by

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Who doesn’t like a good, tasty meal? Nowadays we can also get our fill of food by reading any of numerous books for foodies and nonfoodies alike touting the newest fads and diets, best restaurants, or creative cuisines. There has also been a good debate on the values of different components of food (e.g., Taubes, 2011). Are carbohydrates as good (or bad) as they are made out to be? Should we be eating more protein? Should we be eating fewer calories? Over the past five years food has been explored from many different angles—politics, economics, public health (think of all that has been written on the global obesity epidemic).

There is now a book on food that is certain to appeal to psychologists with even a passing interest in gustatory excursions. John Allen’s book The Omnivorous Mind: Our Evolving Relationship With Food blends evolutionary history, cognitive science, and
sociocultural writing for a different view on what we eat and why. The book’s chapters focus on different elements of the thesis that how we think about food is a function of evolutionary history and culture.

Allen says, “How we eat and how we think reflect the unique natural history of the human species” (p. 3). With this thesis, Allen puts our contemporary eating behavior and food preferences into an evolutionary biological and anthropological framework, evoking and then clarifying (with new data) many of the evolutionary stories of old. We are all familiar with early humans as hunter–gatherers, but Allen nicely reminds us that plants were a major part of the diet even back then and that the Paleo diet that has been the rage in the last few years taps into these prehistoric roots. Although using an evolutionary framework to discuss eating is not new or novel, the strong ties Allen makes first to human cultural patterns and behaviors and then to cognitive activity (e.g., Chapter 5 discusses different representations of food in memory, and Chapter 7 explores creativity in regard to food) certainly provide new food for thought.

The book’s title clearly evokes Michal Pollan’s (2006) Omnivore’s Dilemma but takes the reader on a mostly different adventure. Allen’s book starts with what is almost a tangent, a chapter devoted to the origins of our preference for crispy foods. Whereas there are many points of the chapter (and the book) that are conjecture and extrapolations from the data and evidence, Allen nonetheless uses the example of crispy food to slowly introduce the cultural and biological bases of food preferences. In many ways this chapter echoes another psychological perspective on food and culture seen in Leon Rappoport’s (2003) How We Eat, a source surprisingly not referenced in the current book. Allen, in contrast to Rappoport, discusses in significantly more depth brain biology and evolutionary history.

In many ways, the first four chapters of The Omnivorous Mind serve as a high-powered refresher course on evolutionary theory and brain biology. Readers are treated to multiple scans and cross-sections of brains highlighting areas of activity, as well as discussions of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) research and archaeology. In later chapters Allen provides concise summaries of entire other works; Chapter 6 in many ways is a summary of Taubes’s (2011) Why We Get Fat and What To Do About It. It is a good summary, but like many other parts of the book, it features material that a well-read, nutritionally inclined psychologist will have encountered elsewhere. Indeed, Allen’s book is a textbook example of the benefits of taking an interdisciplinary approach to a topic while also showing how expertise in one area (neurobiology, in the case of Allen) can clearly provide a refreshing spin on a topic that has been around for awhile. One example of this is the development of the term superomnivory, meaning that “all manner of diets are ‘natural’” (p. 73), even though many of the decisions we make regarding what to eat are “unnatural.”

For some readers, the book will seem to be a collection of essays linked by the common themes of food, biology, evolution, and culture. The introduction prepares one for a more coherent theory of mind and food than what one receives. This is not to say that the book overall is not satisfying. For example, the chapter on creativity and food will appeal to
any foodie who salivates at the mention of famous chefs such as Thomas Keller and Ferran Adria. For those unfamiliar with these chefs, the exposition of the role of creativity in modern cuisine and why it may be addictive might become tedious, but they may nevertheless find themselves musing on the variance in creative menu options at restaurants or thinking about why so many simply prefer a straight meat-and-potatoes dish (hold the couscous, please).

In an effort to tie the chapters together, Allen concludes with the hypothesis of a *theory of food*, paralleling the established theory of mind. I was not sold on the importance or validity of this particular idea, although it helped the author keep his promise to deliver a book “as much about *thinking* about food as eating food” (p. 262).

In summary, for those who like to read about food but always thought it a guilty pleasure, here is a great opportunity to partake in a strong collection of a range of biological, evolutionary, psychological, and cultural appetizers. There may not be an identifiable main course, but one can certainly get one’s fill.

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**References**

