Mark Bittman: Former NY Times columnist campaigns against ‘industrial agriculture’

**Mark Bittman** is a bestselling cookbook author and former *New York Times* food columnist and opinion writer who campaigns against “industrial agriculture”, specifically targeting GMOs and pesticides, while promoting organic alternatives. He lobbies against what he calls unsustainable meat and seafood production and consumption. While not a vegan, he promotes what he says is a “progressive, vegetarian and organic” approach to personal food choices and related government policies. He calls himself a “less-meatarian.”

After his relationship with the *Times* ended in 2015, Bittman announced he was joining *The Purple Carrot*, a website devoted to promoting plant-based eating, as its chief innovation officer. He was also named as a Fellow with the Food & Environment Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, known for its criticism of the use of biotechnology in farming and food.

Bittman partnered with other prominent critics of the modern food system—Union of Concerned Scientists Food and Environment Program Director Ricardo Salvador, Michael Pollan, and Olivier de Schutter—to author a *Washington Post* opinion piece that called on President Obama to issue an executive order establishing a “national policy for food, health and well-being”.

**Career**

Bittman was born in Manhattan and raised in Stuyvesant Town, New York where he attended Stuyvesant High School (1967). He graduated from Clark University (1971) with a bachelors degree in Psychology. After college he briefly taught a class on anarchism at Clark and a local high school while working as a taxi cab and truck driver. He then moved to the Boston, Massachusetts suburb of Sommerville where he (self-described) “got involved in left-wing politics” and became a “radical” community organizer working on rent control, welfare benefits and rights for Haitian immigrants while publishing an indy newspaper he describes as a “propaganda rag”. Bittman is a self-described former Trotskyist.

In an interview with his Clark College alumni newsletter, Bittman likens his current food advocacy to his protest activities in the 1970’s, noting, “I got together with a bunch of friends and we were talking about all the protesters — women’s rights people, black-power people, anti-war people, new-ecology people — and how our job as people who knew everything was to make everyone see that it was one struggle.” Adding, “The food scene is similar now. There are many different targets, but beyond those targets there are only a few puppet masters, only a few entities making the food system work against our best interests rather than for our best interests. So whether you’re concerned about what you’re putting in your body, or what they’re putting on crops, or climate change, or labor, or water quality, it’s pretty much the same struggle.”

Bittman’s career appears to be hallmarked by success without formal training as a cookbook writer and food critic morphing into an non-credentialed food and agricultural science and policy paid mainstream media commentator treated by the media as an expert.
New Haven Advocate, Restaurant Critic

Bittman moved to New Haven in 1978 with his first wife and took a job selling photography equipment and in 1980 became a part time restaurant critic for the New Haven Advocate. He syndicated his reviews and food columns to other newspapers. In 1992, while he notes that he has “no formal culinary training,”[4] he wrote and sold his first cookbook “Fish” to Macmillan Publishing claiming to be the first writer to “promote fresh tuna.”

His columns, recipes and cookbooks, while commercially successful, are not without critics among formally trained culinary experts.[5]

New York Times, Columnist

how-to-cook-everything

Bittman’s New York Times column was discontinued in 2015 after 17 years. Following publication of “Fish,” Bittman was offered a column “The Minimalist” with the New York Times. In 1998 he published “How to Cook Everything” which became a best-seller. His Minimalist column and Everything cookbook launched a much broader media career putting Bittman on the mainstream media radar. He began to promote his views that the American diet has been largely destroyed by “the industrialization of food production” blending his political views into recipe writing and commentaries.

In 2010 he published “Food Matters” which blends his philosophical and culinary views where he promotes eating less meat and buying local direct from farmers. In 2011 Bittman transitioned from his Minimalist food column to an oped Week in Review column called The Opinionater, where he delivers political commentary on the industrialization of food.

Advocacy

Bittman told Civil Eats, “The Tea Party does not have a monopoly on anger, on demonstrating, on making demands; progressives need to do all of those things. If it starts with more letters or more progressive talk shows, that’s a start. We need action to keep from despair; we need activity, and with it will come a sense of empowerment. Shopping at farmers’ markets and growing our own food is nice, but this isn’t a back-to-the-land movement—at least not for most people—this is a how-the-hell-are-we-going-to-make-big-changes movement. We have enemies, mostly in big corporations, and we have to figure out how to force them to change their ways. A detailed manifesto of this would take some time to put together, but it’s possible.” Adding, “I’d like to see a fairer form of taxation, subsidies moved from one place to another; a
stronger FDA, a more sensible USDA (really, the USDA should be broken into two agencies, one for agribusiness and one for consumers); and emphasis and support of regional food and food grown at small farms, by farmers making a decent wage. Oh, and better treatment of farmworkers and animals.”[6]

Vegan Before 6 (VB6)

Bittman promotes his diet campaign “Vegan before 6 p.m.” where he claims if you are a progressive and shopping green and looking for organic you should be a semi-vegetarian. He adds the current health crisis is the work of the “evil empire” for promoting the “over consumption of animals” and the corresponding under consumption of plants. Eat more plants, eat less meat, you will live longer. Bittman says we don’t need animal products and junk food, that these foods are marketed to us irresponsibly, and that government support programs fuel this health “holocaust.”[7]

Purple Carrot

In September 2015, Bittman left the New York Times to start a vegan meal delivery company called Purple Carrot with a commitment to ethically sourcing all of its food. He hoped to source organically from domestic sources, but in December 2015, Bittman admitted that it is difficult to define what the company will consider to be “good” food since not enough agro-ecologically produced food yet exists commercially in the volume needed for Purple Carrot to do business.

Criticisms

Bittman has been publicly criticized twice by the physician and nutritionist David Katz for making erroneous health claims. In “Butter is Back,” an article published March 25, 2014, Bittman wrote that a meta-analysis in the journal Annals of Internal Medicine found “there’s just no evidence to support the notion that saturated fat increases the risk of heart disease.” Two days later in the Huffington Post, Katz wrote that Bittman’s conclusion was “in a word, wrong.” He added that Bittman was “absolutely not qualified” to make such pronouncements and asked him to restrain from “inclinations to impersonate an expert.” He also expressed doubt that Bittman had even read the meta-analysis. According to Katz, Bittman instead seemed to have formed his opinion based on blog postings about the study.

In “It’s the Sugar, Folks,” published Feb. 27, 2013, Bittman wrote: “Sugar is indeed toxic. It may not be the
only problem with the Standard American Diet, but it’s fast becoming clear that it’s the major one."[12] As evidence, he cited a study in the journal PLOSOne. Katz responded, noting that Bittman had misinterpreted the study. The New York Times subsequently added a correction to Bittman’s article.

Bittman has been criticized by other food writers for his practice of re-releasing cookbooks with no real new updates at the expense of his followers. And for making blanket statements about cooking issues which are not well researched or founded in facts.[5]

In 2012 he briefly went on an anti-dairy crusade based on anecdotal-based claims which were lacking in factual foundation and based on “experts” like PETA’s Dr. Neil Barnard, whom others called “dubious” at best.[9]

Bittman was also criticized for making insensitive remarks about the death of a Chick-fil-A executive calling him a pig for his company’s opposition to same-sex marriage.[10]

Henry Miller and Jeff Steir have taken Bittman to task for failing to do any research or exercise diligence in his writing misrepresenting facts as part of his anti-biotechnology food activism activities.[11], [12] As has science writer Keith Kloor citing Bittman’s backpedaling on egregious health risk claims made about GMOs.[13]

Bibliography & Resources

- Mark Bittman Facebook fan page
- Mark Bittman on Twitter
- Mark Bittman TedX profile
- Mark Bittman upcoming events schedule

Personal Life

Bittman lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with second wife Kelly Doe, a New York Times art director. He divorced his first wife, Karen Baar (formerly of Planned Parenthood, now with the environmental Save the Sound group)[14] in 2002, with whom he has two daughters. He is a small plane pilot and runner.

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