

Are foodies gluttons?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

March 11, 2011



By now, the no-longer-new food movement has provoked files full of skeptical responses. Most follow familiar scripts: foodies are elitist, or environmentally ignorant, or impractical about global hunger.

So you have to admire the originality of B. R. Myers's "[moral crusade against foodies](#)" in this month's *Atlantic*. His major concern is not for the hungry or the planet. He does indulge in a bit of anti-elitist rhetoric, but it isn't the thrust of the piece (fortunately for him, since his complaint that food writers never bring up Proust except to "[talk] about that damned madeleine again" doesn't exactly paint him as a person of the people).

Instead, Myers offers this: foodies are gluttons. He rejects the idea that gluttony is about overindulgence, pointing out that "the Catholic Church's criticism has always been directed against an inordinate *preoccupation* with food--against foodie-ism, in other words." He spends much of the article affixing this foodie-glutton label to chefs

and food writers who tend toward unabashed gourmandism.

It's fresh for an anti-foodie screed, but it shares the genre's essential flaw: a narrow sense of the food movement's interests, which in fact are quite broad--and which motivate many foodies to connect their interest in eating well with service and policy advocacy.

Foodies look pretty [elitist](#) if you focus on the grass-fed pork belly but ignore [urban farms](#), anti-food-desert [efforts](#) and [voucher systems](#)--to say nothing of efforts to keep food dollars in rural communities. Eco-concerned locavores may seem misguided if you look only at their tomatoes' [carbon footprint](#), but what about the longer-range effects of [large-scale monocropping](#) on not just global warming but soil erosion, water shortages, pollution and biodiversity? [Even if](#) our current system for fighting hunger did benefit from GMOs (it [doesn't](#)) and tons of chemicals (the UN's [skeptical](#)), the system itself is a mess--and changing it means [reforming](#) U.S. farm policy.

As for Myers, he calls foodies gluttons and cherry-picks his evidence accordingly. But as 18th-century Catholic bishop and theologian Alphonsus Maria de Liguori [argues](#), gastronomic pleasure doesn't itself make you a glutton--and it can even be virtuous. Myers takes this sentence by Kim Severson--"What blessed entity invented sugar and cacao pods and vanilla beans or figured out that salt can preserve and brighten anything?"--and mocks it as "the kind of thing that passes for spiritual uplift in this set." I don't see the irony here; I see sensual pleasure pointing Severson toward the creator.

More importantly, the food movement isn't just about the pleasure of eating. It's about pleasure, care and ethics around the whole life of food--producing, selling, cooking and eating. "The most delicious meats may be eaten without sin," [says](#) de Liguori, "if the motive be good and worthy of a rational creature; and, in taking the coarsest food through attachment to pleasure, there may be a fault." That sounds like the difference between an occasional ethically sourced steak and a nightly Arby's binge.

That distinction wouldn't work for Myers, who is an animal rights activist and a vegan. But he goes seriously astray when he tries to lump Michael Pollan in with the hypercarnivorous extreme eaters. Pollan, after all, is best known for pushing a [healthful and low-meat diet](#)--one that doesn't pass muster for anti-meat purists but

is accessible enough that it could make a serious dent in meat overconsumption.

The other thing Pollan's known for is synthesizing and articulating an ambitious [policy agenda](#) that tackles the many ways in which food affects the life of the planet and its people. The food movement is a many-splendored thing, but it's perhaps best captured by the idea that our food-related choices--as both eaters and citizens--have all kinds of consequences and deserve more attention.

Pollan--and Mark Bittman and other leaders of the ethically oriented foodie type Myers dismisses as "sanctimonious"--aren't "inordinately preoccupied" with fancy food. They're trying to get people to be healthier, cook for themselves and advocate for real food policy [change](#) (not just [photo ops](#) with Wendell Berry and [dubious partnerships](#) with Walmart). Myers's gluttony diagnosis addresses the wrong problem: most Americans still pay too little attention to food, not too much.