

On the shelf: Food Matters, by Mark Bittman

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

April 30, 2009

If Michael Pollan is the sustainable food movement's de facto spokesperson, Mark Bittman is its in-house cook. Bittman's [cookbooks](#), [columns](#) and [blog](#) are beloved for their fundamental premise: that tasty, wholesome, environmentally responsible food is found not in upscale, "green" grocery items so much as in an old-fashioned pantry and some basic kitchen skills.

The publishing strategy behind [Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating](#) is fairly transparent. Bittman begins with a whirlwind overview of the cultural and political landscape: overproduction of government-subsidized corn, soy and meat; insidious advertising to promote overconsumption of the same, mostly in highly processed form; the politics behind our deeply compromised food pyramid. He downshifts when he gets into health-related issues, then turns to a lengthy section on meal planning and strategies for healthier eating habits.

Then, less than halfway through, the book turns into a cookbook. I can almost hear the initial planning meeting at Simon & Schuster: *It's like a CliffsNotes volume on food politics squeezed into an intro to a self-helpy kind of diet book. Mostly it's just recipes we already have—we can get this out quick.*

Of course, this book wasn't written for me, a movement foodie who reveres Wendell Berry and refers to Bittman's [How to Cook Everything](#) as "the Bittman bible." So I liked it better with a little distance. As Norman Wirzba [details](#) in the new issue of the *Century*, the need to move from an oil-based economy to a "sunshine economy"—from

industrial to sustainable agriculture—is pressing (not least because of [public health risks](#)).

On-the-ground efforts to eat more sustainably have democratized considerably in recent years, thanks in part to churches, working in their capacity as neighborhood-level organizers. But the public policy side of the conversation remains much smaller.

What Bittman and his publisher understand is that the market for diet books with recipes is much larger than the one for, say, [8,000-word policy manifestos](#). *Food Matters* doesn't break new ground, but it may reach new people.