

The Magic Kingdom of Whole Foods

It's Thanksgiving, and time to think about many things—our copious blessings, NFL standings, and how we're going to do all our holiday shopping online this year. But let's face it...it's mostly time to think about food.

For me, that's easy. I've been thinking about food a lot, lately. Specifically, Whole Foods, as in Whole Foods Market, which arrived in Milwaukee a few months ago as if it was going to single-handedly rescue us from cultural inferiority.

It's no longer talked about with breathless tones of promise. But I've been quietly observing, thinking, sampling homemade guacamole, and pondering Whole Foods' place in the universe, or at least it's role in the salvation (or destruction) of civilization as we know it.

And it's complicated.

On one hand, I want to tap into my inner Howard Beal, fling open my window and yell, "I can't take it any more.... For God's sake, IT'S ONLY A GROCERY STORE!!!"

On the other hand, I'm irresistibly drawn to the perfectly stacked produce, the bins of crisp baby greens, the peppy music and the smiling, healthy looking stock clerks who can tell me when a mango is perfectly ripe.

On one hand, I am suspicious: I want to know why Milwaukee's branch of "the world's leading natural and organic foods supermarket," seems to be mostly about chocolate and sausage.

On the other hand, I want to sing the praises of its smoked chicken wings. And I want bow down before their largely organic meat counter, a sign that we are slowly starting to take the "pharmacy" out of Farming.

Perhaps you're similarly torn. Perhaps you have no idea what I'm talking about. Perhaps some background is in order.

Whole Foods Market is a 25-year-old chain with about 180 stores in the US, Canada and Great Britain, and in September, Milwaukee's branch opened on the East Side. It's a hip and urban. It embraces our ecological anxiety about food, but also honors our trendy gourmet culture and clamoring for convenience.

It's a big, bright, happy place.

And maybe that's why I just can't warm to it. You remember the opening the Mary Tyler Moore Show where Mary is in a grocery store, suspiciously eyeing some packaged food product. She stares at it for a moment, then rolls her eyes as she contemptuously flips it into her cart with a "What the hell; why not?" look on her face.

THAT'S what grocery shopping is about: the endless disjunction between dreams and reality, between noble intentions and carnal desires. It's about arriving with a shopping list of tofu burgers, fresh green beans, and whole wheat pasta, and coming home with Stouffer's mac and cheese, a 12-pack of diet Coke and a box of Cap'n Crunch.

After all, food is a battlefield of antagonistic appetites, and I know the fight well. I like to eat and I'm a bit of a health nut. I own a juicer, I think McDonald's is evil, and I've been known to eat a bucket of vegetables for lunch.

But I'm human. I also know the pleasure of a good cheeseburger, not to mention the divinity of Candy Corn (yes, candy corn). And every so often, I'll sit down to watch TV with a pint of Haagan Dazs or a bag of Doritos.....or both.

Whole Foods wants to embrace both sides of my fractured, foodie soul, creating a happy illusion of wholeness. It's a culinary Disneyland--a land of plenty, where desire triumphs over guilt every time.

Everything about the place has a sense of dreamy abundance. You might think that a store with an ecological conscience would feel a little pinched and scruffy around the edges. But not here. The salad bars are as long as bowling alleys. The shelves and counters are bursting: organic beef jerky, line-caught, sushi-grade tuna, organic socks, bar soap tuned to one of your seven charkas, and "Namaste" brand brownie mix—spiritual enlightenment in a box, with or without walnuts

The carrots, lettuce and broccoli are piled high—great walls of nature that shimmer in the halogen spotlights with a kind of vitamin saturated aura. Even the snack food—stacked high at the ends of the aisles—gets impressive Cirque du Soleil lighting. I've never seen a more omnipotent pyramid of Cheese Puffs.

And Cheese Puffs there are, for don't think this is a store devoted to Health at the expense of Pleasure: rows of elaborate pastries and confections; an entire counter devoted to chocolate, including a four-foot high chocolate fountain: for dipping.

So it's no wonder why my stomach clenches when I walk through the aisles, the speakers pumping easy-alt-rock into my ears and the "team members" popping samples of Uruguayan goat cheese into my mouth. Despite the snappy vibe, food and eating is still a complicated thing in 21st Century America, ripe with pleasures but also fraught with concerns that penetrate right down to our mitochondria. How else to explain a supersized society in which obesity is more of a health concern than hunger? Where an appetizer selection can suggest one's place on the social ladder. Where the Cheesecake Factory portions get bigger while the fashion models get smaller?

So of course, I'm a bit...um...conflicted about Milwaukee's climb up the epicurean ladder. Food may be known as one of life's simple pleasures, but in reality, it contains

multitudes—a whole menu of questions, anxieties, traditions, pathologies, pleasures and social ills. After all, there ain't no free lunch, even if it is organic and gluten-free.