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Atherton: Michael Pollan, Jesse Ziff Cool on 'feeding our families'

by Barbara Wood

Writer [Michael Pollan](#) says his decades-long explorations into food and the American diet were inspired, at least in part, by his son Isaac, for whom the term "picky eater" sounds like a vast understatement.

With more than 500 people listening in, Mr. Pollan and local restaurateur and cookbook author [Jesse Ziff Cool](#) conversed on the topic of "On Our Plates: Strategies for Feeding Our Families," on Nov. 4 at a Common Ground Speaker Series event at Menlo School in Atherton.

His son's odd eating habits, Mr. Pollan said, are "part of the reason I got very interested in writing about food." While Isaac was still very young, "food became such a fraught thing for him," he said. He "drifted into eating white food and nothing else," Mr. Pollan said. "He didn't really like mixed food."

"When it came to color and taste and smell, he was overwhelmed," he said. "He could not get a lot of food down."

That was changed, he said, with the help of the Bay Area's most iconic chef, Alice Waters. Mr. Pollan said that soon after his family moved to California, Ms. Waters, whom he knew from his work as a journalist, offered to cook for Isaac's 11th birthday.

"I said, 'Alice, that is a waste of your talents,'" Mr. Pollan said.

But Ms. Waters made a menu with the only three things Isaac would eat -- steak cooked medium rare and "cut into perfect pink cubes," rosemary roasted potatoes and chocolate mousse.

"She watched him eat really carefully, and she said he's going to be a great eater," Mr. Pollan said. Ms. Waters noticed Isaac had an incredible sense of smell and taste. "She said, 'give him to me for a couple of years when he's in high school,'" he said. So Isaac spent three years working in Ms. Waters' kitchen, Mr. Pollan said, eating in the staff kitchen.

"Cooking taught him how to eat," he said. "When kids cook food, they own it in quite a different way. I think that the key to getting a picky eater to eat is to get him in the kitchen."

Mr. Pollan said that his son also cooked at home. "We insisted that every night he made some contribution to dinner," he said, even if it was only mincing garlic or slicing onions. "If he didn't want to do that, he had to do the dishes," he said.

"Cooking is really, really important," he said.

Ms. Cool agreed. She taught her sons how to make things such as chicken stock, noodles and pie from scratch. They were, she said, "creating stories about food in the kitchen."

"It's a great time to be with your kids, too, especially with teenagers," Mr. Pollan said. "You have better conversations when you're doing things," he said. "Things open up in a very different way."

Kids should not be allowed to leave home without knowing "very basic and essential life skills. How to roast a chicken," and cook the basics, he said.

Children, Ms. Cool said, should know "how to feed someone else or to feed themselves real food."

Mr. Pollan acknowledged that parents and kids are busy. "It's not easy cooking every night," he said. Instead, he said, parents should make a goal of cooking "one more night than you are now" and sharing the work with the kids.

"Some families I know have a night where the kids do the cooking ... it's their show," he said. "I think that's great."

Ms. Cool also recommended children spend time growing food, as Mr. Pollan said he did from the age of 8. "Connecting to a garden, like you did," is important, she said. "Growing some things so they know food is real."

Mr. Pollan is famous for his common-sense approach to eating. "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants. We could stop right here," he says.

But the food industry complicates food for reasons including convenience, novelty and packaging. The industry also takes food research and uses it to make a case for complicated, processed food, he said. "You start with very simple raw ingredients and dress it up," he said.

"We like to complicate food."

And then, he said, there's food marketing. "You're not the only source of information about food that your kid has," he said. "There is an industry that's allowed to market to them. There are very large companies that stand between you and your kids."

What to do? Talk to them about what they're seeing "make them understand that they're being manipulated," he said. "Kids love learning about manipulation and (becoming) sophisticated consumers of advertising."

The [Common Ground speaker series](#) is in its 14th year. The all-volunteer organization has 29 member schools representing 10,000 families. Events are free to parents, faculty and staff from member schools as well as faculty from non-member schools. This school year, the organization will have 11 events on 11 school campuses.