ABOUT THE FILM

In 2004, Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis were best friends and new graduates from Yale who were concerned about the American obesity epidemic, and embarrassed by how little they knew about what they were eating. Inspired by the coincidental discovery that their great-grandparents came from the same small county in rural Iowa, they moved to the heartland to learn where their food was coming from. With the help of friendly neighbors, genetically modified seeds, nitrogen fertilizers, and government subsidies, they rented an acre of land and grew a bumper crop of corn. But as they tried to follow their pile of corn into the food system, what they found raises troubling questions about how we eat and how we farm.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Aaron Woolf - Director/Producer

Director and Producer Aaron Woolf received a Master’s in film at the University of Iowa, but got the bulk of his education in the field in Lima, Mexico City, and Los Angeles. In 2000, Aaron directed Greener Grass: Cuba, Baseball, and The United States, a WNET-ITVS co-production that won a Rockie Award and aired on PBS. In 2003, Aaron directed Dying to Leave: The Global Face of Human Trafficking and Smuggling, which won a Logie Award and aired on the PBS series Wide Angle. He recently completed work on Beyond the Motor City, a PBS special that aired in 2010.

Ian Cheney & Curt Ellis - Co-Producers

Co-Producers Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis became best friends at Yale. In college, Ian and Curt attempted to reconnect students to food and farming, releasing sheep on the central campus, working to bring local foods into the dining halls, and taking incoming freshmen on orientation trips to organic farms. After graduation, Ian and Curt took a cross-country trip, and learned how little they really knew about the centerpiece of the American diet, corn. With Curt’s cousin Aaron on board as director, the team moved to Iowa and started farming and filming in 2004. Since completing King Corn, Cheney and Ellis founded the Brooklyn-based documentary and advocacy company Wicked Delicate, and co-created the 2008 Sundance Channel film The Greening of Southie and the film and food project, Truck Farm. Ellis is the recipient of a Food and Society Fellowship and a founder of the national service organization, FoodCorps. Cheney recently completed his latest film, The City Dark. Ian and Curt won a Heinz Award in 2011 for their work.

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM WRITER

Sarah Dahnke is a multimedia artist and arts educator. She has worked as a teaching artist in public schools throughout New York and Chicago, writing original curricula that weave arts into social studies within the classroom. She is the former artist residency manager at chaNorth, where she managed a partnership with McEnroe Organic Farm that brought artists to the farm to work, harvest and connect to the land. Sarah has a master’s degree from the NYU/Tisch Interactive Telecommunications Program and is a student at Just Food’s Farm School NYC.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Whether you’re an educator, administrator, parent, student, or just someone who wants to learn more about media literacy, you can use this guide as a way to discuss the themes in the film. Lessons are aligned with time-coded video modules, and ‘Resources for Students and Teachers’ offers curricula, teaching, and a list of local and national arts organizations. Above all, we understand that educators are multifaceted artists in their own right, so we encourage you to utilize your own artistic experiences to spark dialogue.

A PDF of this and other creative, incisive Tribeca Film Institute® Educator Guides can be found at TRIBECAFILMINSTITUTE.ORG

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FARMING PRACTICES
The film traces the consolidation of small family farms into large farming operations, with single farms planting a thousand or more acres. Who benefits from, or is hurt by, this consolidation of farms? What images come to mind when you think of farms or farming? What role does the family farm play in America’s perception of itself? What does it mean for the U.S. that the family farm is giving way to industrial or factory farming? What could reverse that trend?

OUR FUTURE WITH CORN
According to the film, the U.S. government subsidizes corn to the point that a corn farmer could not make a profit without the government’s help. This has caused farmers to use genetically modified crops to resist herbicide and create a high yield, and created an industry based on determining alternative uses for corn (ethanol for fuel, grain for animals, high fructose corn syrup). Government subsidies and abundance mean the consumer is able to pay less for foods that contain corn-based products. What do you think the future of our country looks like if we continue on this path? What would happen if we discontinued government subsidies for corn? Would this impact food prices? What about the taste of certain foods?

ECONOMICS
In the film we are asked to look at fast food meals served at chain restaurants. The beef in the burger is from corn-fed cows, the soda sweetened with high-fructose corn syrup, the fries deep-fried in corn oil. A cattle farmer interviewed in the film says that if consumers demanded grass-fed beef, they would produce it, even though it costs more to raise grass-fed cows that grow at a slower rate. Imagine you’re at risk for obesity or diabetes but have very little money to feed yourself and your family. How do you decide what foods to buy? What are the benefits and drawbacks of having cheap food available?

HEALTH
In the film we learn that 70% of the antibiotics produced in this country are consumed by livestock and that beef from cattle raised on feedlots contains as much as nine grams of saturated fat. If you were part of a public health task force, would these facts be alarming? What recommendations would you make to improve public health? As an individual citizen, what could you do to voice your concerns about the food system in the United States? The film suggests our current policies don’t support the production of healthy food, yet Americans continue to purchase it. Who has more influence over changing our system, individuals or government policy?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

ABUNDANCE
During the film, we learn that factory farmed cows fed corn by-products produce meat that has 5 times the amount of saturated fat as grass fed cows and that high fructose corn syrup, another corn by-product, sweetens a wide array of beverages that are linked to obesity and Type II diabetes. Meanwhile, farmers in the Midwest are growing so much corn that there isn’t room to store it, and the crops are less nutritious than ever and must be processed to be usable. What does it mean to live in a time of such abundance, but that surplus food doesn’t offer proper nutrition? Knowing what you know about food insecurity from A Place at the Table, how can we redistribute this abundance to eradicate hunger?

VIDEO MODULES

1. CORN IS IN YOUR HAIR (01:27-04:25)
2. AN ACRE OF SUGAR (01:00:00-01:08:12)
3. CORN AND THE COWS (42:45-48:53)
4. HOW TO MAKE HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP (55:59-01:00:00)
PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY 1
WHAT’S IN A GRAIN?

Time: 45 minutes
Materials: White board or chart paper, markers, loose-leaf paper and writing utensils

Native Americans cultivated corn, known to them as maize, in the land that New York City now occupies. It was rich in protein and nutrients and was used as a basis for almost every meal because it was such a versatile food. They would also use the husks of corn to weave sleeping mats and baskets and burn the cobs for fuel. Today, we also have many uses for corn, but there are many differences between our commercially grown crop and the native corn plants that grew here hundreds of years ago. Most of the cornfields across the Midwest are filled with corn crops that are starchy, low in protein and other nutrients, taste “like sawdust” and to be utilized it requires processing.

PART A:
As a class, read “An Address to Mother Corn” located on page 13 of this guide. After reading the address, engage your students in a discussion about the sentiments expressed in it.

- Did your opinion of corn change after reading the Native American address?
- Consider the differences between mechanized farming which yields a large crop, versus the farming methods Native Americans would have used, plowing the land by hand and raising crops without the aid of fertilizers. With this in mind, why do you think Native Americans would praise corn so much? Why would they be so thankful? What do you think maize provided for them?
- Are there any crops today that can rival corn in popularity and abundance? Think about soybeans, wheat, rice, and sugar cane. How do these crops compare to corn?

PART B:
Based on the list or map you created previously, have your class write a modern-day response to the Native American blessing. Encourage your class to experiment with form by writing a song, a poem, a blog entry, creating a #hashtag, etc.

Here are some questions your students can consider as they formulate their answers:

- How does the existence of corn make you feel? What thoughts, or images come to mind when you think of the crop?
- Are you thankful for the existence of corn?
- Is corn worthy of ceremony? How does it improve our lives?
- If you feel negatively about corn, explain why.

After your students are finished, have each share their address with the rest of the class. Ask students to talk about what informed their address and to highlight the differences between what they produced and the original Native American blessing.

PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY 2
YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Time: 45 minutes
Materials: White board or chart paper, markers, internet and screen, food packaging, wrappers, and bottles students have brought in, video modules one: “Corn is in your hair” (01:27-04:25), video module two: “An acre of sugar” (01:00:00-01:08:12)

PART A:
Have your students create three lists of the foods they consume in their note books:

1. List all of your favorite foods
2. List all of the foods you ate today
3. List all of the foods you can remember eating in the past week

On your board or chart paper, create two columns: “Favorite Foods” and “Foods I Ate” Ask your students to share their favorite foods first. After the list is complete, have students share the foods they have eaten. If there are repeats, just make one entry for each food item. Then, as a class, circle the foods that you know or suspect contain corn or corn by-products. Students should also circle the foods listed in their notebooks.

Note: As your class generates their lists, you may want to keep in mind that most meat, unless it is free-range, will be from corn-fed animals; anything fried at a fast food restaurant was likely fried in corn oil. Chips are likely to be made using corn oil or have corn-based ingredients. Soda, like many juices and sports drinks, contains high fructose corn syrup. Most bottled pasta sauce, ketchup and similar tomato based products are also sweetened with high fructose corn syrup.

PART B:
Have your students take out the food packaging or wrapping they brought and read the ingredients labels.

Analyze and discuss:

- Approximately what percentage of foods on the board are circled?
- What percentage of the foods on your page are circled?
- How much of the foods consumed by the class are corn-based?
- What about the foods on your page?
- How much of your food do you think is made up of corn?
- Does anything about this information worry you or make you want to change your eating choices? Do you feel like you have a choice to eat differently?
- Based on the food packaging in the classroom right now, how much corn is in the room?

Ingredients to look for include high fructose corn syrup, caramel, dextrose, sorbitol, food starch, and xanthan gum. Find a full list of corn products, ingredients, and additives here: www.cornallergens.com/list/corn-allergen-list.php
Almost every product in conventional grocery stores – from steaks to chicken breasts to condiments to desserts to tomato sauce to frozen entrees – is ultimately derived from corn, either in the form of high fructose corn syrup or from corn-based animal feed.

Activity: Take a look back at the list of the foods you made in Part 1. In groups, have students research online what companies produce these foods. Make a list of every food production company you encounter through this research, and see how many companies are represented. Do you see a lot of companies on the list? Do you see a lot of repetition of the same companies?

Make a list of every food production company you encounter through this research, and see how many companies are represented. Do you see a lot of companies on the list? Do you see a lot of repetition of the same companies?

Discuss:

• What does it mean that we can trace our food back to these corporations?
• Looking at this list, do you really have a lot of choices when it comes to determining what you will eat?
• Since so many products available in grocery stores are derived from corn, do you as a consumer have a choice to avoid it? Is this issue hopeless, or can you see some solutions?

TAKING IT FURTHER: A TWO-DAY CHALLENGE

Please note: This is an optional activity through which you can engage your students to further explore how their diets are impacted by the presence of corn products. You can choose to modify it based on your needs.

Day 1: Instruct your students to save all of their food packaging for 1 – 2 days. This includes snacks, drinks, fast food meals, or any other packaging that contains an ingredients list. During your next class, look back through the ingredients lists and determine what approximate percentage of their foods were made from corn. Have each student bring in his/her days worth of packaging and create a display of it in your classroom.

Day 2: Instruct your students that they will be participating in a food experiment by trying to avoid corn products for an entire day. This means no high fructose corn syrup, any meat they consume must come from grass-fed cows, and no foods that contain any of the long list of ingredients here:

www.cornallergens.com/list/corn-allergen-list.php

After the experiment, engage your class in a share-out about their experience.
POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY 1 CONT.
REMIX THE MESSAGE

PART C:
Divide the class into groups of 2 – 4 students. Instruct your students that you will be examining and remixing soft drink advertisements. Task each group with choosing a soft drink ad and remixing the message of the original. Rather than selling a product, the remixed ads can inform us about the ingredients, health benefits or lack thereof, or effects of soft drinks. Students should consider the following questions as they conduct their research and begin formulating their remixed ads:

- Where do you see soft drink ads? What sort of messages do they usually convey?
- How would the message change if the purpose of the ad is not to sell, but rather inform consumers about the ingredients list as opposed to the flavor or the way drinking it will make you feel?

If you have access to a printer, groups can print color copies of the ads they choose to remix. Instruct your students to cut up the ads, gluing down portions onto the blank paper and adding their own original slogans.

Teacher’s Note: Not everyone may agree that soda is unhealthy and may opt to have positive slogans promoting soda consumption. The purpose of this exercise is to get students thinking critically about what they consume and the messages contained in ads. If the class does not share a singular message, that is OK.

TAKING IT FURTHER:
If you can access the Internet in your classroom, you can introduce students to free online editing tools that allow users to create and remix existing videos. These include but are not limited to: Mozilla’s Popcorn Maker (https://popcorn.webmaker.org), The Lamp’s Media Braker Tool (www.thelampnyc.org).

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY 2
CORNY COMMERCIAL

Time: 60 minutes
Materials: Computer with Internet and projector or monitor, paper and writing utensils, markers or colored pencils, video module four: “How to make high fructose corn syrup” (55:39-01:00:00)

PART A:
As a class, visit gotmilk.com (California Milk Processor Board) and view some of the commercials. Also visit porkbeinspired.com (National Pork Board, formerly known as Pork: The Other White Meat) and analyze some of their advertising/social media strategies. Agricultural councils have a history of creating campaigns to let the public know their product is safe and healthy.

Discuss as a class:
- What sort of approaches do you see being used to advertise milk and pork? Do you find the ads funny, wholesome, snarky, exciting, cautious?
- What is the job of an agricultural council when it comes to their product?
- What purpose do these ads serve and who do they benefit?

PART B:
As a class, consider the filmmaking style and storytelling techniques used in King Corn. Engage your students in a conversation about how the filmmakers artistic choices helped tell the story and get their message across to viewers. Here are some questions to ask your students:

- How does the personal quest narrative and Curt and Ian’s family histories help structure the documentary?
- How do the filmmakers use humor to balance what is potentially a very sobering story?
- What are some of the storytelling tools they make use of (stop-motion animation, time-lapse photography, etc.) and how effective are they for conveying their message? Etc.

PART C:
Divide your class into small groups and instruct students to create an advertising plan for corn. Students can choose from the following options or come up with an original approach:

1. A storyboard or comic strip campaign. Students can draw or consider using Pixton Comics (www.pixton.com), a free online digital storyboarding tool.
2. A comedy skit where students write and act out an advertising script.
3. A 30-second commercial which students can script and/or storyboard
4. A social media campaign for corn
5. A song or jingle
POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY 2 CONT.
CORNY COMMERCIAL

Encourage students to think about the tone and message of their advertising plan, with each group free to choose their own approach, deciding to advertise the benefits of corn, the delicious taste of sweet corn, the many uses, harmful effects of high fructose corn syrup, corn by-products and their link to obesity and diabetes, government corn subsidies, or another idea of their choice.

Once students are finished, each group will present their advertising campaign. Once students are finished presenting, consider engaging the class with the following questions:

• What sorts of words did you hear to describe corn in the various advertisements? Were there mostly positive or negative approaches?
• Do you think your views about corn have changed before and after the film? Why?
• If you were to actually put this advertisement out in the world, what kind of an impact do you think it could have?

TAKING IT FURTHER:

Using the advertisement sketches, task the groups with making their commercials and websites a reality. Groups that are creating commercials should determine actor/director/cameraperson/props roles and be given cameras to film. Groups that are creating websites can utilize the free website authoring tool Wix (www.wix.com) to drag and drop elements, such as photos, videos and text into their site. If your school or classroom has a website or blog, promote and share this student work online.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

FURTHER READING

Corn and Capitalism by Arturo Warman
Exploring the history and importance of corn worldwide, Arturo Warman traces its development from a New World food of poor and despised peoples into a commodity that plays a major role in the modern global economy.

The Omnivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan
Pollan follows each of the food chains that sustain us—industrial food, organic or alternative food, and food we forage ourselves—from the source to a final meal, and in the process develops a definitive account of the American way of eating.

Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser
An exposé that reveals how the fast food industry has altered the landscape of America, widened the gap between rich and poor, fueled an epidemic of obesity, and transformed food production throughout the world.

The Jungle by Upton Sinclair
A ground-breaking novel from 1906 that exposed the deplorable working conditions inside meat packing plants in the United States. The book depicts poverty, the absence of social programs, unpleasant living and working conditions, and the hopelessness prevalent among the working class, which is contrasted with the deeply rooted corruption of people in power.

FURTHER WATCHING

IF YOU LIKED THIS FILM, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE SOME OF THESE OTHER FILMS.

Get Involved

Craving more hands on experience? Check out these organizations.

King Corn ITVS Discussion Guide
www-tc.pbs.org/independentlens/kingcorn/resources/kc_discussion.pdf
A discussion guide that offers critical viewing activities and ways for students to take their learning beyond the classroom.

Food Democracy Now
www.fooddemocracynow.org
The organization founded by King Corn director Aaron Wolfe. It is a grassroots movement of more than 50,000 farmers and citizens dedicated to building a sustainable food system that protects our natural environment, sustains farmers and nourishes families.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
www.sustainableagriculture.net
An organization that advocates for federal policy reform and envisions agriculture in the U.S. as safe, nutritious and produced by family farms.

Food Corps
www.foodcorps.org
The organization founded by King Corn co-creator Curt Ellis, which places motivated leaders in low-resource communities to teach kids about healthy food, provide them with access to more nutritious food in schools and build school gardens.
In ancient time the Great Spirit Above sent Mother Corn to our people to be their friend and helper, to give them support and health and strength. She has walked with our people on the long and difficult path that they have travelled from the faraway past, and now she marches with us toward the future.

“In the dim, distant past days, Mother Corn gave food to our ancestors. As she gave it to them, she now gives it to us. And as she was faithful and bountiful to our forefathers and to us, so will she be faithful and bountiful to our children. Now and in all time to come, she will give to us the blessings for which we have prayed.

“Mother Corn leads us as she led our fathers and our mothers down through the ages. The path of Mother Corn lies ahead, and we walk with her, day by day. We go forward with hope and confidence in the future, just as our ancestors did during all the past ages. When the lonely prairie stretched wide and fearful before us, we were doubtful and afraid. But Mother Corn strengthened and encouraged us.

“Now Mother Corn’s return makes our hearts glad. Give thanks! Give thanks to Mother Corn! She brings us a blessing. She brings us peace and plenty. She comes from the Great Spirit Above, who has brought us good things.”

Throughout the address and the elaborate ceremony that preceded and followed it, a stalk of corn stood before the altar, representing the spirit of Mother Corn. About sunset, the staff of corn was dressed like a woman and carried at the head of a religious procession to the brink of the nearby river. White people call it the Missouri River; the Arikaras always called it the Mysterious Waters. With reverence, they placed the stalk in the water so that it might float along as a symbol of their affection for Mother Corn. What advertisements promise them about it. If the class does not share a singular message, that is OK.
TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES® STAFF

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COMMUNITY CLASSROOM
Community Classroom is an innovative and free resource for educators, offering short-form film modules adapted from ITVS's award-winning documentaries and standards-based lesson plans for high school and community colleges, NGOs, and youth organizations. ITVS.ORG/EDUCATORS/COLLECTIONS

ITVS
The Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds, presents, and promotes award-winning independently produced documentaries and dramas on public television and cable, innovative new media projects on the internet, and the Emmy® Award-winning series Independent Lens on PBS. ITVS receives core funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.

ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES®
Tribeca Youth Screening Series® is a media literacy program begun in 2006 by the Tribeca Film Institute®. The academic year is divided into two series, screened from September through June in partnership with national and neighborhood partners. These screenings are augmented by in-class sessions led by a Tribeca Teaching Artist, who works with a film-specific curriculum written and edited by a team formed through Tribeca Film Institute®. Schools are selected based on relationship, location, and need; in 2012 we will be working in eight schools in New York and New Jersey. Connect and download free curricula at TRIBECAFILMINSTITUTE.ORG

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The Tribeca Film Institute® (TFI) is a year-round nonprofit arts organization that empowers working filmmakers through grants, professional development and resources, while also helping New York City students discover independent film and filmmaking.

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