

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES: THE MAGIC PILL

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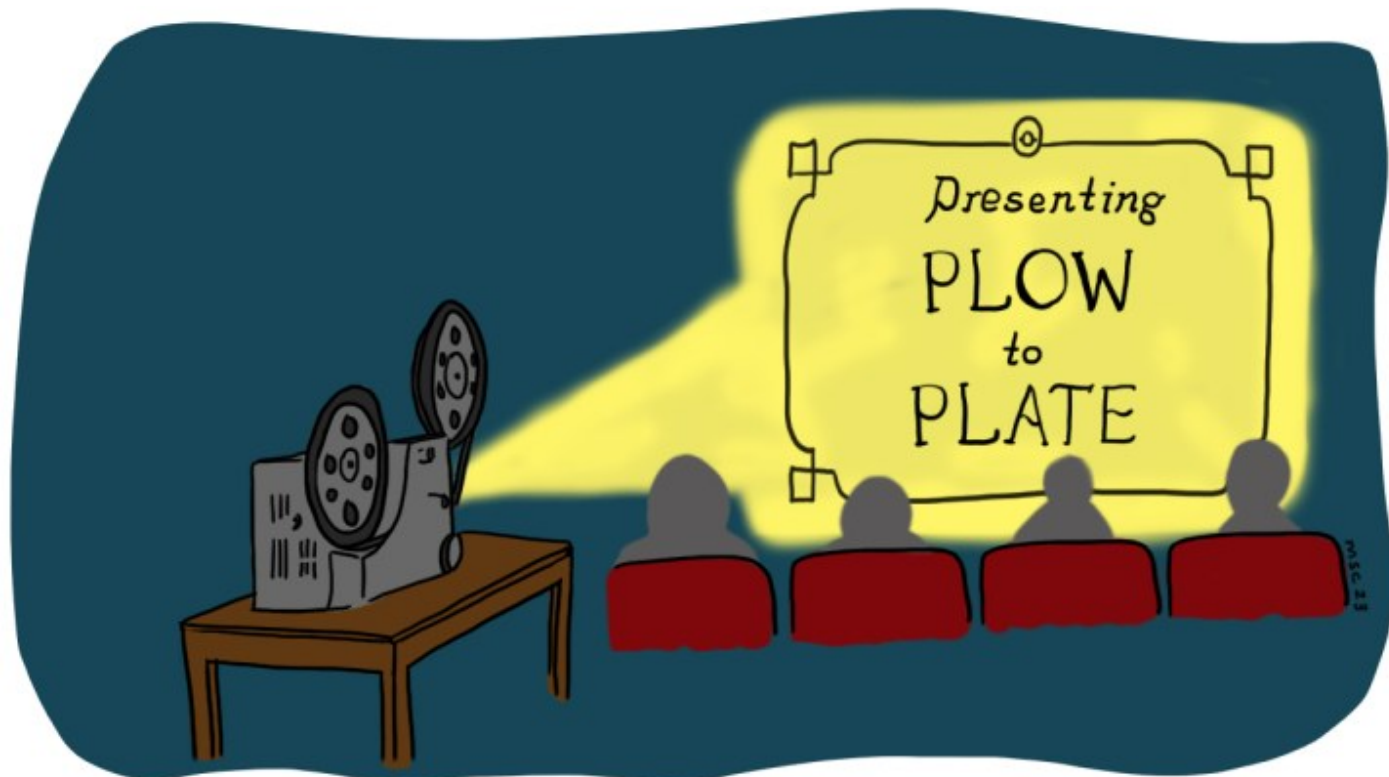


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

The 2017 documentary *The Magic Pill* argues that food, not pharmaceuticals, is the best medicine. It is the same case made by many *Plow to Plate* films, most recently Nelson Campbell's two screenings, *From Food to Freedom* and *Plant Pure Nation*. Director Robert Tate employs a tactic similar to Campbell's. He assembles a group of people, mostly his friends and family, suffering from various ailments, and gets them to agree to a 10-week total revamp of their diets. Tate and Campbell also agree that overconsumption of modern-day processed foods destroys human health—indeed, they'd hesitate to call this real food.

But here the similarities end. Nelson subscribes to the strictly plant-based diet espoused by his father, biochemist T. Colin Campbell, in *The China Study*, and agrees with Michael Pollan, whose simple counsel is "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Tate takes the opposite tact. He argues that humans were hunter-gatherers for

500,000 generations, surviving and thriving mostly on animal prey. By contrast, agriculture and the advent of wheat, a primary bugaboo in this film, has only been around for 10,000 years or about half of one percent of the human race's time on Earth. His ideal is the paleo diet, also called the caveman diet or "Atkins on steroids."

Claiming that "what we have been told about nutrition is dangerously wrong," Tate's subjects invert the FDA low-fat high-carbohydrate food pyramid. They empty their pantries of bread, pasta, rice, sugar and bad trans fats (most processed vegetable oils) and fill their fridges with meats and proper fats including olive oil, ghee and even lard. To save money, one family even buys a whole grass-fed cow.

"WHAT WE HAVE BEEN TOLD ABOUT NUTRITION IS DANGEROUSLY WRONG."

DIRECTOR ROBERT TATE

The Magic Pill doesn't shy away from showing how hard these radical shifts in diet can be, at least at first. Abigail is a young girl in the film with autism whose diet initially consists of chicken fingers, macaroni and cheese, goldfish and apple juice. At first, she and her siblings hate and radically reject the new options, going so far as flinging them on the ground and against the walls. The film suggests that their reactions are comparable to addiction withdrawal—but after about five days, their taste buds adjust and they accept and even like the ketogenic menu.

Another segment focuses on the Yolngu aborigines of Australia whose traditional lifestyles and diet largely ended in the past century. An organization called Hope for Health is teaching the Yolngu that their traditional meat-based diet was good and that the Western diet that they largely adopted from the "dominant culture store" is wrecking their health. A group of Yolngu participate in a two-week program reconnecting them to their old ways of life—taking long walks, stripping trees of bark to use as blankets, as their grandparents taught them, and eating what the land and sea provide.

Along with these stories and testimonials, *The Magic Pill* explains the science behind the ketogenic diet. Ketosis changes metabolism so that instead of using glucose as the go-to fuel, the body taps into ketones—acids produced from fats, not carbohydrates or sugars. There is a segment on the trial and attempted silencing of a maverick South African doctor named Tim Noakes, who was critical of the conventional wisdom touting a high-carbohydrate, low-fat diet. Another section of the movie traces the conventional wisdom to Ansel Kees, a physiologist who based his findings on the dangers of saturated fats on a flawed study. For good measure, the film visits Joel Salatin at Polyface Farm, to discuss regenerative farming, grass and carbon capture. You hear his voice before you see his face, and I knew right away who he was by his many appearances as a talking head in myriad documentaries about the alternative food system.

The ketogenic diet and this film have their critics. But the advice to eat real food—animals that swim, fly, prance and burrow—is good. Eat lots of plants. Avoid processed foods, chemicals, bad fats and too much sugar. I'm not ready to give up cherished rice or pasta. All in moderation. If you shop at the Park Slope Food Coop and have read this review, most likely you are on the right track.

The Magic Pill, May 14, 2024 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link: <https://plowtoplatefilms.weebly.com/upcoming-events.html>

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@mail.com.

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