Having expertly documented how and why food consumption is both personal and political, Marion Nestle is widely considered to be the foremost authority on American food politics, deeply entangled as it is with big business and federal policy. A lot has changed in the ten years since the publication of her influential book *Food Politics*. Marion Nestle spoke with Kate Marshall, her editor, about the meaning of food politics today.

**KM:** It’s been more than a decade since *Food Politics* was published. How has the food landscape changed and what remains the same?

**MN:** The tenth anniversary edition of *Food Politics* gave me a chance to reflect on exactly that question. I’ve seen huge changes in the last decade, many of them for the good. Go to any grocery store and look how much easier it is to find healthier foods. Schools are serving healthier meals (or trying to); farmers’ markets are proliferating; organic foods are selling like mad; young people are competing for places in Food Corps; more young people and women are going into farming; and I’m seeing a lot more backyard chickens and urban gardens, and far greater attention to local, seasonal, and sustainable food production. Vast numbers of people are intensely interested in food issues and want to get involved and do something about them. And ten years ago, I could never have dreamed that a First Lady of the United States would set an agenda to improve access to healthier foods for low-income adults and children.

This is all engaging and exciting to watch, and I love it that so much food advocacy is bottom up, of the people, by the people, for the people. But let’s face it, the food movement has yet to make a dent in the basic political institutions that so resist this kind of democracy. We have a deeply dysfunctional government in thrall to corporate interests. The food movement is nipping at the edges and is heading in the right direction, but I’m guessing real progress is still a long way off.

**KM:** In his foreword to the new edition of *Food Politics*, Michael Pollan describes your book as, “...one of the founding documents of the movement to reform the American food system.” That movement—from urban farming to school lunch reform—is growing. How would you characterize the food movement today?

**MN:** Sociologists who study social movements say that you can’t really tell whether you are in the midst of a movement until it’s over, but fragmented and uncoordinated as it is, food advocacy sure looks like a movement to me. I once asked a student to try to catalog the groups that have organized to work for a healthier, more sustainable, and more environmentally friendly food system. She found hundreds—thousands—working on every food issue you can think of. Each is doing good work. The challenge is to get them to form coalitions broad and focused enough to exercise real political power.

**KM:** What issues will continue to be at the forefront of our national debates on food?

**MN:** The big ones are food insecurity—not having a reliable source of healthy food on a day to day basis—and health conditions related to eating too much of the wrong kinds of foods. Both are rooted in economic and educational inequities. Until people can make a decent living and have affordable healthcare, those problems can’t be solved. Immigration and the plight of farm and packing-house workers are also right up there. We need to find ways to raise crops and farm animals with fewer chemicals and antibiotics and less harm to the workers, the environment, the local communities, and the animals themselves—more sustainably, in short. Our outdated and counterproductive agricultural policies need to be brought in line with health policy. And I’d like to see some limits on food industry marketing, especially to children, here and abroad. Until Congress cares more about public health than corporate health, any public health nutrition advocacy will be controversial.
KM: What do you mean when you refer to the “food industry”?

MN: “Food industry” is the collective term for food and beverage companies and trade associations across the entire food system from production to consumption. This is a vast enterprise that includes companies—from small mom-and-pop to gigantic operations—engaged in agriculture (animal or plant), product manufacture, food service, food retailing, the manufacture of farm machines and fertilizers, and the transportation, storage, and insurance that supports such enterprises. But when I talk about the food industry, I’m talking about the large and powerful corporations that control agriculture, food manufacturing, supermarket retailing, and restaurant service—in short, Big Food. If that sounds polemical, it’s because it is.

KM: Are there any food industry players that are improving the food system at large?

MN: Big Food? Even if the companies want to, they can’t. As publicly traded corporations, their job is to sell product, make a profit, and report growth in profits to Wall Street every ninety days. Most of the promises to make their products healthier and to stop pushing junk foods on kids sound like—and are—public relations because they can’t risk taking actions that might reduce sales. The result is that food and beverage corporations seem to speak with forked tongues. On the one hand, they claim to be making healthier products and reducing efforts to market junk foods to children. On the other, they are heavily promoting the worst junk foods and finding less obvious electronic ways to reach even the youngest children. And when forced to behave better in this country, they move their marketing efforts overseas.

KM: Are there individuals leading an effective or inspiring movement for change today?

MN: The obvious answer is Michelle Obama. I just wish she had been able to do more. Her Let’s Move campaign started out trying to make real change in the current food system, but food industry opposition to practically everything she’s wanted to do can only be described as ferocious. If they don’t like what she’s doing, they go right to Congress and Congress is only too happy to comply, as in giving vegetable credit to the tomato sauce on pizza. One interesting feature of today’s food movement is that it is bottom up. I can think of dozens of people who are doing work that is well recognized and dozens more whose work hasn’t been noticed yet, but should be. There is so much work to be done that there’s room for everyone to join in and get busy.

KM: Why did the Let’s Move campaign fail?

MN: Fail is too strong a judgment. Let’s Move succeeded in getting the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act passed right away and gets high marks for that. And it started a national conversation. I have enormous admiration for what Mrs. Obama intended to do with Let’s Move—improve school food and inner city access to healthier foods. I especially appreciated her courageous speech to the grocery manufacturers about how they really had to stop using misleading and inappropriate methods to market junk foods to children. Once the food industry realized she meant business, they put on the pressure. It’s sad to see how effectively they’ve been able to block so much of the Let’s Move agenda.

KM: If Michelle Obama faced major opposition from the food industry, in your view, how can individuals change our food system?

MN: My mantra: Vote with your fork. This means that every time you buy food that is produced in ways that are healthier for people and the planet, you are voting for a better food system. And everyone who is working in organizations devoted to food system change is making it easier for people to eat more healthfully. But voting with forks isn’t enough. If we want to make real and lasting changes in the food system, we have to tackle the political structure. Vote with your vote. I taught a course in food advocacy at NYU last spring. I viewed my role as giving students permission to get out and advocate for changes in the food system they care about. If they are going to do that, they have to engage with the political system, something not all of them are comfortable doing. I tell them that if they aren’t encountering opposition, they probably aren’t doing enough. I’m encouraging students and everyone else who cares about the food system to run for office. It—and strong public pressure—are the only ways we’ll be able to change government and get real policy change.

KM: You are considered to be one of the founders of the academic field of Food Studies, having served as the chair of NYU’s department from 1988 to 2003. What is Food Studies and where do you see the field going?

MN: My NYU department likes to describe Food Studies as a lens through which to examine important problems of society. When we were lucky enough to be able to launch our undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral programs in food studies in 1996, we were virtually alone. Universities viewed food as too common a subject to be taken seriously for academic study. That’s another measurable change. Now, practically every college and university uses food as an entry point for
teaching students how to think critically about—and engage in—the country’s most pressing economic, political, social, and health problems, nearly all of them related to food in some way.

**KM:** Many do not know that you are a molecular biologist by training. How has your background in science influenced the way you write and think about food politics?

**MN:** My experience studying molecular biology was that it was an exercise in critical thinking. Because molecules are too small to see, you can only infer what’s happening in your experiments. In grad school, the game was to demonstrate that your results were real and couldn’t have been caused by things you hadn’t thought of. I use that training every time I read a paper in my field. It’s turned out to be phenomenally useful. Nobody messes with me about science.

**KM:** Your science cred has always struck me as lending a tone of authority to your writing. It’s not surprising to learn that you were asked to advise on the USDA’s new visual food guide, MyPlate, which replaced the Food Pyramid in 2011. How do you feel about MyPlate?

**MN:** I didn’t exactly advise. I was invited to a meeting to be shown what the MyPlate food guide was going to look like. It was already a done deal by the time I first saw it a year before it was released. I like the “make half your plate fruits and vegetables” part, and MyPlate certainly avoided the controversy over the old pyramid food guide and is bland enough to offend nobody. I’m told by nutritionists that it’s easy for them to use when advising clients, so that’s a plus. I preferred the old pyramid—it made it clear what you were supposed to eat less of—but the White House wanted a fresh start, so there was no rescuing it, even with tweaking to correct its flaws.

**KM:** Do you still have colleagues at the US Department of Health and Human Services who will speak with you?

**MN:** Yes, several, but only off the record. When federal officials want to talk to me, they call me at home over weekends. And they tell me to contact them at home, never at work. I have a lot of sympathy for how hard their jobs are. Trying to promote public health nutrition in today’s congressional environment is an uphill haul.

**KM:** You play an important public role and keep an active blog, foodpolitics.com. And your Twitter account, @marionnestle, has more than 100,000 followers. Has social media connected you to new audiences?

**MN:** I don’t really know who the blog reaches. I find out that people in government and the food industry read it when I say something they don’t like. I meet people who read the blog and tell me they find it useful. I’ve run it since 2006 as part of my NYU public service, and I consider everything on it to be open source. I try to link to original documents whenever I can and hope that students will feel free to take advantage of it. I ought to make their research a lot easier. Some techie friends set it up so it goes out automatically to Twitter. That’s where the new audiences come in. I meet people who follow me on Twitter everywhere I go. It’s a bit weird, but fun.

**KM:** Who do you think are the most important voices writing on food today?

**MN:** I can’t keep up with the number of books, movies, and websites that are covering issues I wrote about in *Food Politics*. I’m answering your questions on the weekend of the Brooklyn Food Book Fair, a three-day symposium focusing on the work of people writing about food issues related to society, health, and gastronomy. These days, the journalists Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, and Michael Moss are having an enormous effect in inspiring people to join the food movement. Happily, people who inspired me—Wendell Berry, Francis Moore Lappé, Joan Gussow, Michael Jacobson—are still around and still writing up a storm. I hope they are enjoying the emergence of today’s food movement as much as I am.

*The Tenth Anniversary Edition of Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* by Marion Nestle with a foreword by Michael Pollan, released by University of California Press in May 2013 ($29.95), is available for purchase at local bookstores and online retailers.