

**"ENORMOUSLY  
ENTERTAINING!"**

*A moral, socio-economic odyssey  
through the American food system.*

—THE BOSTON GLOBE

# KING CORN

*You Are What You Eat*



**INGREDIENTS:** BALCONY RELEASING PRESENTS A MOSAIC FILMS PRODUCTION • A FILM BY AARON WOOLF, CURT ELLIS AND IAN CHENEY "KING CORN"  
CO-PRODUCED BY IAN CHENEY, CURT ELLIS • EDITED BY JEFFREY K. MILLER • CAMERA BY SAM CULLMAN, AARON WOOLF, IAN CHENEY • ORIGINAL MUSIC BY THE WOWZ  
WITH BO RAMSEY AND SPENCER CHAKEDIS • EXECUTIVE PRODUCER FOR ITVS: SALLY JO FIFER • KING CORN IS A CO-PRODUCTION OF MOSAIC FILMS INCORPORATED  
AND THE INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE (ITVS) WITH FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING  
PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY AARON WOOLF [WWW.KINGCORN.NET](http://WWW.KINGCORN.NET)

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RELEASING

[ITVS]

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## **Synopsis**

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*King Corn* is the Peabody-winning feature documentary about two friends, one acre of corn, and the subsidized crop that drives our fast-food nation. In *King Corn*, Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis, best friends from college on the east coast, move to the heartland to learn where their food comes from. With the help of friendly neighbors, genetically modified seeds, and powerful herbicides, they plant and grow a bumper crop of America's most-productive, most-subsidized grain on one acre of Iowa soil. But when they try to follow their pile of corn into the food system, what they find raises troubling questions about what we eat—and how we farm.

## **Distribution**

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*King Corn* premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in 2007. Balcony Releasing distributed the film theatrically, with screenings in 60 US cities and Japan. The film has also enjoyed a robust community screenings life, with more than 200 grassroots events organized by Film Sprout's Caitlin Boyle. *King Corn* aired nationally on the PBS series Independent Lens, and has been broadcast in more than a dozen countries internationally. It was rebroadcast on Planet Green in 2010, in a double feature alongside the 30-minute documentary sequel *Big River: A King Corn Companion* ([www.bigriverfilm.com](http://www.bigriverfilm.com)). *King Corn* and *Big River* are available on educational DVD through Bullfrog Films and on wide-release home video from New Video's Docurama label.

## **Exhibition and Credits**

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Exhibition Format:	35mm, HDCAM, Digibeta, DVD,
Run Times:	90 minutes or 50 minutes
Sound Format:	Dolby Surround, Stereo
Production Format:	DVCPRO 50 24p 16:9 on Panasonic SDX900
Domestic Premiere:	South by Southwest, March 2007
International Premiere:	HotDocs, April 2007
Theatrical Premiere:	New York Cinema Village, October 2007
Broadcast Premieres:	PBS Independent Lens 2008, Planet Green 2010

Presented by.....Balcony Releasing  
A Production of.....Mosaic Films Incorporated  
A Film by.....Aaron Woolf, Curt Ellis and Ian Cheney  
Co-Produced by.....Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis  
Edited by.....Jeffrey K. Miller  
Camera by.....Sam Cullman, Aaron Woolf and Ian Cheney  
Original Music by.....The WoWz with Bo Ramsey and Spencer Chakedis  
Produced and Directed by.....Aaron Woolf

*King Corn* is a co-production of Mosaic Films Incorporated and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

## **Contacts:**

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## **Film Summary**

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Almost everything Americans eat contains corn: high fructose corn syrup, corn-fed meat, and corn-based processed foods are the staples of the modern diet. Ready for an adventure and alarmed by signs of their generation's bulging waistlines, college friends Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis know where to go to investigate. Eighty years ago, Ian and Curt's great-grandfathers lived just a few miles apart, in the same rural county in northern Iowa. Now their great-grandsons are returning with a mission: they will plant an acre of corn, follow their harvest into the world, and attempt to understand what they—and all of us—are really made of.

Ian and Curt arrive in the Midwest enthusiastic about their new endeavor. Iowa's newest farmers lease an acre of land from a skeptical landlord and fill out a pile of paperwork to sign up for subsidies. The government will pay them \$28 to grow their acre of corn—the first of many steps that reinforce the idea that *more corn* is what America needs.

Ian and Curt start the spring by injecting ammonia fertilizer. The chemical promises to increase yields fourfold, fueling the mission of abundance laid out for them. Then it's planting time, and with a rented tractor, Ian and Curt set 31,000 seeds in the ground in 18 minutes. Their seed has been genetically modified for high yields and herbicide tolerance, and when the seedlings sprout, Ian and Curt apply a powerful spray to ensure that only their corn will thrive on their acre.

But where will all that corn go? Ian and Curt leave Iowa to find out, first considering their crop's future as feed. In Colorado, rancher Sue Jarrett says her cattle should be eating grass. But with a surplus of corn, it costs less to raise cattle in confinement than to let them roam free: "The mass production of corn drives the mass production of protein in confinement." Animal nutritionists confirm that corn makes cows sick and beef fatty, but it also lets consumers eat a \$1 hamburger. Feedlot owner Bob Bledsoe defends America's cheap food, but as Ian and Curt see in Colorado, the world behind it can be stomach turning. At one feedlot, 100,000 cows stand shoulder-to-shoulder, doing their part to transform Iowa corn into millions of pounds of fat-streaked beef.

Following the trail of high fructose corn syrup, Ian and Curt hop attempt to make a home-cooked batch of the sweetener in their kitchen. But their investigation of America's most ubiquitous ingredient turns serious when they follow soda to its consumption in Brooklyn. Here, Type II diabetes is ravaging the community, and America's addiction to corny sweets is to blame.

The breadth of the problem is now clear: the American food system is built on the abundance of corn, an abundance perpetuated by a subsidy system that pays farmers to maximize production. In a nursing home in the Indiana suburbs, Ian and Curt come face-to-face with Earl Butz, the Nixon-era Agriculture Secretary who invented subsidies. The elderly Butz champions the modern food

system as an “Age of plenty” Ian and Curt’s great-grandfathers only dreamed of.

November pulls Ian and Curt back to Iowa. Their 10,000-pound harvest seems as grotesque as it is abundant. They haul their corn to the elevator and look on as it makes its way into a food system they have grown disgusted by. At a somber farm auction, Ian and Curt decide to tell their landlord they want to buy the acre. The next spring their cornfield has been pulled from production and planted in a prairie, a wild square surrounded by a sea of head-high corn.

## **Production Notes**

*King Corn* was shot in 2004 and 2005. Director and Producer Aaron Woolf lived in Iowa with Curt and Ian throughout that time, and the team traveled to 30 states and Mexico on the trail of corn. The film was shot in 24p on the Panasonic SDX900 and edited in Iowa, New York and Boston on Final Cut Pro. Additional footage was assembled from the National Archives, Ellis and Cheney home movies, and ample amounts of Super8. Funding for the film came from foundations, individuals, and ITVS. *King Corn* was broadcast nationally in the 2007-2008 season of the PBS series Independent Lens.

## **Director’s Statement, by Aaron Woolf**

If there had been reason to suspect that over-production of sorghum or rice lay behind our national health crisis, I don’t think I would have been as excited about making this film or as somehow conflicted about bringing it out into America. But the thought that corn could be implicated—this hit where it hurts.

I first found corn when, like the plant itself, I moved from my home in Mexico to Iowa sixteen years ago, to study film. I loved the Iowa landscape, and would ride my motorcycle through the fields, implausibly comforted by the notion that if I crashed, I would somehow be safe in those green rows. During those long rides, it never occurred to me that those plants would someday be the focus of a film that I would make, or that there was trouble in the garden.

But long before I studied in Iowa, fundamental alterations had been made to the corn plant, and to the role it would play in our food system. Even if I had thought to look more deeply into the effects this evolving corn culture had on our society, it would have been too soon to see. Many of the consequences of what we had done to corn and to corn policy were as yet unknown.

The first corn hybrids were crafted by farmers in humble awe of the possibilities of the plant, and when corn subsidies were altered in the early seventies, the nation still struggled with widespread hunger. But bad outcomes can come from well-intentioned actions. In reality, those efforts laid the groundwork for the current problems that come from having too much food, at too low a quality. Yes, food is cheaper now, but we are only beginning to understand the full cost that cheapness demands from our environment, our health, and our social fabric.

Today the process of questioning our culture and agriculture is underway in many forms. If you ride a motorcycle through Iowa now, you will pass an increasing number of fields planted in

organic corn, or grazed on by free-ranging cattle or buffalo, using farming practices that are safer for all of us. You will pass homes and greenhouses where heirloom varieties of vegetables are being preserved with great urgency and diligence. Maybe even you will get that feeling that Columbus had when he first set eyes on the New World, and wrote to Queen Isabela in Spain that he had found something more valuable than gold, a crop that could feed a continent.

### **About the Filmmakers**

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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. Aaron is the founder of Mosaic Films and the Brooklyn grocery Urban Rustic.

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.

The New York anti-folk band The WoWz is a collaboration between Simon Beins, Sam Grossman and Johnny Dydo. Their releases include *Brudders*, *Long Grain Rights* and *Cool Dump*. Iowa sessions for *King Corn* were produced by two-time Grammy nominee Bo Ramsey.

### **Subsidizing Obesity**

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Corn is the nation's most-planted, most-processed, most-subsidized crop. More than 80 million acres of the heartland are planted in corn each year and delivered to our tables:

“If you take a McDonald's meal, you don't realize it when you eat it, but you're eating corn. Beef has been corn-fed'; soda is corn; even the French fries. Half the calories in the French fries come from the fat they're fried in, which is liable to be either corn oil or soy oil. So when you're at McDonald's, you're eating Iowa food. Everything on your plate is corn.”

– Michael Pollan, UC Berkeley, in *King Corn*

There is legislative logic to the flood of cheap corn-based foods. In 2005, federal subsidies spent \$9.4 billion in taxpayer money to promote corn production. For Iowa farmers over the last half-century, these payments have often meant the difference between profit and loss on a given acre.

With the Farm Bill promoting production beyond market demand, the raw materials for an obesity epidemic were readily at hand, and America's food manufacturers designed and marketed fast- and processed foods from that abundant supply of cheap corn.

Since *King Corn*'s release in 2007, ethanol, global demand and speculation in commodity markets have driven the price of corn to significantly higher levels than were reflected in the film. Though corn is now less affordable than it once was, the infrastructure investment that American food manufacturers made in building a corn-fed food system has slowed any transition away from corn-based ingredients, and the crop's fast- and processed foods remain staples in the national diet.

For further reading on farm subsidies and the legacy of cheap corn, consult Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, the Farm Subsidies Database at [www.ewg.org/farm](http://www.ewg.org/farm), or [www.kingcorn.net](http://www.kingcorn.net).

## **Corn by the Numbers**

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### **On the farm...**

Number of acres planted in corn in the U.S. in 1970<sup>i</sup>: 66.9 million

Number of acres planted in 2004<sup>ii</sup>: 80.9 million

Number in 2007<sup>iii</sup>: 92.9 million

Percent change since 1970: +39

Number of acres planted in corn in Iowa in 1970<sup>iv</sup>: 10.8 million

Number of acres planted in 2007<sup>v</sup>: 14.3 million

Iowa's average yield, in bushels per acre, of corn in 1970: 86

Iowa's average yield, in bushels per acre, in 2007: 180

Percent change since 1970: +109

Number of acres planted in vegetables in the U.S. last year<sup>vi</sup>: 2 million

Number of acres planted in vegetables in Iowa last year<sup>vii</sup>: 2,800

Number of acres planted in sweet corn—for corn in the cob—in the U.S. last year<sup>viii</sup>: 253,500

Percentage of those acres that are in Florida, the number-one sweet-corn-growing state<sup>ix</sup>: 13

Rank of New York among top sweet-corn-growing states<sup>x</sup>: 3

Last year in which a record was set in the U.S. for corn production, in bushels<sup>xi</sup>: 2004

Percentage points by which 2007 corn production is projected to exceed that record<sup>xii</sup>: +10.6

Number of bushels to be harvested in 2007<sup>xiii</sup>: 13.1 billion

### **In your body:**

Rank of refined sugar, or sucrose, among most-used sweeteners in the U.S. in 1966<sup>xiv</sup>: 1

Rank in 2007: 2

Rank of high-fructose corn syrup in 2007: 1



Estimated percentage of high-fructose corn syrup consumed from beverages<sup>xv</sup>: 66  
Rank of soft drinks among top beverages consumed by Americans<sup>xvi</sup>: 1

Minimum percentage of a soda that is made up of high-fructose corn syrup<sup>xvii</sup>: 7  
Maximum percentage: 14  
Percentage by which high-fructose corn syrup is cheaper than sugar<sup>xviii</sup>: 60

Average, in pounds, of high-fructose corn syrup consumed by an American in 1970<sup>xix</sup>: 0.6  
Average, in pounds, consumed in 2000<sup>xx</sup>: 73.5

Size, in ounces, of McDonald's Supersize soda, discontinued in 2004: 42  
Size, in ounces, of McDonald's new extra-large soda, Hugo, introduced in 2007<sup>xxi</sup>: 42

Percentage of Americans categorized as overweight or obese in 1971<sup>xxii</sup>: 47.7  
Percentage in 2004<sup>xxiii</sup>: 66  
Percentage of American children categorized as overweight or obese in 1971<sup>xxiv</sup>: 4  
Percentage in 2004<sup>xxv</sup>: 17.5

#### **In our Wallets:**<sup>xxvi</sup>

Rank of Iowa among states receiving the most money in corn subsidies: 1  
Rank of New York: 16

Rank of corn growers among farmers receiving the most farm subsidies in Iowa: 1  
Rank of corn growers among farmers receiving the most farm subsidies in New York: 1

Amount, in dollars, that Iowa corn farmers received in subsidies, 2003-2005: 3.4 billion  
Amount that New York corn farmers received: 173 million  
Amount, in dollars, received by Floyd County, IA corn farmers, 2003-2005: 37.5 million  
Amount, in dollars, received by Greene, IA's top recipient of subsidies: 364,693

Number of farm subsidy recipients in Greene, Iowa: 317  
Population of Greene, Iowa: 1,015

Amount, in dollars, that the top 20% of subsidy recipients received, 2003-2005: 29.1 billion  
Amount, in dollars, that the remaining 80% of recipients received: 5.6 billion  
Amount, in dollars, received by the subsidy program's single top recipient: 7.9 million<sup>xxvii</sup>

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- vi USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Quick Stats, “U.S. & All States Data—Vegetables, 2006”.
- vii USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Quick Stats, “U.S. & All States Data—Vegetables, 2006”.
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- x USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Quick Stats, “U.S. & All States Data—Vegetables: Sweet Corn-Fresh, 2006”.
- xi USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, “USDA Forecasts Record-Setting Corn Crop for 2007,” August 10, 2007.
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- xiv Sally Squires, Washington Post, March 11, 2003, “Sweet but Not So Innocent?”
- xv George A Bray, Samara Joy Nielsen and Barry M Popkin, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 79, No. 4, 537-543, April 2004
- xvi American Beverage Association, “What America Drinks: Our Favorite Beverages—Total U.S. Beverage Consumption 2005”.
- xvii American Beverage Association, “What’s Inside Carbonated Soft Drinks,” 2007.
- xviii Business Week, April 2, 2007, “Will Soda Makers Shuck Corn for Sugar?”
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- xx George A Bray, et al, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 79, No. 4, 537-543, April 2004
- xxi Martin, Andrew, The New York Times, July 22, 2007, “Did McDonald’s Give In to Temptation?”
- xxii United States Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Health, United States, 2006, With Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans—Table 73: Overweight, obesity, and healthy weight among persons 20 years of age and over by sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin, and poverty level: United States, 1960-1962 through 2001-2004”, p. 287.
- xxiii United States Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Health, United States, 2006, With Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans—Table 73: Overweight, obesity, and healthy weight among persons 20 years of age and over by sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin, and poverty level: United States, 1960-1962 through 2001-2004”, p. 287.
- xxiv United States Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Health, United States, 2006, With Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans—Table 73: Overweight among children and adolescents 6-19 years of age by sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin, and poverty level: United States, 1963-1965 through 2001-2004”, p. 291.
- xxv United States Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Health, United States, 2006, With Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans—Table 73: Overweight among children and adolescents 6-19 years of age by sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin, and poverty level: United States, 1963-1965 through 2001-2004”, p. 291.
- xxvi Farm Subsidy Database, Environmental Working Group, 2007