

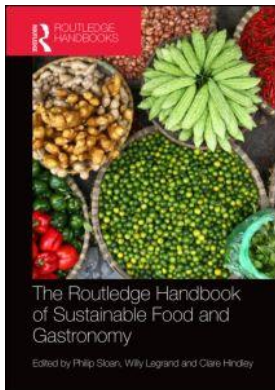
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3

‘SUSTAINABLE FOOD’: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT ANYWAY?

A personal commentary

Clare Hindley

It shouldn't be the consumer's responsibility to figure out what's cruel and what's kind, what's environmentally destructive and what's sustainable.

Jonathan Safran Foer, Eating Animals (Little, Brown and Company, 2009)

‘Sustainable’ and ‘food’ are well-established entries in a standard dictionary (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.), but ‘sustainable food’ has yet to earn its place. The combination of the two ideas is left to the individual. This could partly in itself offer the definition, as the consumer is indeed faced with a broad and sometimes unclear concept accompanied by a seemingly unending string of decisions and considerations when trying to consume and/or purchase sustainable food (Tobler et al., 2011). Certainly dictionaries play less of a role in defining each individual's world than the media and in fact our assessment of ‘sustainable’ and ‘food’ are both heavily influenced by our media consumption (Wansink and Sobal, 2007, Greenslade, 2011).

In 1980s London, being sustainable meant reading *The Guardian* newspaper, riding a bicycle, shopping at a wholefood (organic) shop and being vegetarian (Rieff, 2005; Robinson, 2010). Somehow, maybe apart from riding a bicycle and reading *The Guardian*, the items were not really separable. Wholefood shops did not really seem to stock much, if any, meat; organic intrinsically meant vegetarian. Choosing to be vegetarian meant an initial step towards rescuing mankind from its seemingly inevitable destruction of the planet, but was naturally also influenced by the desire to fit into the peer group of 20-somethings in London. There was a certain knowledge that destroying the rainforest, the Amazon in particular, meant eating tofu was better than eating meat, but the exact link wasn't spontaneously clear. Somehow it was connected to Live Aid and the knowledge that tofu rather than meat could ‘save the world’. Living in London also involved eating at Cranks and marvelling at what one could do without meat and with brown rice and lentils. The later demise of this extremely successful restaurant chain in London in 2001 with a concept referred to as ‘anachronistic’ (Pook, 2001) maybe showed that this image did stay stuck in the 1980s too long. What we never questioned was that the tofu had travelled halfway round the globe, presumably leaving its trail of transportation pollution, in contrast to some of the meat that was local produce. ‘Sustainability’ and ‘food miles’ had not yet become common parlance (McKie, 2008). Rye bread from Germany was simply perceived as more politically correct than the local baker's

produce. Organic carrots from Italy were undeniably more exotic and certainly more morally correct than non-organic carrots from down the road. Shunning the supermarkets was an integral part of seeking organic food as none or at least very few stocked organic produce. However, the belief in tofu was only carried out to the full by those who ‘went the whole way’ and became vegans. The majority were not really disciplined enough to renounce leather bags and shoes not to mention honey and milk chocolate. We all knew what ‘fruitarians’ were, had toyed with the idea, but knew problems would arise when we still wanted to go home to mum for some good home-cooking. We were aware of the food crisis with regard to certain African nations suffering from famine but the fact that supermarkets in the UK were already throwing away food simply because it was past its sell-by date or blemished had not seeped through yet (Rubin, 2002). The word ‘sustainable’ was not part of our vocabulary, but we were creating our own definitions of what later would be called sustainable.

These definitions and somewhat vague ideas were heavily influenced by particular concrete events. ‘Those years of the late 70s and early 80s [were] extraordinarily exciting. England was being convulsed by a social, cultural and political counter-revolution’ (Cowley, 2009). The decision to become vegetarian was not just a dietary decision; it was a clear political, social and moral positioning influenced by a desire to ‘react’. ‘For much of Britain, including London, the 1980s was a brutal decade of poverty and unemployment, to say nothing of strikes, riots and bombings’ (Harris, 2006). In 1980s UK there was definitely a lot to react to: Margaret Thatcher, the miners’ strike, the Falklands War, Brixton and Toxteth riots, IRA bombs, not to mention the more international concerns of Apartheid and Reagan’s Central American policies (a close ally of Thatcher). Of course, choosing to be vegetarian was not expected to change the political course of Britain, but it was a way of positioning ourselves and showing a willingness to take responsibility. In this whirlwind of social, cultural and political changes famine, music and fur stand out as particularly symbolic in the decision to be a 1980s (sustainable) vegetarian.

Famine was a concept everyone was conscious of, but it didn’t affect us directly until 13 July 1985. On this day nearly 2 billion people ‘woke up with one purpose. Nearly a third of humanity knew where they were going to be that day. Watching, listening to, attending: Live Aid’ (Jones in Bainbridge, 2013). ‘Live Aid was the day that pop stars started having to be role models’ (Bainbridge, 2013). Despite the fact that Live Aid was an initiative to raise money to alleviate the famine in Ethiopia, it provided the motivation to think about and review our own consumption. Linked to this was that eating less or, ideally, no meat could feed more people. The impact of Live Aid cannot be overstated and Dylan Jones (in Bainbridge 2013) refers to it as the time ‘when a nation’s attitudes and expectations were somehow captured and changed forever’. We watched, we sang, we donated and we took it upon ourselves to change the world.

Music was, of course not only Live Aid and the bands represented there. The 1980s saw the rise of many bands including the British band, The Smiths, with their ‘Meat is Murder’ single advocating vegetarianism. ‘Meat Is Murder’s sinister opening, full of strange noises that conjure up an abattoir, moves into a terrible, beautiful melody. “The carcass you carve with a smile, it is murder . . . And the turkey you festively slice, it is murder”’ (Viner, 2011). Morrissey, the lead singer, was very vocal about his vegetarianism and was renowned also for voicing his political beliefs. ‘Around the time of the release of Meat Is Murder, Morrissey’s interviews were becoming increasingly political as he trashed the Thatcher administration and campaigned for vegetarianism’ (Erlewine, n.d.). Thus the link between politics, music and diet was made.

The 1980s also saw the establishment of many animal rights initiatives. There was ‘a widespread shift in thinking about how we ought to treat animals. Britain . . . played an important

role in this area of . . . moral concern' (Singer, 2001). 'In the 1980s, experimentation on animals became a "hot topic" as cosmetics companies testing their products on animals suddenly became a big "no no" ' (Ethical Consumer, n.d.). The anti-fur campaigns, although not directly linked to vegetarianism, were part of the animal welfare movement. With slogans such as 'It takes up to 40 dumb animals to make a fur coat. But only one to wear it' (Lynx anti-fur poster, 1984) and posters showing animals caught in steel traps, the public was beginning to see fur in a new way (Anti-Fur Movement, 2012). 'The anti-fur organisation in 1985, enlist[ed] top models of the day, musicians and photographers to their cause with a series of high-profile adverts and publicity stunts [. . .] made not wearing fur trendy and [gave] pariah status to anyone who chose to ignore the message' (EADT, 2012). Such widespread campaigns and such a clear message left a lasting impression and were another building block in the creation of 'sustainability'.

These events, influences and personalities were a significant part of the formation of our individual ideals and beliefs. Human welfare issues, environmental concerns and even political opinions and musical tastes were relatively easily aligned. The path forward seemed clear. The question, however, arises as to whether this is simply a personal interpretation, a capital city issue, only the UK or possibly a wider European movement.

Education played no or a very limited role in developing our ideas. Girls still had home economics/domestic science as a compulsory school subject and certainly no one discussed where the food came from, the role of meat in our diet or the impact of our consumption on the environment. Working in a small town in southern Spain in the 1980s, vegetarian cuisine in restaurants meant accepting the meat casserole and simply taking the meat out. The only wholefood shop was a tiny room that closed during my stay. Germany, famous in the UK for the green movement, was not much different. Traditional cuisine amounted to variations of meat and two veg and the vegetarian option was simply two veg (Hughes, 2013). 'Until very recently chefs in Germany showed very little creativity in vegetarian cooking and the vegetarian option in restaurants amounted to very little more than a . . . vegetable plate, with or without egg' (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010: 118). However, the Bioladen (wholefood store) was already well-established with the same link to vegetarianism as in the UK, despite the fact that animal welfare was not as widely discussed.

Nowadays the millennials and generation Z face other challenges. It's simply not so easy to eat sustainably. Schools, at least in Germany, in subjects such as food science, economics, politics and social science deal specifically with related topics. Children aged 14–15 carry out projects on, among other things, sustainable winter sports, sustainable energy production, sustainable clothing production and sustainable food. Presentations are given, papers written and debates held to actively prepare and encourage pupils to make the decisions the twenty-first century demands. Even children's TV includes daily 'science' programmes discussing the same and more. The internet – well known for its easy access to information but also its inability to sort 'useful' from 'overload' and 'inaccurate' – provides another source of info inundating the (future) consumer with factors that 'should' all be part of the purchasing decision (Confino, 2010).

The result: a 15-year-old German standing in the local supermarket making a mature decision to act responsibly and put their understanding of sustainability into practice and asking simply: which product is more sustainable? The local carrots or the Israeli organic carrots? What matters most, the food miles, the organic product, fair trade or the support of the local producer? How can it be that the haricot beans are imported from Tanzania, doesn't Africa have a food shortage? Does purchasing the Tanzanian beans support the local community there; surely it is ridiculous to import beans from so far away when so many farmers in Germany

produce them? The issue is not helped by another customer saying that we should buy local produce to stop ‘all those foreigners stealing our jobs’. That doesn’t really support the first attempt at making a sustainable decision. The bananas are easier as thankfully there are no German bananas! However, there’s still the issue of organic bananas, non-organic bananas or non-organic/fair trade bananas. It’s best not to delve too deeply into the numerous discussions on how fair ‘fair trade’ actually is (Organic Consumers Association, 2005; Elliott, 2012). The confectionery section offers the next challenge, with the choice of organic, organic/fair trade, non-organic/fair trade or non-organic produce. Again a difficult decision – probably organic/fair trade means we’ve made the most sustainable decision, but in this case personal experience has established this particular chocolate doesn’t actually taste that good. Should the consumer forget their maturing culinary tastes and eat chocolate they don’t like just to be sustainable? The decision is not made easier by the fact that currently labelling is not the food industry’s most renowned trait and can we really believe what is in the product anyway? As Alan Reilly, chief executive of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, stated: ‘The most important ingredient in food is trust, and once consumers lose that, it takes a long time to get it back’ (Reilly, 2013).

The final criterion is then simply the ‘best before’ date, often seen as a line not to be crossed (Stillman, 2011). The media is awash with information on the global food crisis, but surely this means there isn’t enough food for the world, not that here in Europe people should maybe consider that the yoghurt they won’t touch because today is its sell-by-date will later the same day be on the mountain of ‘unwanted/unneeded’ food disposed of daily. Thank goodness the multi-buy, three for the price of two craze has not hit Germany yet. As once the initial purchasing frenzy is over it becomes clear that a two-person household doesn’t actually want three for the price of two – they want two, as otherwise the third will simply be thrown away (Smithers, 2013) and join the supermarket mountain. Does this mean, when confronted with bulk-buying offers, in order to be sustainable the menu for the week should already be clear to avoid overbuying? Thank goodness a 14–15-year-old does not have yet to take the price into consideration and ‘sustainable packaging’ will only be discussed in next term’s curriculum.

Despite my long career as a 1980s sustainable, organic, fair trade, bike-riding, *Guardian*-reading vegetarian, I can’t really help generation Z’s decision except to say that we had it easier. Maybe van Vark (2013b) is right in stressing that ‘Customers want food they can trust and expect retailers to do the ethical and environmental thinking for them’. For various reasons, the individual often does not want to tackle these decisions and the pressure is indeed on the retailers to do the ethical and environmental thinking for them. ‘For retailers, this mainstreaming of sustainability throughout the system will be a challenge [. . .], but it’s one they can’t shy away from’ (van Vark, 2013a). Even the individual who willingly faces the challenge of seeking out ‘sustainable food’ can be overwhelmed with the multitude of ethical and environmental issues involved.

Despite the dictionary’s difficulty with ‘sustainable food’, it does offer a definition of ‘food for thought’ defined as ‘something that warrants serious consideration’ – maybe this would be a suitable entry for ‘sustainable food’, just leaving it open to interpretation as to who is responsible for this ‘serious consideration’.

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