

Business Forum Report

Planet-friendly diets

The Food Ethics Council held an in-person Business Forum meeting on 4 June 2024 on the subject of planet-friendly diets. Speakers were **Chantelle Nicholson**, multi-award winning chef and owner of **Apricity Restaurant** in Mayfair, and **Ali Morpeth**, registered **nutritionist** and **consultant** on healthy and sustainable diets. Discussions were held under Chatham House rule, meaning that points remain anonymous and quotes are unattributed. The following report captures insights that were shared and discussed at these meetings.

What is the issue?

In 2019, the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health published what was mooted to be the first set of global scientific targets for healthy diets. It set out key environmental boundaries for food production, flagging the disproportionately large impact that food has on planetary boundaries. It was claimed that adopting such a 'Planetary Health Diet' would help avoid severe environmental degradation and prevent millions of premature adult deaths every year. However, it was also criticised, including by those who challenged the idea of a global reference diet, given the varied local and national contexts for our food.

There is an overwhelming scientific consensus, including from recent work from the IPCC, that dietary consumption patterns need to change in order to stave off climate and ecological collapse. At the same time, diet related ill-health is proliferating in the UK, with deep social and economic costs. According to a EPIC-Oxford study, people who closely followed the EAT-Lancet diet had a 28% lower risk of ischemic heart disease and a 59% lower risk of diabetes. The EAT-Lancet Commission's Summary Report also states that healthy diets from sustainable food systems could prevent 11–24% of adult deaths annually. During this Business Forum dinner, we collectively explored what shifts are needed by those working in the sector – from chefs to supermarket chief execs – as well as what policy environment would enable healthy, sustainable diets to flourish.

Why is change hard?

Behaviour change, as one participant expressed, is 'monumentally hard'. 99% of people do not currently eat in line with current public health guidelines, and the 'planet friendly diet' goes further than that. Similarly, 86% of people in the UK regularly eat meat; the EAT-Lancet Commission concludes there needs to be a greater than 50% reduction in global red-meat consumption to achieve a sustainable, healthy food system. However, there is a deeper issue at stake.

“We are talking about economics, and where the margin is... The whole industry is set up to sell processed food and that's what you have to do if you want a return. The economics are geared up totally for this.”

Are individuals wholly responsible for the dietary choices they make? Or should accountability be directed elsewhere? It was raised that 'food environments' are primarily what drive peoples' eating habits, and that advertisements, meal deals, end-of-aisle products and similar discount mechanisms promote poorly nutritious and unsustainably produced products. Many food environments are actually food deserts, with huge numbers of people living in areas with minimal or no access to fresh food. Ultimately, food environments are driven by profit rather than by environmental or public health concerns. Within a competitive industry, how can change happen?

Without a level playing field it is hard for businesses to make some of the changes they might like to. If one moved towards stocking only in season fresh fruit and veg, businesses believe that most customers would go down the road to the next supermarket. Regulatory measures would help to create more of a level playing field, however there was concern that this would have to be done very carefully so as not to end up being regressive and affecting people those on low incomes.

There are several considerations that must be taken into account with 'planet friendly diets'. They must minimise environmental harm, whilst maximising health gains, delivering on nutrition, and being affordable. The cultural appropriateness and accessibility of food is also crucial. Many people are overworked, caring for family members, with less time to cook and energy costs to consider. Disability justice is also an important lens: convenience is necessary for many people. Making progress against all of these considerations at once is a challenge.

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What are some leverage points for change? What alternative framings might help to shift things?

It was argued that almost always, food that is better for the planet is also better for the health of people. However, the story is often isolated, with many initiatives focusing on the single message of 'healthy eating' or 'sustainable food'. Instead, the two narratives should be drawn together. It was suggested that people really do care about health – more so than they do about sustainable or 'planet friendly' diets, which can feel abstract. One business owner noted that organic yoghurt sales are higher than ever, with the biggest sales being in natural, rather than fruit flavoured, yoghurt – they suggested that growing awareness around gut health could be responsible for this shift. Therefore, the message around health, wellbeing and nourishment could be a useful lever for simultaneously delivering ecological and climate objectives.

“Carbon tunnel vision is an issue. People get missed out of the sustainability conversation. We need to think about regenerating people. A happy workforce equals less strain on the NHS.”

There was disagreement among participants as to whether people do care about and make choices based on health outcomes. It was raised that only 1% of people are currently following public health guidelines; nutrition labelling appears to have made little different to the behaviour of those buying and eating the products. However, it is crucial to again illuminate the context in which people are living, shopping and eating. Food environments are geared toward unhealthy food, with junk food advertising often targeting young people and exploiting youth culture.

“We are constantly being nudged towards less healthy options, e.g. end of aisle offers. If better options are more available and obvious to us, it would change our behaviour.”

However, it was said that some businesses have tried to promote healthier products, and that this has not worked out.

One Business Forum member shared an example: their mince pies, which happened to be vegan, had always been a big seller. However, once they were labelled as 'vegan', sales fell through the floor. This speaks of how polarised and value-laden the issue has become. It was suggested again that health could provide a more unifying story – rather than leaning into sometimes polarising labels such as veganism and vegetarianism. Different, more nuanced stories should be told about products, centring on gut health or high fibre for example, rather than focusing on dietary labels.

Whilst individual cases and promotional experiments show varying levels of success, it is perhaps necessary to think more deeply and long term about behaviour change – considering culture, education, connection and experience. One participant mentioned culture:

“The demand is there if the culture supports it. I grew up in a culture where people cooked, and they wanted fresh fruit and veg, so there was a market that supplied those things.”

It was also noted that we should remember and centre the joy of eating well. Many campaigns forget this side of the story, with one participant stating that “the EAT-Lancet diet looks really sad on the plate. There is a lack of joy.” However, healthy and sustainable food can be joyful. The menu at Apricity Restaurant in Mayfair is 70% vegetarian, with just three meat options. 80% of the food is sourced from UK, including a lot of pulses and wholewheat sourced from Hodmedods.

“Pulses and legumes, marrowfat peas... they are incredibly joyful and incredibly cheap.”

Apricity take a 360-degree approach with circular supply chains. Rather than demanding things from suppliers, they ask 'what have you got?', and work with that. The plant-based tasting menu is priced the same as the meat one; ingredients are cheaper but labour costs are much higher, so overall costs are similar. Another Business Forum member shared that they have lots of non-meat options within their range, and that vegetarian lasagne is one of their best sellers. At the same time, margins on the vegetarian options are a little higher – so there is a

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financial incentive there for businesses. Reformulating and experimenting with hybrid products is worthwhile for some, for example by bulking up beef dishes with mushrooms.

“There is a sweet spot if you can find where the margins can be better as the taste improves.”

Education and access to good food via public procurement was agreed to be a big leverage point. It was said that the Chefs in Schools programme has been very effective in supporting the next generation to understand the value of nourishing food, as well as the joy and experience of cooking and eating well. School governors can play a role in getting Chefs in Schools into their institutions. One participant mentioned a successful [school food initiative in Hackney](#). There is evidence that the children's taste preferences are changing already, because of the early access they have had to good food. A case was also shared from New York, where they trialled [taking all meat off the menus in hospitals](#). People could still request meat, but it was said that they tended not to, “as the food was so tasty”.

“It starts with children. Where is the funding for teaching kids how to cook, vs ordering takeaway?”

However, it was also mentioned that widescale shifts in school meals are hampered by low budgets (which are increasingly being slashed), as well as low skills, allergy concerns around nuts, seeds and legumes, and concerns around waste. Public procurement does present a brilliant opportunity to both educate and connect people with good food; however, it needs more funding and policy support.

Finally, the ‘stick’ is just as important as the ‘carrot’. Food environments and supermarket priorities can be shifted via policy change. An example was shared of leveraging public planning laws to prevent industrially-produced meat being sold near schools.
