



food
ethics

The magazine of the Food Ethics Council

Catering for ethics?

The eating out guide

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Helen Crawley | Clare Devereux | George Lindars-Hammond | Mike Rayner

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The Food Ethics Council challenges government, business and the public to tackle ethical issues in food and farming, providing research, analysis and tools to help. The views of contributors to this magazine are not necessarily those of the Food Ethics Council or its members.

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Catering for ethics?

Tom Macmillan

Eating out is one of the trends most profoundly affecting the food system. In the UK, people now spend almost as much on eating out as on eating at home. In China, YUM! Brands alone, which owns KFC, now has a \$2 billion annual turnover.

Most of us know little about the industry that wields this influence but after Fast Food Nation, Supersize Me! and Jamie's School Dinners it would be nonsense to suggest catering is ignored. However it is often examined in isolation and left as little more than a footnote to analysis, policy and public outcry about the food system as a whole.

This edition of Food Ethics is devoted to putting that right – an eating-out guide with a difference. We have focused on catering but kept one eye on the rest of the sector, particularly on differences between the ethical challenges faced by caterers and grocery retailers.

We begin with an overview of the catering or 'food service' industry - its size, shape and diversity, and how major fast food companies and contract caterers have confronted or ignored issues ranging from animal welfare to healthy eating. The remainder of the magazine explores specific problems facing catering, and solutions to them, in greater depth.

There are two sets of problems: those to do with food and those to do with service. The food problems – how it is produced and what consuming it does to us and to our environment – echo those facing supermarkets. The problems related to service are more distinctive even though developments in retail – not least ready-made sandwiches and the supermarket café – are mingling the two sectors together.

The range of food problems in catering is much the same as for the rest of the food industry, including public health, environmental damage, animal welfare and the power they wield as bulk buyers. Yet there are differences on each of these counts. As Alan Maryon-Davis (p.9) reminds us, the foods we eat out of the home are on average fattier, saltier and more sugary than those we eat at home, and lower in fruit and vegetables. Neville Rigby (p.10) considers the effect this is having in middle- and low-income

countries, where fast food is expanding apace. Mass catering also comes with its own environmental challenges, not only in logistics, where food service prides itself on efficiency, but in things as simple as the conveyor belt that is stocked full all day, whether there is one person in a restaurant or one hundred (p.35 for Julia Hailes). The visibility, overt industrialisation and sheer volume of meat sold by fast food giants has made animal welfare a prominent issue for that part of the sector. And while the biggest caterers have less overall buying power than the biggest supermarkets, at least in the UK, that power is heavily focused on particular products.

Some problems, such as the pressures and fault-lines in accountability that have driven franchisees to exploit their workers, seem integral to the sector's economic success.

On top of these variants of familiar food issues, service comes with its own distinctive problems, both for the people doing the serving and for the consumers being served. The top 10 US fast food chains have over 5 million workers worldwide and, as Tony Royle (p 12) documents in depth, many are underpaid, overworked, at risk of injury and insecure.

For consumers, the key issues with service are transparency and choice. As Emma Roe (p.4) argues, it is in part because contract catering is shielded from the public's gaze, and information about nutrition and provenance is still rare on menus, that food service on the whole lags behind grocers in tackling environmental and social problems. Yet, as she also points out, consumers may be partly complicit, as many seem to "leave their ethics behind" when they eat out. Choice is also a mixed picture: caterers have come under fire on health grounds for supersizing portions, yet the brand trust and limited menu of a major chain like McDonald's places it well to 'edit' consumers choices in the wider public interest.

How to solve these problems? Michael Heasman (p.24) and Don Sloan (p.18) are confident corporate responsibility can go a long way, citing cases such as Bon Appétit, an impressive US offshoot of UK giant Compass, and McDonald's, which has won plaudits for improving its animal welfare and environmental standards. Yet the fact that McDonald's is also the focus of Tony Royle's hard-hitting critique hints at the limits of voluntary initiatives: some problems, such as the pressures and fault-lines in accountability that have driven franchisees to exploit their workers, seem integral to the sector's economic success. Those will only be solved by stronger government regulation.

The state's other main influence on catering, beside regulating, is as a major buyer and provider, to the tune of £2 billion a year in England alone. This summer's Food Matters report from the UK Cabinet Office reiterated government's need to get its own house in order. Jeanette Orrey (p.19) reports on St. Andrew's Primary School in Shifnal, one of hundreds of UK schools transforming their whole approach to food. For Helen Crawley (p.27), the priority for public health is tough, detailed nutrition-based standards for caterers, including clear and simple labelling.

In parallel to the top-down efforts of major caterers and government, communities are taking matters into their own hands. Clare Devereux (p.29) catalogues a host of inspiring grassroots projects including Brighton's 20/20 Café, based in a community mental health centre, which trains service users in catering to NVQ level and sells healthy, sustainable and affordable food into the bargain.

The prognosis? As people tighten their belts and purse-strings, some commentators envisage a shift towards more home-cooking, eating more veg and less meat, with benefits for health and for the planet: as The Times put it, 'Recession could work wonders for British diet'. But in the Summer '08 edition of Food Ethics, Adam Drenowski called this notion "the arrogance of privilege", arguing that "saving money on food translates into cheap empty calories and eating more... obesity is the toxic byproduct of economic distress". If fast food is as recession-proof as some pundits claim, Drenowski may sadly be proved right. ■

Ethical consumerism

How are caterers coping?



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It is widely recognised that ethical consumerism is driving some parts of the food retail market, as retail brands actively market products based on ethical credentials (whether Fairtrade, local food, organic food or improved animal welfare) to shoppers.

However, this active ethical consumerism is much less obvious in the behaviour of consumers when they eat outside the home. The catering industry argues that the majority of consumers are primarily driven by the taste of food, convenience and the service they receive when eating out; Mintel report that just 2% of respondents say they think through ethical considerations when deciding where to eat out.¹ For many, restaurant standards on issues such as the welfare of farm animals, local food, and Fairtrade are seen as an added bonus rather than essential criterion.

Despite this there are a number of examples of ethical food provisioning and the availability of ethical products in the catering sector. However, to identify the drivers for ethical provisioning we have to look further than the demands of restaurant, fast food or canteen customers. Why are people eating out? What does the global food catering industry look like? Who is interested in making 'ethics' more visible in the food service industry, and why? What types of food are more likely to be sold along 'ethical' lines? What counts as 'ethical' in the food service sector?

Eating out in the UK

People in the UK are increasingly eating their meals outside the home. The reasons are many – growing affluence, changing patterns of employment, changing food culture, the disappearance of the 'stay at home' mother, the marketing of 'convenience', the loss of cooking skills and so on. This shift towards eating out is not a uniquely British, European or even western phenomenon but one that is being repeated across much of the globe. For example in China fast food sales more than doubled between

1999 and 2005², with Western food chains like McDonald's, Pizza hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken arriving on the high streets of major Chinese cities.

In the UK people may go for a meal in a sit-down restaurant, grab some fast food or a takeaway, dine in hotels, have a meal over a drink in a pub or visit the canteen at work. These many opportunities to eat out are reflected in the size and shape of the UK catering market. The food service sector comprises all outlets involved in the "provision of meals out of the home"³, including restaurants, pubs and office canteens. In 2006, the Office of National Statistics announced that eating out expenditure had exceeded expenditure for food and drink in the home.⁴ The total food and drink industry, according to the Office of National Statistics Consumer Trends, is £172 billion per year; of this figure, £82 billion per year is national consumer expenditure on catering services.⁵ These figures include alcoholic beverages bought without a meal. This figure is significantly larger than a comparable estimate from the Expenditure and Food Survey which would have come in at £28.7 billion in 2004/5, including £5.4bn of snacks.⁶ And to complicate things further Horizons for Success, a market research agency, gives total food and drink sales (excluding drinks not served as part of a meal, and packaged snacks not sold with another item of food), across restaurants, fast food, pubs, hotels, leisure, staff catering, health care, education and the services for 2007, as £39.4 billion.⁷ The UK catering market in 2007 supported more than 110,000 companies, provided employment for about 1.8 million people and accounted for almost 10% of total UK household consumption expenditure.⁸ Small, independent companies dominate the sector; 88% have turnovers less than £500,000.⁹ Restaurants carry a third of this market, followed closely by fast food and takeaways, with food service management or contract catering at 12%.¹⁰

There is no clear definition of the food service and catering industry. It is either measured as part of the food and drink market or as a component of the hospitality market, in which case foreign tourists are also accounted for. Government statistics only include VAT registered businesses and some small firms in the food service sector may therefore not be accounted for. Equally, some statistical overviews include the education and health care sectors, whereas others don't. And where these sectors are included it is for non-residential catering services, not for residential catering services. Residential public and private institutions including schools, hospitals, prisons and the armed services may use private contract-catering services and are often excluded from statistics on the food service industry as they operate on a different commercial basis.

The global structure of the industry

Market analysts Keynote estimate that the global food service industry is dominated by the North American market, making up 40% of the £155bn total, followed by Europe and Asia with around 30% each.¹¹ The Chinese and Indian catering industries are huge and may exceed this percentage but they are hard to accurately account for. Around 45% of the foodservice market is outsourced to contract caterers (not fast food outlets, restaurants or pubs). However, the proportion varies from around 30% in Europe to 50% in other parts of the world, including North

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America.¹² Eastern European countries fall well below the 2006 European market average of 30%.

The contract catering industry has some very large global players; the largest are Compass Group PLC, Aramark Ltd and Sodexo. These global food service giants operate both in the private and public contract catering sectors, but their success in some national markets is restricted by national food cultures. For example in southern and eastern European countries, the contract-catering service is fragmented with a number of family-owned businesses¹³ operating in the public and private sector.

The size and scale of the restaurant and fast food sectors, country by country, can in part be explained by the tourism industry and in part by the percentage of household incomes spent on eating out. Countries like France, Spain and the US, which receive large numbers of international tourists also have larger restaurant and fast food sectors. Across the 27 European countries there are significant differences in household

spending on eating out; the European average is 5.1%, but this dips to 1.7% in Poland and rises to 9.4% in Malta.

Across Asia the fast food take-away food market is growing rapidly, especially sales of western food as young people are eager to try non-Asian cuisine. Fast food takeaway food is more popular in Asia than in Europe.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the introduction of this kind of food is thought to be leading to rising obesity figures across Asia.¹⁵

As one would expect from such a diverse sector, the different supply networks behind the scenes are hugely complex and varied. This highly fragmented industry involves a complex network of abattoirs, food manufacturers, processors, wholesalers and distributors that operates alongside and, in some places, overlaps with the food supermarket retail supply networks. For example, the flank and forequarters of a beef carcass may be used to make beef-burgers for a fast food chain, whereas the other cuts may enter various prime, mince or processed

products in a supermarket retail chain. The food service industry, unlike the food retail industry, is not dominated by sales of branded packaged food products. In contrast, the food service or catering industry is characterised by the bulk purchase and movement of raw materials to be processed, cooked and prepared for immediate consumption, or for meals/food products to be chilled or frozen for reheating in another venue at a different time closer to the intended consumer. Where ethical food produce is introduced into a supply chain, such as free-range eggs, Freedom Food chicken or Rainforest Alliance orange juice, this difference has to be preserved through bulk purchasing and processing systems for eggs, chicken or orange juice.

Ethical market

Over the last decade, the size and scope of the food retail markets for locally produced, seasonal, organic produce, farm animal welfare, non-GM, sustainable farming practices and so on has increased markedly with rising public awareness and concern over



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these issues as well as increasing affluence and active marketing of products along these lines.

But, in general, it would be fair to say that the catering industry is a long way behind food retail in addressing these issues, in terms of what is available to consumers at the point of purchase. This can partly be explained by consumer behaviour. As both the academic and marketing literature point out, people tend to 'leave their ethics behind' when they go out to eat. The issue of labelling ethical products is also transformed when a food item is sold through a menu, as opposed to on a retail shelf. Currently, there is no regulatory push, and only a light marketing pull to make explicit the attributes of produce, whether about its provenance, nutritional value, traceability or production system.

Historically, the catering industry has had little interest in marketing the implicit quality attributes of the food they serve. However, recently there has been a noticeable trend towards 'local', seasonal food on the menu, within catering (especially high-end restaurants) and contract catering (school meals being the most dynamic sector). Additionally, the use of specific logos on menus that indicate some ethical status is increasingly evident in a range of eating establishments, perhaps most notably in the branded chain restaurants, pubs and, cafes. The Fairtrade logo and the Rainforest Alliance logo have a growing presence in high-street and in-house branded catering outlets.

Brands drive ethical food provisioning

Recent evidence indicates that the biggest initiatives towards ethical provisioning in the UK food service sector are in three areas. First, the activities of global food service/restaurant companies; second the promotional activities of ethical certifying bodies; and third, the demands that private and public institutional customers place on contract catering firms for particular types of ethical provisioning. These initiatives are not a direct response to individual consumer behaviour, but can

be understood as driven by the corporate social responsibility agendas of the public institutions and private sector companies involved, who are eager to be seen to address ethical values.¹⁶

As we'll see in later articles, leading global fast food brands like McDonald's are taking the lead in setting corporate social responsibility targets that they hope will, on the one hand, spare them the negative publicity of media 'exposés' and on the other, add value to

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their brand by positioning it to attract a consumer base interested in ethical brand values. McDonald's received sustained attack in the 1990s following the McLibel trial. Its response has been to push forward ethical provisioning policies as a matter of priority in some parts of its global food operations. McDonald's UK, closely followed by McDonald's Europe is leading the way. In the UK all fresh milk is organic, all coffee is Rainforest Alliance, and all eggs are free-range across the full-range of meal options and condiments.

One of the challenges for McDonald's in making these changes to their provisioning policy is the careful promotion of them so they don't deter consumers who are attracted to their cheap and fun brand values. Therefore the shift to all organic milk is subtly marketed in stores, so some consumers need not feel anxious that they are paying extra, which McDonald's deny, for something they feel they can't afford.

In the past ten years, the organisations that certify the industry according to specific ethical criteria have themselves become important drivers in developing a market for their labelled products. Perhaps the most successful is the uptake of fair-trade coffee in the food service sector.

The Fairtrade Foundation made a decision to bypass the individual consumer and instead target public and private institutions directly¹⁷; in other words, they've gone direct to the bulk buyers of coffee with influence over a large number of consumers. Although the Fairtrade Foundation has a low marketing budget, this tactic has seen them harness the influence of local authorities, corporate food businesses, and increase the availability and size of the fairtrade coffee market.

The third area where we see brands driving ethical provisioning is in the demands made by public or private institutional customers to their in-house contract-caterers. Compass Group PLC, a UK company with global operations, and the largest market share in the UK, will, at a price, meet any specific ethical requirements that a customer demands for their menu.

A good example of this is the Google UK headquarters in London, whose in-house restaurant is run by a subsidiary of the Compass Group. They procure food that is as far as possible local, seasonal and meets a high standard of animal welfare. Although Google is fairly unusual in seeing food service as an asset rather than a cost to their business (and is thus willing to pay for higher standards), businesses are increasingly seeing food service as falling within their broader corporate social responsibility, in particular with regard to the working environment they provide their staff.

Constraints to ethical provisioning

As well as consumers' general lack of interest in ethical issues when eating out, there are other important barriers to the development of an 'ethical' market within food service. Uniformity

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and consistency of product is something that the catering industry values highly. To repeatedly be able to offer the same quality eating experience – taste, texture, colour, smell – is something prized above nearly everything else. With this requirement comes a sourcing challenge that clashes with ethical provisioning aspirations. How do you consistently get a steak that fits comfortably on a standard dinner plate from the 'local' UK national beef herd all through the year? Seasonality and the size and shape of breeds adapted for different landscapes make this impossible to achieve and places food service procurement at odds with some ethical aspirations.

Healthy eating

Aside from the supply-side ethical provisioning, there has been an increased desire in both the public and private catering industries to engage responsibly with the sugar and fat content of meals and food products as a reaction to public concern about rising levels of obesity and heart disease in the UK. The UK government has urged the food industry to play a more positive role in encouraging healthy eating. Well-known fast food brands such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken are often seen as the epitome of unhealthy eating, following negative publicity inspired by the release of the Morgan Spurlock's film *Super Size Me* (2004) and Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* (2002). In response, these restaurant chains have expanded their product ranges to include 'healthy' options, as well as lowering the salt and fat content of existing products, to win back consumer confidence.

These concerns have steered UK consumers towards newer brands such as Nando's, Pret a Manger and Eat, who have capitalised on the demand for fresh and healthy meals.¹⁸ The public catering sector in the UK, most particularly the school meals sector, has undergone considerable public scrutiny, which has led to increased regulation of the nutritional content of meals provided to school children.¹⁹

Employment conditions

The global food industry often receives negative publicity for its employment conditions. For the catering industry not only is criticism made about the pay and conditions on farms and in food-processing factories, but also in fast food and restaurant chains. Ethical concern about employment conditions for

Different policies operate within chains operated by the same parent company

service staff extends from protest about fair pay to the mundane, boring, routine drive labour for an un-unionised workforce.²⁰

The most recent revelation in the UK is the widespread use of below minimum wage pay for waiting staff, whose pay is topped up with tips. It was recently reported that the Loch Fyne restaurant chain, which makes claims about its ethical provisioning, adopts this practice.²¹ Its defence is that it is following the policy of the parent company Greene King.²² Perhaps this example indicates that

different product provisioning policies operate within chains operated by the same parent company; no doubt this is done with the intent to create unique selling points for branded restaurants. However, employment policy differentiation is yet to accompany this strategy of differentiation; it is not yet valued as a unique selling point by the food service industry.

The efforts of the food service industry to make more routine human interaction, through managing customers' and workers' behaviour and emotional response, violates some important cultural standards about the status of the self that honours authenticity, autonomy, sincerity and individuality.²³

Communicating 'ethics' in the food service sector

There is a range of ethical concerns in the food-catering sector from the healthiness of food and the sourcing policy of food to the employment conditions of those working in the industry. The industry's response to ethical criticism is highly variable and also extraordinarily fragmented because of the structure of the industry. Consequently, it is hard for studies to always be able to trace and account for ethical practices when they are taking place. Consumers who want ethical transparency when eating



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out may often be frustrated because the regulated use of product-package labelling – a popular approach for informing about the quality of food – works much less effectively in a sector where food is often served as a meal with no quality descriptors.

However, there is an increasing number of eating establishments that are actively choosing to market components of meals using terms associated with ethical food choices such as organic, local, sustainable, free-range, Fairtrade or low fat. Publicly recognisable logos of ethical bodies or food quality standards may also be used on menus to support these claims. However menus carry nothing like the nutritional breakdown that product packaging carries.

What is striking about this industry is that the huge buying power of some of the food service companies operating in the fast food sector, and the institutions, companies and firms that use contract-caterers, can have remarkable leverage within the food industry to continue the support and development of more ethical food products.

However, many of those companies are choosing not to wield that power and are, instead, supporting poor ethical practice around the globe through the food served in in-house canteens and high streets from London to Lahore. The sad truth is that bulk buying products more often than not tends towards the lowest common denominator. ■

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How healthy is eating out?

Encouraging sensible eating practices must be a priority for the catering industry



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Despite the wobbles of the credit crunch, the catering sector is still riding on the crest of a wave. The trend towards gastropubs, café culture, the humble sandwich and our perennial love of burgers, fish and chips and other takeaways, has led to a tripling of eating-out sales over the past 25 years. In 2004, spending on eating out overtook spending on eating in – and continues to rise.

The government's Family Food Survey has found that about one-third of the average family's food budget now goes on eating out. And the British Hospitality Association estimates that over one billion meals each year are provided by schools, hospitals and other parts of the public sector. The shift to eating outside the home amounts to a huge social change in the way we eat and in what we increasingly are putting down our throats.

What does this revolution mean for the health of the nation? Is the swing to eating out bad news for our waistline, arteries, heart and bowels? Are our burger-besotted kids doomed? Does fast food spell a fast-track to the graveyard?

These are not easy questions to answer – not least because of the sheer diversity of the eating-out market. For one person it might mean a deep-fried takeaway twice a day, every day. For another it could mean a healthy sandwich or salad mix for lunch during the working week. For a third, it might simply amount to an occasional pub meal or visit to a restaurant. And for a fourth, whatever's being offered in the staff canteen. But it's hard to get a handle on who's eating what. Sales figures give only crude information about the types of food or meals purchased. And market research reveals only a little more about what sorts of people choose what sorts of foods, how often and why.

Nevertheless, a pattern is emerging. According to the Food Standards Agency, taken as a whole, the foods we eat out of home are on average higher in fat, saturates, salt and sugar, and lower in fruit and vegetables, than the foods we eat at home.

This seems to be because of the continuing preponderance of fast food outlets, where frying is the order of the day. Furthermore, there seems to be a strong class gradient in the type of food that's habitually eaten out. People in poorer socio-economic circumstances, particularly those in so-called manual occupational groups, tend to eat more of the less healthy foods. This may be true of the food they consume at home too – but now that eating out has become the norm, the health impact of this social trend is even more important. It is bound to contribute to the inequalities in health that are all too apparent between the haves and the have-nots in our society.

The foods we eat out of home are on average higher in fat, saturates, salt and sugar

Foods (and drinks) high in fat or sugar are packed with calories and tip the scales towards obesity, making the UK the overweight capital of Europe and leading to dire warnings of a diabetes 'epidemic'. Fats, especially saturated fats, found mostly in meat and dairy products, add to the risk of coronary heart disease. Too much salt in our food can push up our blood pressure and increase our risk of stroke and chronic kidney failure, as well as heart disease. And diets high in red meat are associated with a higher risk of bowel cancer, as are diets low in fruit and veg. Most of these health problems are more common among the less well off and there's a real concern that part of the reason is their choice of foods when eating out.

So how can we encourage people to go for healthier options? Price,

convenience, flavour, availability, habit, peer pressure, advertising – all play a key part – but, as far as eating out is concerned, often there's very little real nutritional choice. Yes, the catering trade has to respond to popular demand – and if people want deep-fried sausages and chips, that's what they'll get. But caterers and food outlets can do much to nudge the market in a healthier direction as well as cashing in on the healthy eating boom.

Offering a wider choice, including interesting salads, lightly cooked vegetables and fresh fruit would be a good start. Using less fat, salt and sugar in cooking; grilling or baking (not frying); and switching to polyunsaturated cooking oils would help too. And then there's labelling. According to a recent survey by the Food Standards Agency, two-thirds of people want restaurants, pubs and cafes to display nutritional information on menus and point-of-sale signs, and the FSA is developing a standardised national scheme to satisfy this demand.

As a public health doctor concerned about health inequalities I would very much welcome all these initiatives. Yes, I know the larger contract caterers have been heading in this direction for some time. But our high street outlets should respond too. And if they leave it too long they'll start losing their customers. ■



Fast food in the developing world

Globalisation on the menu

When eight-times Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps took part in a PR stunt in a Beijing McDonald's this summer, he attracted a throng of enthusiastic young Chinese fans. It was just one of several crowd-pulling appearances the swimmer made as 'global ambassador' for the company's Champion Kids programme.

The focus was meant to be on the Olympics, now heavily sponsored by McDonald's alongside Coca Cola and VISA, but it was the company's rapidly expanding presence in China that was even more remarkable.

The first McDonald's 'drive-thru' opened in Beijing at the beginning of 2007, and the restaurant where Phelps put in his appearance was the 16th 'drive thru' to open in China at a time when the company had just announced a deal to open 30 more. And this in turn heralded a plan to roll out hundreds more conventional outlets to its then 900-strong chain in the world's largest growing economy. What McDonald's triumphal partnering of the Beijing Olympics so starkly illustrated was that the fast food revolution still taking place in China was no overnight business coup, but the culmination of long term strategic planning – and not just in the boardroom of McDonald's.

The notion that any of the big fast food brands should become the most visible flag bearers for globalisation in China might easily have been scoffed at just a quarter of a century ago. Now China is an economic powerhouse leading the vanguard of so-called developing countries that have thrown open their doors to the western fast food icons. Some, including China, are realising a little late in the game, that having to cope with the resultant upsurge in the 'diseases of globalisation' is an inevitability that will severely hamper their development.

When the door was first flung open to Western companies over 20 years ago, PepsiCo introduced the first Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet to Beijing. This KFC operation, now part of YUM! Brands, was several steps

ahead of McDonald's and can now boast a US\$2 billion annual turnover in China, providing one fifth of the conglomerate's global revenue (and accounting for almost one quarter of its global net profit). This figure is set to double within 10 years, according to the China Economic Review last September, unveiling YUM! plans to open more than 20,000 restaurants across China.

YUM! had a head start in China by being the first to market, and because there was a ready supply of chickens. But China's traditional agricultural infrastructure presented a real challenge to McDonald's, which needed to develop a supply strategy from scratch in a country where beef was rare, and to shift cultural attitudes to embrace the American burger culture before it was formally branded by Eric Schlosser's exposé, *Fast Food Nation*.

McDonald's might still have been struggling to construct a supply chain but for the timely intervention of the World Bank, which 10 years ago offered China the prospect of a US\$93 million loan to develop its sparse livestock and meat processing sector, thus paving the way for a fast food explosion.

The manoeuvre did not go entirely unnoticed, with Neal Barnard founding president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine in the USA, protesting to the New York Times in 1999 that while smart Americans were recognising the need to "Easternise" their diets, "World Bank bureaucrats decided to promote a Westernisation of China's diet".

Barnard observed:

"Of course, the World Bank's efforts to promote cattle farming in China are concerned less with good health than with economic investment. No doubt some cattle ranchers will profit, as they edge out vegetable and rice acreage. But why is the World Bank, so roundly criticised over the years for its self-defeating economic development schemes, falling into the same old trap?"

Neville Rigby

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The remarkable rise of fast food sales with little underlying core consumer demand, and the future projections of a massive increase in the proliferation of western fast food catering to the world's largest country, stand testimony to long-range market planning and well established collaborative processes. These underpin a strategy of international economic development which serves to wean the Chinese (and particularly their children as potential lifetime consumers) away from their traditional and previously relatively healthy dietary standards towards an acquired taste for western junk food.

The market expansion of McDonald's across Asia is illustrated in the following table shown on the next page.

Researchers see it as no coincidence that access to fast food is one of the key factors driving up obesity rates, particularly where the concentration of fast food outlets in more deprived areas reflects the limited alternatives available. In China the impact of changing diet is tangible, with consumption shifting from a plant-based to an animal-based diet with a remarkable increase in fat intake. Prof Chen Chunming, founding president of the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, reported to a symposium 10 years ago that the fat intake of teenage boys in cities had soared from 17% to 30% of their total energy consumed.

Nevertheless nutrition experts in China and India still consider the nutrition

Fast food in the developing world

The number of fast food chains in Asia/Pacific: The case of McDonald's near 2000

	1980	1990	2000	2002
Asia/Pacific				
Japan	800	2000	3714	3881
Australia	200	600	711	720
Taiwan	10	200	741	790
China	0	100	300	600
Philippines	10	100	1000	1000
South Korea	0	100	300	300
Malaysia	0	100	100	100
Other	10	100	100	100
Total Asia/Pacific	100	3000	6000	7000
USA	1000	1000	1000	1000
Europe	100	1000	1000	1000
Latin America	0	100	1000	1000
World Other	100	1000	1000	1000
Global Total	1000	3000	7000	10000

Source: McDonald's Corporation, Annual Reports, available in August 2004

transition taking place to be in its first phase, with the adverse impact of westernized fast food outlets affecting a comparatively affluent elite to date. However, the transition in Latin America is considered to have shifted, with aspirational consumption of iconic fast food brands in countries such as Brazil now disproportionately affecting teenagers in lower socio-economic status groups.

Talking to Prof Chen Chunming during a McGill University childhood obesity think tank in Montreal recently, she told me that western fast food restaurants in China were still considered an expensive and an occasional treat; but she was concerned that the pattern would change towards cheaper fast food consumed more frequently, thus exacerbating rising childhood obesity. She felt that street hawkers selling traditional Chinese foods should also be seen as also a source of concern, including the commonly consumed 'you tiao' – something like a deep-fried bread stick.

China is now struggling to work out what to do, as overweight and obesity rates have skyrocketed to affect 280 million Chinese men, women and children. The WHO warned several years ago that obesity-related chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart

disease would impose a huge burden on the health system and put a brake on economic development.

Overweight and obesity rates have skyrocketed to affect 280 million Chinese men, women and children

In India, leading paediatrician Prof Narendra K. Arora, executive director of the International Clinical Epidemiology Network (INCLEN) in New Delhi, believed it was too early to consider the impact of the limited number of Western fast food outlets, and in his view some traditional Indian fast food offerings were also contributing to the obesity problem now becoming apparent in around 15% of pupils attending in private schools in cities.

Travelling in many developing countries I have noted the proliferation not only of golden arches but many clones and emulators of fast food

culture. McDonald's has more than 31,000 outlets around the world, but it is the broader westernization that is surprising. Even Iran – a country supposedly insulated to American influence through economic blockage – has created its own alternative burger and cola culture and consequently has urban obesity rates that match or exceed some of those found in the USA and Europe.

During a visit to Islamabad, an unscheduled spot of lunch one day led not to a classic Pakistani meal but a soggy pizza in a westernised local 'modern restaurant'. Strolling through downtown Santiago earlier this year en route to a health ministry meeting to discuss the need for greater protection for children from fairly ubiquitous and intense fast food marketing, it was clear that millions had been invested extending burger chains' networks across a country struggling to find ways to deal with childhood obesity that goes hand in hand with nutritional deficiencies.

It isn't difficult for hard-nosed US executives accustomed to the hard sell to promote fast food investment to many governments. Fast food restaurants offer a symbol of economic progress and western investment. The clientele passing under the golden arches in Moscow are a more affluent group because its prices are at a premium. The prices in Beijing are still beyond the reach of the masses.

The jobs created in fast food restaurants offer neither a route to riches nor long term security. The economic 'benefits' may actually present a poor trade-off by diminishing traditional market opportunities, introducing absurd examples of superfluous food miles – such as China having to import McDonald's French fries from the USA – tilting the balance against local agriculture and locking development into an energy-inefficient Western model that is redundant if we are ever to tackle climate change, energy conservation and rational use of resources. ■



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What's the beef with fast food?

Fast food: success and criticism

Whilst many of us may be concerned about the implications of the current global financial crisis, most financial analysts suggest that multinational fast food giants will actually benefit as consumers 'trade down' their eating habits to save money, and increasing unemployment encourages more people to consider jobs in the industry.¹ The mostly US-owned brands such as McDonald's, Burger King, KFC and Pizza Hut, still dominate this important global industry. The top 10 US fast food chains have a combined turnover of over \$100 billion and employ over 5 million workers in over 110,000 units worldwide; the US fast food industry alone is expected to increase the number of jobs on offer by about 17% in the next ten years.² Their impact on employment in their manufacturing and agricultural suppliers should also not be underestimated, as recent cases involving US agricultural workers and Chinese plastic toy workers suggests.³

The leader of the pack: McDonald's

McDonald's is probably the best known of these brands; having developed many aspects of the modern fast food industry in the 1940s and 50s. It is also the main focus of this article, which is based on an ongoing 15 year international research study of the corporation and some of its main competitors. McDonald's is not only the market leader in most national economies where it operates, but continues to be the most successful: in 2007, McDonald's return on equity was 26%, more than double the industry average of 10%, its 2007 sales turnover was \$23 billion and there is growing evidence that McDonald's is seen as the fast food model for others to emulate.⁴ McDonald's employs over 1.6 million people in 31,377 outlets, up from 31,108 in 2002.⁵ Despite this success, McDonald's has often been the focus of much that it is perceived to be wrong with this industry. In the late 1990s for example, it was embroiled in the longest ever running UK civil court case – 'McLibel' – with two unemployed

greenpeace activists; there have been 'slow food' campaigns, notably in France and Italy, BSE and E-coli scares and obesity concerns with films such as *Supersize Me*. Following some of these scares McDonald's made its first ever loss in 2002,⁶ but rebounded in 2003 with a new global marketing campaign, 'I'm loving it'. Although growth has slowed, McDonald's along with other fast food chains continues to expand abroad; fast food sales for all chains in China doubled between 1999 and 2005 and McDonald's plans to open 125 new stores in China in 2008.

Focus on employment

Although there has been considerable media attention paid to the food and its health implications, and the sustainability of the production system, much less attention has been paid to the pay and working conditions in the industry. This is not that surprising, as acquiring facts about employment in fast food is not straightforward and, with their vast media spending, fast food companies have put a lot of effort into portraying themselves as good employers. McDonald's alone spends over \$2 billion per annum on advertising and claims "...the highest possible ethical standards..." and that "...employees are respected and valued".⁷ McDonald's is keen to emphasize the 'fun' aspect of working in restaurants and claims to provide many other positive benefits such as: pension scheme, paid holidays, company cars, sick pay, stock options, share purchase schemes, telephone assistance, clothing allowance, training and education and prospects for advancement. However, in recent years McDonald's and other fast food employers have become increasingly concerned about recruitment. In the USA in particular, McDonald's launched an aggressive recruiting campaign in May 2007 in the face of a considerable reduction in the numbers of young workers applying for their jobs and jobs in the fast food industry more generally.⁸ Could it be that working in fast food is not quite as much 'fun' as some employers would

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have us believe? What are the majority of fast food jobs really like?

Employee hierarchy, organisational structure and labour turnover

It is important to note that 90-95% of all employees at McDonald's are employed on hourly paid contracts and this includes some restaurant management grades e.g. floor, shift or swing 'managers'. This kind of arrangement is typical for the US fast food chains more generally. In a typical McDonald's outlet for example, with about 50 employees, there are usually only three or four salaried staff – the assistant managers and the store manager. Another important point to bear in mind is that fast food chains like McDonald's often use a combination of directly-owned stores, franchise stores and, in some cases, stores operated through holding companies or joint ventures. These arrangements vary from one country to another, but format franchises are a common feature. At McDonald's the proportion of franchise stores in some countries is higher than others, but the average worldwide is around 75%. However, in nearly every case McDonald's corporate centre retains extensive and tight control over these operations, so that franchisees, although motivated by profits, are more like employees. They have little say over most parts of the operation, with targets on sales and labour costs monitored and set by the Corporation. This high level of control can be seen as one of the reasons for the success of

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the Corporation, ensuring a high level of uniformity of the system across national borders.⁹ This has also caused problems for the Corporation: there has been a history of franchisee unrest,¹⁰ with some franchisees complaining that targets are too tight and royalties on sales too high, and the accusation that McDonald's is sometimes willing to cannibalise its own system to make sales targets.¹¹ This situation inevitably tends to put more downward pressure on labour costs and working conditions. In this context it is hardly surprising that labour turnover in the industry is extremely high. In the USA, average labour turnover in the industry is 150% per annum; at McDonald's, although it varies across countries and outlets, it has been known to reach 300% per annum for crew employees.¹²

Pay and benefits

Ray Kroc is credited with creating the modern McDonald's Corporation in 1955. He set up the franchise system and bought out the McDonald's brothers in 1961. As the official biography of the Corporation points out, Ray Kroc's vision for the organisation and his 'Krocisms' still affect the outlook of most McDonald's managers.¹³ In his own autobiography *Grinding It Out*, Kroc states: "We sold them a dream and paid them as little as possible".¹⁴ In that vein it is perhaps not surprising to discover that benefits such as company cars and stock options are predominantly for those in salaried or more senior positions, and even where benefits could apply to hourly-paid workers, they usually only apply after several months or years of service, which due to high labour turnover, means that few workers ever get substantial benefits.

The situation with pay is no different, in most countries there are massive pay differentials between those at the top and the bottom of the company. The top US McDonald's executives continue to earn as much 150-300 times that of the new hourly-paid US McDonald's employee.¹⁵ Large fast food chains usually pay just above the minimum

wage for new employees; again few earn significantly more than this as labour turnover is so high. Those hourly-paid employees that remain in employment for six months or more may earn a few cents or pence per hour extra, for very good or exceptional performance, depending on the manager's judgement. Or if employed for longer they may get a promotion to training squad/crew trainer and later floor manager with a higher rate, but this also comes with a lot more pressure and responsibility.

In many countries it is still common practice for fast food workers to be asked to compete in all-night cleaning 'parties', which are often unpaid

It is interesting to note that the Judge in the McLibel case (Mr. Justice Bell) determined that: "...the British McDonald's operation pays low wages and it depresses wages for other workers in the industry".¹⁶ In the USA McDonald's also pays lower wages than some regional and international chains such as Starbucks.¹⁷

Since the late 1990s, hourly-paid fast food wages in most countries have barely moved with inflation. Only in some mainland European countries, where trade unions have been strong enough to 'persuade' McDonald's and other fast food chains into accepting collective agreements (e.g. Norway, Sweden, Denmark), have basic starting wages been significantly improved on.¹⁸ In the USA, the fast food industry pays more minimum wages than any other industry.¹⁹ The minimum wage issue is further exacerbated by youth and 'apprenticeship' rates which are found in a number of countries.²⁰

Unpaid and long hours

But low pay is not the only issue. 'Off-the-clock' work – that is working through breaks, working before shifts start or after they finish, waiting in rest areas and clocking on when the restaurant is busy, clocking off when it is not – is a practice which has been common in the big fast food chains and was firmly condemned in the McLibel trial. One extreme case in the UK in 1985 involved one employee being sent home from Burger King with just £1 after spending most of the day in the changing rooms. In North America this kind of problem is endemic.²¹

In many countries it is still common practice for fast food workers to be asked to compete in all-night cleaning 'parties', which are often unpaid, go on until the early hours of the morning and offer prizes like cinema tickets for the 'best cleaners'. These big cleaning sessions usually take place before an important quality evaluation of stores by regional managers.

There are also many complaints from employees about miscalculations of holiday pay and sick pay and no or inadequate notice of shift changes. There is evidence that the scheduling of hours is sometimes used as a means to punish or reward hourly-paid employees to ensure compliant behaviour.²² There have also been cases at McDonald's where considerable pressure on reducing labour costs has led to some assistant restaurant managers – keen to impress their store manager with the lowest labour costs on their shifts – electronically adjust employees' clocking-in times to reduce the wage bill.²³

In December 2000, some 1,200 Italian workers walked out of 40 McDonald's stores to protest about working conditions and an intimidating work climate.²⁴ In Japan, in 2005, McDonald's was faced with paying back around \$18million to 130,000 restaurant employees after complaints about a clocking on system that automatically rounded down minutes worked by employees.²⁵

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Unpaid and long hours also affect salaried restaurant managers. For example, McDonald's salaried managers are paid for a 40-hour week, but they regularly work 50, 60 or 70 hour weeks and in many cases overtime is not paid – this appears to be common practice in many countries.²⁶ As recently as January 2008, a Tokyo District Court ruled that McDonald's should pay overtime to store managers and area managers. In August, McDonald's responded by introducing a new wage system in Japan, which for the first time included overtime pay; however, overall pay will not improve much as managers will also lose allowances under this new system.²⁷ Chronic under-manning in restaurants may have led to one extreme case in Yokohama, Japan in October 2007, when a 41 year old female McDonald's manager is alleged to have died from overwork after working a number of consecutive shifts without adequate breaks.²⁸

Careers, education and training

McDonald's frequently points out that

many managers and franchisees begin life as crew and therefore many are promoted into top jobs. Although employees can and are promoted through the system, the very high labour turnover levels mean that only a small fraction of employees ever get beyond the hourly-paid level. Secondly, it should be noted that all franchisees who buy into the company from the outside have to train as crew and managers for one year (unpaid) in order to qualify for a franchise, and many senior managers buy franchise outlets as a retirement 'nest egg'. McDonald's also argue that they provide significant education and training opportunities, but despite the various accreditations that McDonald's has acquired for some of its training, much of the education that is provided is very narrow and limited unless workers progress to the level of management. The majority of hourly-paid jobs are highly automated, de-skilled and routinized.²⁹

Working conditions

For the majority of employees, work in

the fast food industry is not only low-paid, low-skilled and fast-paced, but it can also be hazardous. Although McDonald's and other chains provide detailed handbooks on health and safety issues, fast food employees repeatedly complain about health and safety violations such as skin burns, which are a common problem in the industry,³⁰ slippery floors, inadequate ventilation (e.g. air conditioning turned off in hot kitchens to save money), no or inadequate safety clothing or gloves for working in freezers or dealing with hot oils and dangerous chemicals. In 1992, a McDonald's worker in Manchester was killed (electrocuted) by a faulty fat-filtering machine. A leaked McDonald's memo admitted that there had been several instances where employees received severe shocks from faulty equipment.³¹ In Russia, in the McDonald's McComplex Moscow food processing plant, workers complained of ear infections and one case of frost-bite due to working without adequate protective clothing in industrial freezers.³²

Acquiescent workers

A common assumption is that it is always the young who are employed as hourly-paid fast food workers. In Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, the US and Australia, young workers are very common but, in some other countries, more stringent legislation makes the employment of under-18s more difficult and costly. In practice, workforce characteristics in stores tend to be more mixed and usually reflect the local labour market, which result in a combination of different types of workers that may include some who have a poor educational record, economic migrants, university students, housewives and school students. The net result is an acquiescent workforce that is unlikely to question managerial prerogative regarding their employment rights and conditions, either through fear of management reprisals, a lack of interest or a lack of experience.

Economic migrants are increasingly an important pool of labour for the industry, often providing a wide range of experience and high working levels. Such migrants often have problems with the host country language and recognition of their qualifications, which means that finding better jobs for these employees is often difficult. There have also been a few cases where illegal immigrants have been employed.³³ In some of the worst excesses, in Germany, some migrant workers were almost constantly on-call, living in apartments owned by managers or the company and totally dependent on the corporation for their work permits.³⁴

In August 2002, the US State Department criticised McDonald's for exploiting foreign students. McDonald's recruited around 400 students, many from Poland and Slovakia as part of a government-sanctioned 'educational exchange' programme. These students worked at McDonald's and earned next to nothing. McDonald's was deducting the equivalent of \$2,000 per month rent for five students to share a two-

bedroom flat. The students were told that if they did not accept the rental agreement they would lose their jobs. Deductions were also made for Medicare and social security despite the fact that these students were legally exempt from such payments.³⁵

Grievance procedures

In theory, McDonald's has a number of mechanisms for workers to air their grievances (e.g. RAP sessions and suggestions schemes) but, in practice,

Work in the fast food industry is not only low-paid, low-skilled and fast-paced, but it can also be hazardous

managers are under much greater pressure to reduce costs than to act on worker's grievances.³⁶

In what appeared to be an attempt to undermine statutory works council rights in Germany³⁷ McDonald's Germany established their own McDonald's 'Ombudsman' in 2003 to deal with worker grievances. According to trade union officials at the German union (Nahrung Genuss Gaststätten) it was discovered that this individual was far from independent and was in fact the retired head of McDonald's Germany human resource management department.

Overall, the evidence suggests that fast food managers rarely respond to worker's complaints if this conflicts with sales and profitability, unless forced to do so by trade unions, where these exist, or bad publicity.³⁸

Trade union influence

Up until the 1990s McDonald's was outspokenly anti-union. For example,

McDonald's CEO in 1991 stated: "McDonald's is basically a non-union company and intends to stay that way".³⁹ In the USA up until the 1970s it routinely used lie-detector tests to weed out potential unionists, as a leaked memo from McDonald's top executives revealed at the time: "I think [the union] was effective in ...reaching the public with the information that we do use polygraph tests in a Gestapo-type manner".⁴⁰

After a number of bad publicity scares relating to anti-union activity, especially in Europe, McDonald's public statements on unions have become less adversarial and now usually proclaim that they are not against unions. However, the evidence suggests otherwise. Where McDonald's and other US fast food giants can avoid unions, they will do so. Many fast food workers complain of overly aggressive management, and there is no doubt that the worst cases of harassment and intimidation are reserved for those trying to form trade unions or assert their employment rights.

The last 40 years, since McDonald's began its overseas expansion, is littered with unionisation struggles many of which have failed or have had little effect on the business. The US-owned fast food chains are adept at using a variety of union-busting techniques, which usually involve a combination of legal action, flying squads of managers, buying out contracts and harassment and intimidation of union supporters, which the labour courts or similar bodies are often unable to address in any effective way.⁴¹ Such union-busting is a common feature of employment relations in the USA where it is estimated that, by the end of the 1980s, US employers were already spending some \$1 billion per annum on union-busting activity and the services of specialist union-busting law firms.⁴²

There have been a number of attempts to organise individual outlets in the USA and Canada, all of which eventually failed. The usual pattern is that a majority of employees in a store vote for union recognition yet, even if

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the labour court awards recognition it never translates into collective bargaining and within a few months of union-busting activity the unionisation attempt is finished.⁴³

In the UK, British unions do not have the resources to organise the big fast food chains and a similar story is found in most English-speaking countries including Australia and Ireland. Unions in New Zealand have had slightly more success: in 2000, McDonald's pragmatically accepted a collective agreement under labour reforms brought in by the then Labour Government but, by 2005, McDonald's was busy engaging the services of union-busting specialists Teesdale Associates to fight off a community-organised low pay campaign. New Zealand McDonald's workers have been involved in several strikes organised by the UNITE union in an attempt to

improve their low wages; in 2006 strikers were attempting to increase their wage from near the minimum adult wage of \$10.25 per hour to \$12. Despite getting an agreement with KFC and Pizza Hut, McDonald's only made an agreement after several months of conflict and, at the time of writing, McDonald's is once again trying to roll back these agreements.⁴⁴ A recent unionisation attempt in Japan has so far only enjoyed limited success, despite the direct support of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (RENGO).

Some mainland western European unions have so far, probably had more influence than elsewhere, due to a combination of more 'union-friendly' traditions and stronger labour legislation and/or stronger trade union movements. But across mainland Europe the picture is mixed with the

'union effect' varying in different countries. Even where collective agreements have been imposed, there is clear evidence that many outlets do not properly comply with the agreements. Fast food companies continue to avoid or undermine collective agreements and employment legislation; the battle between McDonald's and the German unions over statutory works councils rights is a good example of this.⁴⁵

The solution?

These outcomes are not that surprising; fast food companies are highly systematized and based on a low-cost model that appears to treat the majority of their workforces as exchangeable units of production. It is also a very competitive industry and labour costs represent some two-thirds



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of operating costs and margins are tight. But it is a profitable business model. Although some of the worst excesses appear to take place in franchise operations, this should not exonerate the large chains. Franchisees are under considerable pressure to meet the franchisor's sales targets and make profits and they also provide a convenient get-out clause for the franchisor concerned, making it easier for fast food chains to avoid unions and other national employment rights.

What is the solution? If national legislation is not adequate, is there likely to be any remedy at the supranational level? Probably not: European Union legislation, such as the 1994 European Works Council Directive, cannot be applied to employees in franchise outlets and even where it is applied to directly employed workers it has proved to be toothless in this industry.⁴⁶ Neither is there likely to be any remedy found in international law which is largely focused on trade, or the soft law of voluntary private codes of conduct such as corporate social responsibility. These corporate initiatives simply do not work for employees in the fast food industry, but are a useful PR weapon for large corporations hoping to silence NGOs and other commentators.

One obvious answer still lies at the national level. If governments are serious about tackling low pay then they will need to tackle industries like fast food. One obvious step would be stronger national *collective* labour law which could provide independent trade unions with more power to gain recognition and then negotiate, monitor and enforce collective agreements. It is probably no coincidence that countries with the strongest trade unions and more centralised collective bargaining systems tend to do most to improve basic pay and conditions in this industry, for example Denmark, Norway and Sweden.⁴⁷ However, increasing regulation in national employment systems to strengthen the position of unions would require a major shift in political will and the fast food

companies (and others) will lobby hard to stop this happening. Despite the catastrophic results of unfettered markets in the global banking system, economic liberalism and the deregulatory instinct, both in government thinking and in international institutions such as the IMF and WTO, are far from dead. As things stand trade unions will continue to face considerable difficulties in improving the lot of fast food workers, even in countries where their regulatory systems allows them to challenge such employers now. For the rest there appears to be no prospect of real improvement in wages and conditions for fast food workers in the near future. ■

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Business ethics

Good for competitive advantage and good for society



Donald Sloan

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Is it too much to hope that the current economic crisis will result in a fundamental reassessment of business ethics? It may well be, but as some shocking realities of unfettered capitalism hit home, surely it is time to pause, stand-back, and consider how we might create more responsible business models that have a sense of empathy at their core.

Whilst in a reflective mood, where better to start than with the foodservice management sector, the scale, reach and influence of which is immense. It plays a pivotal role in a complex food supply chain and, in doing so, may impact on the environment, health, human dignity, cultural identity and trading practices internationally. The sector has taken a barrage of criticism from some of our most vocal commentators, not only over perceptions of the quality of its products, but also for supposedly contributing to our dysfunctional relationship with food – a relationship characterised by the standardisation of taste, excessive consumption of pre-prepared dishes and lack of interest in the origin of ingredients. In short, the ethical credentials of foodservice management companies have been under fire.

Without succumbing to the hype, it is worth noting what can limit engagement with ethical agendas, not in foodservice management specifically, but more generally. A well-rehearsed suspicion is that a focus on ethics in the business community is sometimes a sham, driven by ego and a rather cynical desire to be associated with 'good causes' rather than by authentic concern for others. Even in circumstances in which commitments seem genuine, including to many of those professing them, they can stem from being caught on a wave of self-righteousness, rather than from anything more meaningful.

There are, of course, reasons for lack of engagement that do not speak so negatively of the human spirit. For example, it is understandable that on a topic so complex, confusion can

reign. It is difficult to prioritise ethical concerns, identify which codes of conduct are most appropriate and legitimate, and which agencies carry authority. Such confusion may justify avoidance, or at least an approach which is overly simplistic.

Despite such challenges, and contrary to popular criticism, it would seem that foodservice management companies are now prioritising ethical issues. A simple review of leading companies' websites reveals the extent to which issues such as environmental impact, sustainable procurement, fair trade and community engagement are now taking centre stage. In addition, work undertaken in 2006 by Oxford Brookes University's Centre for Environmental Studies in the Hospitality Industry resulted in the four largest contract caterers signing up to five principles on sustainable procurement which, if adhered to, represent a significant step forward. These were, to select food products from the country in which they are going to be offered; provide information about food provenance on menus so that consumers can make informed choices; avoid sourcing products that are damaging to human health or the environment; seek ways to adapt centralised purchasing and distribution systems which limit ability to source locally and seasonally; and reduce energy consumption and waste. Whilst such principles are not binding and there is still no compulsion to monitor practice or provide transparent reporting of progress, they do enable companies to better frame and communicate their achievements.

In the absence of legislation, and considering fundamental challenges to engagement, a pragmatic approach is required – one that establishes realistic ethical principles, provides accessible interpretations of complex ethical issues, defines priorities for the foodservice sector, examines changes in client demands and which ultimately helps to change business cultures.

To this end, Oxford Brookes University's Department of Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism Management is developing The Catering Forum, which will act as a hub for communication on matters relating to food ethics and corporate social responsibility more generally. Its launch, on 4th February 2009, will draw together foodservice management companies, representatives of major client organisations, policy makers and leading commentators, to agree a common agenda and goals. This initial event will incorporate presentations on factors in the external environment, such as rising food prices and human rights in the food chain, which are shaping ethical considerations. The Department will also oversee a new awards scheme for the foodservice management sector, designed to acknowledge and reward real achievements on ethical issues, focusing on waste minimisation, staff training, food procurement, carbon reduction and water management.

All such activity represents progress, but there are risks. We have all been witness to ethical and socially responsible concerns being sidelined in times of economic uncertainty, but now is the time for those in foodservice management to think long-term. Competitive advantage can be secured through a focus on quality and innovation; criticism can be addressed through engagement with a common ethical agenda; and the adoption of new business models, which have empathy at their core, can make a positive contribution to society. ■

the big question

How good was your lunch?

When, as a dinner lady in the year 2000, I set about trying to replace processed school meals with fresh, local and organic food, I was a lone voice in the wilderness. Today's government school meal standards and hundreds of schools joining the Food for Life Partnership movement for better food culture, mean I can enjoy the first taste of success.

Today I was treated to a school dinner at St. Andrew's Primary School in Shifnal, Shropshire. I was there to assess the school for our Food for Life Partnership Silver award, which – alongside rewarding practical food education like cooking, food growing and farm visits – requires that school lunches are served on plates, not flight trays, there is a range of local and organic items on the menu, and all chicken, eggs and pork are Freedom Food certified or free-range.

At St Andrew's, ingredients are supplied by local authority caterer Shire Services, the first large school meal provider to reach the Food for Life Silver-standards. Equally important is the school cook, Jan Bentley, and her team who prepare more than 75% of the food from scratch each day. I know from my time as a dinner lady how tough this can be, and never stop calling for this labour of love to be better rewarded. School meals are a vital education service and in my view school cooks should be on the school's senior management team, not coming and going via the back door. I chose home-made cheese and onion quiche with salad, and an ever-popular marble sponge. It was delicious, and the sustainability credentials weren't bad either: the cheese came from a local dairy, and the eggs were free-range from one of six local farms that supply Shire Services. The lettuce and beetroot in the salad were grown organically by the children in their school garden. Next step is the Gold award, with 50% local and 30% organic ingredients on the menu. Hundreds of schools are joining the Food for Life Partnership and changing their menus, and I look forward to tucking into many more meals like this one!



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Peter Jackson
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My lunch is usually a rather hasty and functional one, eaten alone at my desk or on the run between meetings. I normally buy a sandwich and some orange juice from the Sainsbury's Local across the road from my office. I also have a bowl of fruit beside my desk as a healthier alternative to the chocolate bars that I keep hidden in a desk drawer for moments of crisis. My partner encourages me to have a 'proper lunch', eaten with others outside the office, and there is a lovely park nearby where I could take a break and get some exercise. But I rationalise my unhealthy choice of a desk-bound lunch with the idea that working through the day means that I will be able to get home earlier, to eat tea with my wife and children and spend more time as a family. Doing research on food is bound to make you more self-conscious about what you eat and we regularly talk at home about the gap between our idealised 'family meal' and our actual daily practice. The ideal involves fresh food made from local, seasonal ingredients, cooked from scratch and shared in a leisurely way by all the family as we take it turns to talk about the events of the day. The reality often involves convenience food (pasta and meatballs, pizza or macaroni cheese, fish and chips), eaten quickly, with the children bobbing up and down from the table or rushing to get off to football or Brownies, the routines and rhythms of ordinary life always threatening to undermine our best intentions. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go and buy a sandwich...

How good was your lunch?



Carlo Petrini

Founder of the Slow Food Movement, an international eco-gastronomic movement which promotes the enjoyment and protection of locally produced food products and regional cooking.

www.slowfood.com

I'm often asked what my perfect meal is, about my favourite dishes and what my tastes are at the table. As I frequently find myself travelling all over the world, I can only reply that my perfect food is local, wherever I find myself. I want to eat what each place I visit has to offer. And I enjoy it best in the company of others, sharing in a gratifying and healthy conviviality.

There is a profound cultural value in eating locally, be it in the market, the street, in restaurants, or in people's houses. It is the best way to understand where you are. Generally the local food is tastiest too and eating it leads you to continuous new and exciting discoveries along your journey. When you're on home turf it cheers you too, because the things you eat shore up your identity.

So local foods meet the demands of quality, curiosity and culture. But these values are underlined, above all, by the fact that local foods are often the most sustainable. The ingredients avoid unnecessary long journeys, making the best of the animal breeds and plant varieties that are found in the area. Eating locally respects biodiversity and supports farmers who have bucked the global trend towards industrial monoculture. It is good, clean and fair, satisfying your palate, environmental sustainability and social justice.

It is for this that I love the tajarin of my native Piedmont, with a sauce made from local tomatoes and sausages from Bra, the city that I come from. But I also love feijoada when I'm in Brazil, injera in Ethiopia and the spicy delights cooked up by farmers I meet in Punjab. Our real wealth comes from the earth and from the knowledge of people who work it, and we must do our utmost to preserve that by eating local foods – wherever we are.

It's a shameful confession for a foodie but today, like most days, I ate lunch at my desk. I admire the French tradition of taking a full hour (or more) out of their working day to savour their thriving food culture. But I'm told that fewer French workers are lunching these days, and 'le sandwich' is nibbling at the market share of proper sit-down meal. That's shameful too.

On the plus side, I made my sandwich this morning (which, before you think I'm too smug, I don't always do) and it was stuffed with organic cheese and tomato and – my trump card – huge, peppery rocket leaves fresh from my garden. So I scored points for low food miles, high animal welfare standards and pesticide avoidance. Apart from the bread.

Usually, that would have been organic too but you know how it is. Ran out of bread, happened to be near a major retailer open late in the evening, and grabbed a loaf of what they had left. It had seeds (jolly good for you, apparently), and it was brown. But perhaps a little too brown, as though it had been dyed. And because it was baked on the premises (not from scratch – the dough gets shipped in pre-done and they just bake it there because it smells nice) there was no labelling, so I couldn't tell if it was dyed. Or, frankly, anything else about it.

That would also be true if I'd bought my sandwich from a wide range of outlets. Many, due to a quirk in labelling law, are not required to provide ingredients lists, but others are. Even when you do get a long list on your sandwich pack – in tiny type you can barely read – you're none the wiser. And don't get me started on how much water and other gloop can be legally squelched into the 'meat' in your sandwich.

Maybe tomorrow I'll pretend I'm in France and go out for lunch? But then how to find an ethical restaurant...?



Jeanette Longfield

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How good was your lunch?

Lunch presents me with a daily challenge, and most days I eat it at my pub since it's my job to ensure the food is up to scratch. I really enjoy this daily ritual, but I also find it hard to curb my appetite since there is always such a wonderful array of dishes to choose from – my eyes are definitely bigger than my stomach!

Today I chose red mullet with spicy chermoula, white cannellini beans and curly kale on the side. Not to be confused with a bad hair-do, the red mullet is a good looking fish with a vibrant red skin, firm white flesh and a meaty taste. It was popular in Roman times – dinner hosts would have red mullet swimming in glass bowls on the table, and the fish were killed and cooked straight away. Nowadays one rarely sees this fine fish on a menu, which is a great shame. But why?

Red mullet are often caught in fishermen's nets as 'by catch' – which means they are usually thrown overboard. With many of the world's fish nearing extinction, I think it's dreadful that red mullet are not made more use of, especially as they are abundant in the northeast Atlantic. Eating fish is always a political choice for me – if it's not sustainable and responsibly fished, I won't allow the pub to serve it. We buy all our fish from the South East of England, from fishermen based near Hastings: they use small day boats and traditional fishing methods. We were the first in the country to have our fish-buying policy approved by the Marine Conservation Society, and this year the Marine Stewardship Council allowed us to use their logo on our menu for any of their certified fish that we buy. We're proud to serve unloved species such as red mullet – they make a very delicious (and guilt-free) lunch!



Geetie Singh

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Arthur Potts Dawson

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I've been green all my life, thanks to my mother and father. As a 'green' chef the ethos of Acorn House and Water House reflects my principles – we buy sustainably, cook simply and seasonally and ensure our ingredients are local, organic and/or Fair Trade. We dispose of our waste in an environmentally friendly way, using a wormery, hot composter and an experimental bokashi system, which is turning our cooking oil into a compostable substance.

The kind of food I eat at home is the same in principle as what's served in our restaurants - good, seasonal food, consisting of produce that has been sourced sustainably and cooked simply so that the essential nature of the food remains, and few nutrients are lost. So in autumn I eat as if I were fattening myself up for winter – which is, of course, what would have happened in centuries past. One of my favourite lunchtime dishes is mushrooms on toast, a very English thing.

Today I mixed together a selection of wild mushrooms bulked out with some button mushrooms and cooked them with a bit of butter and oil, shallots and garlic. To retain all the goodness you must clean your mushrooms carefully with a cloth and never immerse them in water. Once they were nearly ready I added some chopped parsley, lemon juice and a drizzle of olive oil. It was delicious served up on rounds of homemade sourdough.

How good was your lunch?

Martin Forsyth

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I'm aiming to be healthy, so try a chicken and salad baguette from the sandwich van. As I'm being good, an apple as well followed by a cup of tea from the machine.

But actually, how healthy is it? It's very difficult to tell from the label. The sandwich manufacturer has stuck to the legal minimum: product description, ingredient listing and use by date. The foodservice sector could make more of an effort with labelling, but it's hard to extract the information from the different parts of the supply chain (especially items not legally required like whether it's suitable for vegans or country of origin).

What the foodservice sector really needs is a single way of understanding and collecting information about all foodservice products up and down the food supply chain. If you don't have this you can't explain the benefits to consumers or foodservice operators.

Back to the sandwich. Is the chicken from the UK or overseas? RSPCA Freedom Foods or imported, pumped-up commodity? There's no labelling to indicate either way – but it tastes alright!

What about the apple? What variety is it? Is it fresh? It looks ok but how was grown? Was the farm part of the Leaf or Global Gap schemes? Did Gangmasters recruit poorly paid workers to pick it? How do you tell – who can you ask? But again, it tastes fine.

Well at least the tea is Fairtrade – a good standard which delivers benefits for workers. But hold on – the very small print on the cup says that only 50% is Fairtrade Tea. Shall I only drink half of it? Taste-wise? Not the best, but what do you expect from a machine.

It's often said that very committed consumers who buy organic, Freedom Food and Fairtrade leave their conscience at home when they go out. But maybe – just maybe – they need to be told what they're eating in a different way. Just because they don't ask doesn't mean they don't want to know.

I had a good lunch today. I went into the garden and picked myself some tomatoes. Two lovely Berne Rose, an heirloom variety. With them, I had some bread and cheese from our local market. Julie, the breadmaker, grows her own wheat, mills it herself, and bakes it in a traditional stone oven. It's not baguette she makes, but a wheatier bread from farine 80. The cheese comes from Myriam, new at the market last Saturday. She only makes one cheese – a local fermier, as they call it - but lines it up neatly at her stall by age. The aged one I'm eating now is strong and tangy.

I'd waited a long time for this lunch. I'd prepared the soil back in February, digging in manure from a friend's horse field up the valley. When the weeds started pushing through in March, I began to hoe. In the first week of May, I bought tomato plants from an organic fête and planted them well into the soil. Two weeks later, I sowed French marigolds and basil around them to keep the bugs at bay, and pushed some stakes into the soil. For the next few months, I hoed, pruned and curled the plants around their stakes. And then, one day in late August, my lunch appeared.

Given current concerns about food miles, labour practices and nutrition, it would be easy to preach about the ethical virtues of my lunch. But my motives are far more selfish than virtuous. What I am looking for is a lunch that tastes good, a lunch produced by people I trust, a lunch that gives me a sense of power in a food system in which I have very little. Producing my own tomatoes feels a little subversive, a little rebellious, in a nice, harmless kind of way. It's personal, but it's political too.



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How good was your lunch?

I'm a big fan of the sardine luncheon. A few days a week, I open up a tin, pour off the oil, take a stack of crackers (whole wheat and high fibre, of course) and sit on the porch of my office (you really shouldn't eat them inside).

Why sardines? They're tasty (in my view). They're cheap at about a \$1.50 a tin. They're really, really good for you – lots of protein, calcium, and beneficial fatty acids (I started eating them almost daily after hearing them described by a US health guru as "health food in a can").

Unlike tuna, they contain very little mercury and, more to the point, aren't being fished into extinction. Yes, the main sardine population, the Pacific population, almost vanished in the 1940s. But it turns out that over-fishing wasn't the primary driver: according to marine experts, sardine populations cycle natural through booms and busts, and happily, we're now in a boom.

Still, a few things will need to change before sardines becomes a truly sustainable lunch. First and most obviously, the tin packaging soaks up a lot of metal and energy, so I'm going to need to find a bulk method. That said, I have to honestly question whether I'd be committed enough to prepare them in bulk, given the stink, but there's also the time required to take into account. It sort of makes one wonder whether 'convenience' and 'sustainable' are mutually exclusive.

Second, the relative abundance of sardines could disappear if the whole world decided to partake in this health food in a can. Which leads to another question: can a food be truly sustainable if it can't be enjoyed by everyone?



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Food is one of life's essentials, alongside air, water, clothes and shelter. Every morning, before leaving for work, I turn my attention to breakfast and lunch. I almost always bring my lunch from home and very rarely go to the canteen or eat out – a tradition I've followed since it was established by my parents when I was a child. When my mother was unable to prepare school tiffin, my father used to do it for her. Now, I do it with my sisters, and my parents still participate in one form or another.

Continuing to follow this tradition makes sense to me, because I prefer not to buy my lunch from outside for reasons of health and hygiene. Home cooked food is more hygienic, nutritious and easily digested than market prepared food.

While outside food is usually tasty, it can often be unhealthy. Problem areas (for me at least) are the high content of oil, chilies and spices. The taste is great, but oily, spicy food plays havoc with my digestion.

I am from north India and I like north Indian food. My lunch box contains home-made bread (called chapatti or roti in Hindi) and cooked fresh vegetables from the local market. I try and have a wide variety of veg in my lunchbox every day – which isn't difficult as it's part of Indian culture. So when I tuck into my lunch I know it's healthy, fresh, locally sourced, and – above all – delicious!

Corporate social responsibility

Is the 'renaissance' reaching food service industries?



Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – the business decision-making linked to ethical values, compliance with legal requirements, and respect for people, communities and the environment – is becoming one of the defining themes of business in society in the 21st century. One leading commentator, Simon Zadek, describes the 1990s as seeing a “renaissance in corporate citizenship” driven in part by the new economic imperative for business to build a sense of shared values with stakeholders and the move towards business models that embrace ‘sustainability’ issues (Zadek 2001).

But while there is much generic work on CSR and broader aspects of corporate citizenship, there is often limited sector-specific analysis of the impact of this business renaissance. This rule of thumb applies particularly to the food industry and especially in foodservice. So this article is not a review of literature pertinent to CSR and foodservice, but describes the corporate citizenship activities of two very different foodservice companies, not to provide a critique but to outline how far CSR – whether explicit or implicit – can drive progressive change in the catering industry.

With this in mind it might be a surprise that the choice of examples is fast food restaurant chain McDonald's and the Bon Appétit Management Company – a business unit of the world's largest foodservice company the Compass Group. Before getting into these case studies, let me set the scene by examining CSR activity in the food sector.

CSR activities are sometimes seen as being driven mainly by environmental concerns such as climate change, energy use, and the creation of a low carbon economy. But while these are becoming increasingly important for food business (because its factors of production are under threat), the CSR agenda is much broader. An examination I carried out of food industry CSR reports shows that the CSR agenda can be summarized under six main areas of business activity:

- Working/employee conditions
- Community involvement and philanthropic activities
- Labour and supply chain relationships (i.e. the company's external impact on other businesses, in particular its suppliers)
- Meeting legal requirements and financial probity
- Meeting environmental impact challenges
- Nutrition and healthy eating.

It is the integration of all these elements within business strategy and financial decision-making that to my mind separates authentic food business change with respect to CSR from ‘greenwash’.

Local food drives Bon Appétit's socially responsible strategy and marketing

Bon Appétit Management Company completed their fourth annual Eat Local Challenge on September 30th, an initiative launched in 2004 to raise awareness of food miles, and about where people's food comes from.

The challenge requires every chef in the company's 400 restaurants and cafes around the United States to create a 100% local meal, using only ingredients produced within 150 miles of the cafes (with the exception of salt).

Such is Bon Appétit's dedication to local food that, since its foundation in 1987, and long before the local food movement became topical, the California based foodservice company's aim has been to work with local food suppliers.

But in the late 1990s the company found itself facing a peculiar problem – what it calls “a crisis in flavor and taste” in the foods and ingredients it purchased. The company found that many of its local food suppliers had been lost. It was this crisis that created the genesis of the Bon Appétit Farm to Fork Program.

The Farm to Fork Program grew when Bon Appétit began to locate their “flavor crisis” in a wider food system context. As the company told me in an interview: “When we really started to learn about what was happening to farming in our country [the United States] and food transportation and the incredible environmental impacts of that then it became a larger mission for us to really support local farms, to reinvest in our community, ensure green areas in our communities and also prevent the environmental fallout of long distant shipping of products.”

The Farm to Fork Program is a company-wide initiative to buy locally. The first choice is to purchase seasonal, regional and organic produce from local farmers and artisan producers. These local products are served within 48 hours of harvest. It aims to deliver delicious and healthy food for its customers, and stronger economies for the communities in which Bon Appétit operates. Last year the company sourced US\$55 million of local produce in this way.

Michael Heasman

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Corporate social responsibility

It is perhaps surprising to learn that Bon Appétit Management Company is a fully owned business unit of the UK based foodservice giant the Compass Group. The Compass Group says it is the world's largest foodservice company, and in 2007 had sales of £10 billion and employed 360,000 people world-wide: 40% of the Group's revenues came from North America in 2007 where it employs around 127,000. It has yet to publish a CSR report but its first is due in early 2009.

To put Bon Appétit in context, it employs 10,000 people and operates more than 400 on-site cafes inside business and educational establishments across 29 U.S. states. Rather than 'bolting-on' its sustainability initiatives to existing business practice, Bon Appétit has introduced system-wide change to make sustainability a part of how the company fundamentally does business at all its sites.

The Farm to Fork Program is part of its Circle of Responsibility initiative launched in 2002. The initiative is a way of wrapping up a lot of the company's sustainability initiatives into a package their customers can understand. For example, part of the Circle of Responsibility initiative is a communications program to help educate and inform the company's consumers about the behind-the-scenes activities the company is implementing. Without preaching values to customers, it tries to be proactive with customers in taking its sustainability message beyond its own boundaries, and it regards itself as a model of what is possible.

The new socially responsible face of McDonald's?

Some people might pinch themselves but McDonald's was named as one of the world's most ethical companies in 2007 and the company's Vice President for Corporate Social Responsibility, Bob Langert, is ranked as among one of the most influential people in business ethics. The accolades were from Ethisphere Magazine, a global publication dedicated to illuminating the correlation between ethics and profit. Over the past four years in particular the company has set out to demonstrate and implement system-wide changes in relations to perceptions about its social responsibility – McDonald's even runs its own CR blog.

McDonald's current CSR activities can be linked back to its corporate global strategy called Plan to Win, introduced in April 2003. The early 2000s were dark days for McDonald's, with its financial performance heading downhill and the company experiencing an erosion in total shareholder value compounded by a number of external shock factors (for example, 9/11, consumer concerns in Europe and Japan about BSE, and a strong U.S. dollar).

The Plan to Win strategy's objective was to make "McDonald's their customers' favorite place and way to eat". To achieve this, the company set out to grow by being better and attracting more customers to existing restaurants rather than adding more restaurants. Part of the Plan to Win strategy was also to demonstrate McDonald's leadership in social responsibility.

This has manifested itself in recent years, as McDonald's has instituted various programs to reduce its environmental footprint and make its global operations more sustainable and transparent. Its first CSR report was published in 2002, but a second more substantive report appeared in 2004 and its third in 2006. The reports follow reporting guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative, the de-facto international standard for reporting on environmental, social and business issues.

The company's CSR efforts have focused on four areas: health and nutrition; combating the perception that working for the company is a 'McJob'; the company's environmental impact; and its work in the communities in which it operates. But at its heart McDonald's objective has been to restore and extend consumer trust.

To sum up this approach, Denis Hennequin, president McDonald's Europe, wrote in the company's 2005 European CSR report: "Our customers need to know that they can trust McDonald's – it is critical to their decision to visit our restaurants. Corporate responsibility is one of three key drivers of trust". (The other two being the delivery of quality ingredients, quick and friendly service in a clean, comfortable restaurant environment, and providing evidence of leadership and success).

McDonald's has set out to demonstrate that corporate responsibility is not an 'add-on' programme, but an intrinsic part of their decision-making. At an operational level it has seen, for example, the company introduce, into selected markets, organic milk, fairtrade coffee and new healthier menu options. It has also put in place policies for animal welfare and sustainable fishing.

In addition, the company has worked to put in place a wide range of environmental initiatives, and in 2008 the company published a report entitled 'Best of Green' reporting on these for its European operations – including the fact that it has been working together with Greenpeace to protect threatened areas of the Amazon rain forest. Europe is McDonald's largest region by revenues despite having around one-quarter the number of outlets as the U.S.

While CSR is only one aspect of McDonald's new-found business success it would appear from the evidence that the company's CSR objectives are being integrated system-wide across the key areas of the CSR agenda set

**Last year Bon Appétit
sourced \$55 million of
local produce**

Corporate social responsibility

out above. The significance of McDonald's working in this way is hard to determine without further independent research, but the corporation's scale and presence within the food system make it noteworthy.

For example, in its UK operation the company works with more than 17,200 farmers for its core ingredients and, since their launch in 2003, the company has sold more than 10 million fruit bags making it the biggest retailer of pre-prepared fruit in the UK. Perhaps as tellingly, McDonald's globally has turned itself once more into a formidable competitor and, in 2007, it turned in record revenues of US\$25 billion. So will its leadership in social responsibility now be part of the marketing and strategic mix that sets the pace of industry CSR change?

Much of the food industry and foodservice sector is still in the early stages of implementing CSR strategies (and many businesses are doing very little or nothing at all). But the crucial trend is that in the future no successful foodservice business will be able to ignore the importance of CSR or corporate citizenship trends to marketing and building long-



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term relationships with consumers and other key stakeholders – if not for social reasons alone then for sound business reasons. As we've seen in both Bon Appétit and McDonald's, CSR is here to stay. ■

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Public procurement

The government's role in supporting healthy eating and a sustainable food system

The provision of good food in public settings is not an intractable problem. It is, in fact, eminently achievable, and the concept has now been embraced across the UK. A raft of documents is available from government departments, local authorities, NGOs, food suppliers and providers on the role of public procurement in contributing to healthy eating and a more sustainable food system. There is no shortage of rhetoric, and little dispute that public sector catering can, and should, improve the diets of hundreds of thousands of workers, patients, prisoners and others who eat in publicly funded settings.

Improving health is, however, just one part of a multi-stranded concept which, put simply, aims to reunite consumers holistically with healthy, locally-produced sustainably-grown food from a supply chain which reduces waste and food transport and supports its workers. There are many players: cost-conscious local authorities and government departments, public health nutritionists, managers and commissioners of services, environmental campaigners, audit authorities and the wider EU community all have a different take on the priorities for the public procurement of food in the 21st century. Within this chain are inevitable conflicts, and there still remains a gap in the evidence base between the recommendations of public health nutritionists and those of environmentalists. This can be illustrated, for example, by the tension between those who promote an increase in oil-rich fish consumption and those who strive to manage dwindling fish stocks.

The scale of food procurement in public settings is undeniable. The public sector in England spends £2 billion on food and catering services. The NHS alone produces over 300 million meals each year and spends over £500m on food, employing more than 12,000 staff in catering departments. But while these figures are significant, public sector catering actually represents only about 7% of the total catering market by value across the UK. Therefore the ability of those in public sector procurement to affect on the food sourcing policies of large contract catering organisations and food distributors is challenging. It could be argued that improving public procurement will have a limited impact on the overall catering food supply chain and on the population's nutritional health. Data from the 2006 Food and Expenditure Survey suggests that about £8 per person per week was spent on food and non-alcoholic drink eaten outside the home in Britain, with an additional £3.54 spent on alcoholic beverages. For those under the age of 30, however, the average spend of £13.63 on food and drink outside the home is nearing expenditure on household food and drink purchases of £18.83 a week – with eating out among younger people fuelled by higher expenditure on soft drinks, sandwiches and meat and meat products (for example fried chicken, burgers and kebabs) as well as alcoholic drinks.

Food purchased outside the home makes a relatively greater contribution to total fat, saturated fat and sugar intakes compared to its energy contribution than food eaten at home,

but this is not the case for many micronutrients. Adults under the age of 30 have the most micronutrient-poor diets of any adult age group and this is reflected in increasing numbers of young men and women found to have low nutritional status. How significantly public sector catering can impact on the nutritional health of this generation of young adults and their parents is debatable.

Currently we have no evidence for the average contribution of public service catering to nutritional intakes of population groups. In statistical terms, improvements are likely to make a fairly minimal difference to average nutrient intakes on a population wide basis. The main drivers for changing public procurement practices are therefore likely in reality to be economic and environmental rather than health related. The exception to this is where individuals are provided with the majority of their food in public settings: in prisons and young offenders' institutions, long stay hospital settings, residential care homes and detention centres for example. Changing procurement policy for these individuals does indeed have the power to make a critical difference to nutritional status, but this requires both clear nutritional standards (such as those produced for many settings by The Caroline Walker Trust) as well as a willingness to spend more money on higher quality food and invest in training around enabling good nutrition and eating well.

There has been considerable progress in public sector catering in recent years. The Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI) was adopted by government departments in 2003 with an agreement to promote healthy food and improve the sustainability and efficiency of food procurement, catering services and supply. However, recent evidence from DEFRA suggests that by 2007 progress to some of the objectives, such as UK produced food, farm assured food standards, organic and fair trade food procurement, has been slow or is unknown in many government departments.

In terms of food purchased for the NHS supply chain and HM Prisons, 40% of food in the NHS and 67% in prisons is reported to be UK produced, with 80% of foods from farm assured sources in the NHS but none in prisons. Whilst 4% of food is from organic sources and 100% of tea and 4% of coffee is fairly traded in the NHS, this data is also unknown for prisons.

Helen Crawley

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Public procurement

Whilst there have been some positive changes in procurement of food commodities, whether food is any 'healthier' is unknown. The development of clear nutrient-based standards for food served in prisons and hospitals has been slow and any standards produced are likely to remain voluntary. The recent Cabinet Office report, *Food Matters*, suggests the route of developing a 'Healthier Food Mark' for public sector catering to encourage provision of healthier food in hospitals, prisons and government departments. It is unlikely, however, that a gentle, food-based approach will make any substantial difference to public health nutrition as the change to strict nutrient-based standards in schools perhaps best demonstrates.

There is a common misconception that the driver for the change in the composition of school meals in the UK was rising obesity levels. This was not in fact the case. The impetus for the improvement of school meals was the poor nutritional intake of schoolchildren. The introduction of clear nutrient standards acted as a vehicle for a significant change in the proportion of school aged children who achieved the appropriate reference nutrient intake (RNI) for a number of micronutrients (particularly iron, zinc, vitamin A, folate) and fibre, and a significant decrease in the number having higher than recommended intakes of total fat, saturated fat and salt. The decision to bring in mandatory, quantified nutrient-based standards (which specify the actual amount of nutrients that meals served over a period of a week or more should provide on average to a group of people) was an admission that the previously favoured food-based standards (which demanded that certain foods were offered each week) were insufficient to make the step change in the nutrient intakes of school children that was desired.

The second major change that came with school meal standards was the agreement to restrict food choice among school aged children on school premises – the ultimate 'nanny state' decision, based on the fact that, when faced with unhealthy choices, children are unable to make appropriate decisions about their food. These decisions were a bold attempt to use public service catering to move the public health goal posts and, in reality, to move them more for those in the population from lower-income households, entitled to free school meals, for whom school meals were known to make a greater contribution to total nutrient intake.

While tough nutrient based standards in theory encourage caterers to look in detail at all the food products they serve and the recipes they use, the final jigsaw piece in encouraging caterers to change food procurement policy to improve nutritional standards is the introduction of target nutrient specifications for individual food products. Target nutrient specifications for the amount of total fat, saturated fat,

sodium and sugar and minimum protein content of certain processed foods have been used by procurers and caterers of school food products in Scotland since 2004. They remain voluntary but send a clear signal to manufacturers that in order to have their food considered for purchase by local authorities they need to fulfil specific quality standards. Despite now being developed by the Food Standards Agency as UK-wide standards, they receive no mention on the School Food Trust website. While many local authorities have their own food product specifications, the lack of any enforcement in this area could be suggested as a weak link in what has become a tightly regulated chain.

A joined-up sustainable food procurement system requires financial commitment

In reality, the provision of food which meets defined nutrient based standards still relies on trust and goodwill and some may argue that there is inevitable tension between a service which must be cost-neutral or profit-making and one which ultimately puts the nutritional needs of its clients first. In Italy, many schools have handed over the operation of their school canteens to not-for-profit organisations set up and managed by parent committees. These small and local purchasers generally enjoy greater

freedom than public institutions in their procurement activities and, as Jeanette Orrey demonstrated in her Nottinghamshire primary school, school meals are able to develop over time to meet local needs.

Within all public sector settings, however, there are a number of caterers. Around 37% of food service provision to hospitals is contracted out to the private sector, for example. For commercial catering organisations, procurement policy is ultimately driven by their clients' price requirements. Most catering and food supply companies can source a wide range of foods and ingredients, but higher-quality foods come at a higher price and there remains a demand for cheaper foods and ingredients, and for ready prepared foods.

A joined-up sustainable food procurement system requires financial commitment, clear and simple nutritional labelling for caterers and clarity in the relative role of nutritional standards to other factors linked to sustainable public procurement. At the moment across the country there is endless debate about the relative merits of serving organic white sliced bread to children rather than non organic wholemeal bread; the economic benefits of home made compared to ready made sauces; the greater waste associated with increasing the vegetable content of dishes. There is much food for thought for the Government's newly announced Council of Food Policy Advisors who will be charged with making food policy recommendations 'from farm to fork.' Public health nutrition expertise will be essential if the aim of improving nutritional health of the population through better public procurement policy is also to become a reality. ■

Community catering

A grassroots revolution

In the past few years we have seen a food revolution in the UK – with civil society campaigning against GM foods and supermarkets, rising consumer interest in artisan and local foods, and a visible increase in the number of farmers' markets, farm shops and box schemes.

Despite this renewed interest in food, there is one industry – catering and food service – that has so far escaped closer scrutiny, possibly because it is less visible to the public eye.

However, there is activity here too – with communities and individuals developing alternatives to the large scale corporate catering operations that dominate the sector. Local solutions are often better placed to deliver a variety of social benefits, such as healthier and more sustainable food, skills and training and economic development.

The community cafe

Smoked mackerel salad and roasted vegetable cous-cous, wild mushroom, chestnut and spinach stuffed brioche – it could be the menu of a top end London brasserie. In reality it's lunch at the 20/20 cafe in Brighton – run by the Nourish social enterprise, and sited in a community mental health centre in a disadvantaged area of the city. As well as offering high quality food and outside catering, the cafe trains service users in catering to NVQ level – and is about to open an industrial kitchen from which it can expand the outside catering operation.

Working in a highly competitive marketplace – Brighton probably has more catering operations per square mile than most cities – the cafe is carving out an excellent reputation and building a strong customer base within both the public and private sectors. "More and more people are coming to us because they value our strong ethical values and the fact that our profits benefit marginalised adults and the community in general", explains Nourish Deputy CEO, Alan Lugton.

The 'community cafe' has long been a way of responding to the needs of vulnerable members of society, providing an affordable meal and social contact. More often than not they are found in the church hall or community centre, with customers drawn from the immediate neighbourhood. Increasingly, however, they are responding to a wider range of concerns. "Although we are motivated primarily by our service users, to whom we want to provide good food, and the opportunity to learn new skills, we also want to keep local money circulating in the community for the benefit of the community," continues Alan. "More and more people today want to know where their money is going, and here they can see for themselves."

Nourish is receiving an increasing number of enquiries from people who want to run community cafes in a more commercial way – with a presence on the high street and appealing to a wider customer base – whilst maintaining their social values.

The Crocus Cafe in Nottingham started life as a fair-trade cafe in a community centre, but recently moved to a shopping centre where it can attract more and different customers, including students from the university, staff

from a nearby medical centre and local residents. The cafe is non-profit making and run mainly by volunteers. Like so many community run food ventures it is a challenge to keep prices low whilst maintaining ethical purchasing policies that support fair-trade, organic, vegetarian and local producers. "Customers are drawn to the cafe because of the affordability and quality of the food we offer, rather than the ethics underpinning what we do – but they often leave with their perceptions changed", says board member Alice Townend, who says that being involved in the cafe changed her life and has given her a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

The Slow Food movement

Whereas anti-supermarket campaigns are two a penny across the country, UK civil society has been somewhat slower to protest against the homogenisation of the high street with fast food outlets, restaurant chains and the ubiquitous coffee shop.

In France, Jose Bove is famous for destroying a McDonald's fast food outlet, which for him and his supporters symbolised all that was bad about today's highly globalised and industrialised food system. In Italy, the appearance of the same golden arches at the foot of the Spanish steps in Rome led to the birth of Slow Food, an international consumer movement which now has more than 80,000 members in over 90 countries. Slow Food celebrates the diverse heritage of regional food and drink, and actively promotes the protection of a wide range of artisan products which would otherwise be swallowed up by cheap, mass-produced and inferior produce.

Local convivia are at the grassroots of the slow food movement, where tastings and visits are organised, and information on good shops and restaurants shared, all done with an emphasis on the 'conviviality and enjoyment' of food. Slow food can also take credit for the enormous number of local food festivals across the UK – it's hard to find a town now without its annual celebration of local food specialities and quality restaurants, which

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Community catering

have done much to introduce people to different ways of accessing and enjoying food outside the home.

The community meal

Slow Food is often criticised for being elitist – with the events and produce it supports often too expensive for the ordinary person on the street. The founder, Carlo Petrini is unapologetic, claiming that “we have to change the food system and this starts with the elite”. However, a multitude of grassroots projects across the UK could prove him wrong – change is also happening in some of our poorest and most deprived communities.

A recent urban farming project in Middlesbrough culminated in the ‘Town Meal’, held in a central square in the City, and attended by over 2,500 residents. Dott 07 was a regeneration project exploring the role design can play in increasing the sustainability of depressed and run down areas. During the project, over 1,000 residents, including schools, community groups and businesses, were involved in growing fruit and vegetables in unusual containers and public spaces around the town. And, at various points, community members came together to eat the food they had grown, with the final Town Meal marking the end of a productive year.

‘Culture Kitchen’ is another annual celebration of an on-going grassroots project run by the Women’s Environmental Network. This local food project encourages groups of inner city women, often of ethnic origin, to develop their organic food growing skills. Once a year all the participants come together to celebrate their work, share recipes, prepare and enjoy a meal cooked with the produce they have grown. According to the organisers, “the success of Culture Kitchen has its roots in the power of food to unite groups who may not normally come together”.

In the US, the concept of the ‘pot luck’ has been a traditional way of sharing and eating food together, with everybody contributing a component of the meal. This idea is now developing into a bigger movement, with people joining ‘dining co-ops’. The idea started on college campuses, and has extended into the community, where it can take several different formats. A group of friends eat together once a week, with members cooking the meal in turns. In a ‘cooking co-operative’, a group of friends with families each cook a meal large enough to feed them all. On a Sunday they collect the food, take it home complete with instructions, so they don’t have to cook during the week. Cooking co-operatively – on a regular basis or for a one off special occasion – can help people save time and money, deepen relationships with family and neighbours, and provide healthier, more sustainable food as well.

It makes sense to support community led initiatives

Delivering public food procurement

Every day, across the UK, many millions of people come together to eat food in a variety of different settings. The most obvious of these is the school meal, the centre of so much controversy in recent years, but there are also meals served in our hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, universities and other public places.

Despite public sector food procurement receiving much attention recently, with various initiatives and campaigns designed to help increase the amount of healthy, local or organic produce on offer, provision is still dominated by large, remote food service companies, delivering millions of meals across the globe every day. Breaking this dominance with smaller, more local and community based operations, whether that is famed co-ops or social enterprises, remains a challenge.

In the words of Nourish’s Alan Lugton – “we’re a social enterprise – with the emphasis on enterprise. It’s very difficult to be enterprising with public sector contracts – they are restrictive, too big, and with such small margins that they don’t really allow for a more creative and human scale approach.”

When change does come, it’s because visionary and supportive purchasing officers develop contracts and budgets that are more accessible to smaller providers.

When a new school meal contract was developed in Kent, it was decided to break it up into clusters of schools, thereby creating smaller and more manageable contracts. This allowed a new company, Whole School Meals, to win the contract for delivery in 21 schools in the Deal area. The company is unique in that 75% of its shares are held by 18 of the schools it serves, while the remaining 25% are held by the seven founding directors. The company’s vision is to be ‘a community-based company, highly professional in its management, commercially viable, accountable to the schools, parents and children. At its heart [is] the goal of providing home-cooked school meals that are healthy, nutritious and which the children enjoy eating; and preparing these meals from fresh, seasonal ingredients that have been produced locally’.

Both Nourish and Whole School Meals prove that it makes sense to support community led initiatives to break into public sector food procurement. They can be much better placed to deliver sustainable food (Nourish has its own community farm and Whole School Meals sources 70% of its food from Kent). And local communities feel the benefits of their success, through job creation and supporting local businesses and charities, as well as attracting more inward investment into the area. ■

School dinners

A dispatch from the coal face



George Lindars-Hammond

A 17 year old student who is studying for his A Levels in Bath. He is a young campaigner for the Children's Rights Alliance for England.

When I started school I took school dinners. This was before the Jamie Oliver phenomenon had hit our screens and the Labour party was still in opposition. I remember even at that young age being served extremely overcooked and squashy vegetables, though I can't remember particularly disliking them. The food was fairly stodgy and looking back, I suspect the ingredients had come straight from a factory.

Times change, and I started bringing a packed lunch to school. My mother made sure it was extremely healthy and included a good deal of fresh ingredients. When I started secondary school I went back to buying my lunch at school. For the first three years at my school there were two entrances to the canteen, commonly known as the "Healthy" and "Unhealthy" side.

Entering through the former you would be offered a selection of main courses and vegetables, although the dishes on offer frequently included the now vilified Turkey Twizzler.

On the unhealthy side there was no change in the menu day to day. The food comprised burgers, sausages and fish fingers accompanied by chips, baked beans and mashed potato. The

burgers were the most disgusting I have seen in my life and there was very little goodness in the processed food on offer.

But then came Jamie Oliver's spotlight on school dinners, and our menus improved slightly. Out went the Turkey Twizzlers and the disgusting burgers. Then, two years ago a new chef was appointed to run our canteen. Tim Fletcher was a man on a mission.

Almost immediately he threw out the old menus and forged new links with local suppliers to create food unlike the school had seen before. With meals such as moules marinières and Piri Piri chicken on offer, food became exciting at a boys' school where healthy attitudes are hard to promote. Take up of school meals rocketed and the whole school is feeling the benefit of better food, which has the added bonus of improving moods and concentration span.

Since I began sixth-form, and had freedom to leave school over lunchtime I have used the canteen much less and have instead bought food at the local Co-op, which has the bonus of being an ethical retail chain. I'm exercising my choice, but in practice, I probably get a far less balanced meal for more money

than if I'd stuck to Tim's (very cheap!) school menu.

It seems to me that most young people care very little for how ethical their food is. But – as proved by my own school's food revolution - when a good, tasty, locally sourced meal is put in front of them in school, they really appreciate it.

During my years in full time education I have experienced the whole range of options for lunch, and in where the food came from played virtually no part in the choices I've made about what I ate. For me, taste is the key, and if ethically produced food tastes good then it will win the day in schools. ■



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Food, faith and home

Making the connections



Mike Rayner

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Our relationships with food are badly out of kilter – witness all of the recent food-related problems from obesity to global warming. Trends in eating behaviour hold a mirror to our changing relationships with food, so reflecting upon such trends may inform us about those relationships and how they might be put right.

A modern trend that is often remarked upon is the increasing tendency for people to 'eat-out'. This, unlike some other trends, is generally seen as not contentious and of little consequence to what we care about in connection with food. But isn't there something questionable about this trend?

Others in this edition have pointed out its consequences for our physical health, the environment, etc. Here I want to suggest that eating-out to excess risks damaging our social fabric – our relationships with one another. Of course, how often we eat out is not the only factor determining the quality of our relationships, but it may be more important than we have tended to think, particularly in view of the special significance that many religions give to 'eating-in'.

By 'eating-out' we generally mean eating outside of the home. Eating at other people's homes is not normally considered to be 'eating-out'. Moreover eating-out generally involves 'other people' sourcing, cooking and serving the food for us in return for money. Eating-out is not just a matter of location.

However, where we eat is clearly somewhat important to us – we try to go for the nicest place we can when we eat – and I would like to suggest that it is 'home' where meals are best eaten. By home I mean where our family congregate but also the place to which our friends are drawn. The best of homes are also where the stranger is made welcome.

I would also like to propose that the best of meals are those which we ourselves prepare or are prepared for us by someone who loves us, rather than the paid employee. We surely know that the food cooked at home is generally tastier than at even the best of restaurants. How often do you hear – when eating out – 'I am sure I could have done better myself'?

Eating-out used to be a treat – and I believe that is the proper place for it – but now it has become routine. McDonald's in central Oxford used to have special arrangements for children's birthday parties. This facility has been quietly abandoned as eating at McDonald's is so commonplace that very few would now think of holding a party there. The purpose of eating out (in France and Michelin star restaurants excepted) seems to be to avoid the washing up.

Moreover the provision and eating of meals in many fast food restaurants is now so quick that all one can do is consume the food. There is no time to talk to the person serving it, let alone the person preparing it. This reduces those people to the status of (vending) machines – it dehumanises them. Perhaps more importantly there is no time for conversation and building relationships between those eating the meal together.

It is surely no coincidence that the meals we regard as most significant – even in secular society – are normally prepared and eaten leisurely at home with family and friends – for instance, the Thanksgiving dinner and the Christmas lunch; and, moreover, that meals at home – particularly celebratory but sometimes also routine – become acts of religious worship. The clearest example of this is the Passover meal in Judaism – a meal to remember and celebrate liberation from oppression. The Passover meal is also the fore-runner of the Communion meal in Christianity.

Food and feasting is central to the worship of most religions, but this is often lost sight of – perhaps because food seems too earth-bound and not heavenly enough. If people of faith (and indeed of none) could recapture a sense of the true importance of food – and in particular food eaten at home – then perhaps they would be able help address some of the food-related problems that beset our society.

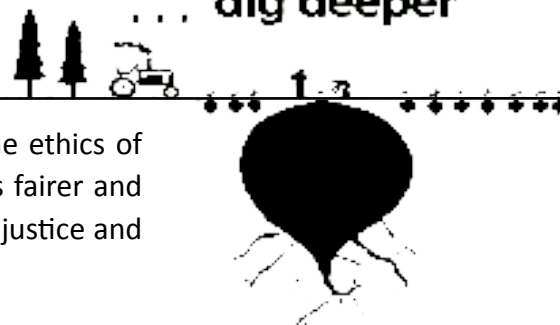
For this reason a conference entitled 'Faith and food: making the connections', organised by a group of Christians from different denominations, is being held at the Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford on 28th February 2009. Speakers will include Colin Tudge, Rev Canon Tim Gorrington and Fr Edliberto Sena from Brazil. There will be workshops, worship and of course good food. For more details see our website: www.faithandfood.org □



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The Climate Diet

Jonathan Harrington | 2008 | Earthscan

A comprehensive guide to eating well and saving the planet, *The Climate Diet* reveals the extent to which our energy-intensive lifestyles are bad for the climate. In this down-to-earth book, Harrington offers information and advice, and provides a checklist of recommendations to get us on the road to eating and living more sustainably. AB

Creating Food Futures

Cathy Rozel Farnworth et al. (eds.) | 2008 | Gower

A thought-provoking collection of essays investigating the potential and the building blocks for a more democratic food system. They challenge both the private sector's growing influence on food governance, and the pessimism that presumes citizens our powerless in the face of this trend. Critical, open-minded and worth a read. TM

The End of Food

Paul Roberts | 2008 | Bloomsbury

A thorough overview of the origins and development of our modern food system and the contradictions and crises within it. The author explores possible solutions to the problems we face in the food system, including transgenic, organic and local food production, eating less meat and reforming farm subsidy systems. AB

Ethical Traceability and Communicating Food

Coff Barling Korthals Neilsen eds. | 2008 | Springer

The product of a major EU research project, this book explores how transparency systems that already operate in food supply chains can be adapted to communicate on ethical issues, to inform consumers and to give them more power. It includes case studies of British bread, Danish bacon and Greek olive oil. TM

The Impact of Fair Trade

Ruerd Ruben ed. | 2008 | Wageningen

A fascinating collection of essays that assess the impact of Fair Trade on smallholder producers in countries around the world. This book provides a first step towards a qualitative analysis of the different effects of Fair Trade, and asks whether consumers and government have a moral duty to support Fair Trade products. EB

The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food

Wayne Roberts | 2008 | New Internationalist

A short, thoughtful book that investigates the reasons behind the unjust, undemocratic and unsustainable nature of the global food system. Highlighting the difficulties of making 'good' food choices, and the destructive effects cheap food has on health, society, the economy and the environment, Roberts also provides factual accounts of inspiring work already taking place. AB

Problems of Trust

Franck Meijboom | 2008 | University of Utrecht

Food and farming have had more than their fair share of problems of trust. But in the face of countless business and government efforts to 'build trust' when they suffer crises of confidence, Meijboom argues that it is trustworthiness they should be after – they need to earn it, not make the public more trusting. A meticulous attack on tangled thinking. TM

Reconstructing biotechnologies

Guido Ruivenkamp et al. (eds.) | 2008 | Wageningen

This collection takes it as read that agricultural biotechnologies do not, for the most part, promote the public interest or international development. Yet it asks whether they could do and, if so, what that would take. It discusses influences on innovation from the field through to international rule-making, asking whether the current trade-related intellectual property (TRIPS) should be replaced by development-related 'DRIPS'. TM

Regoverning Markets

Bill Vorley et al. (eds.) | 2008 | Gower and IIED

An important and thorough look at what happens when supermarkets meet small-scale producers in low- and middle-income countries. The editors' top recommendations for governments in countries experiencing rapid supermarket expansion are to invest in traditional markets, control supermarket power and support producer organisations. TM

The School Food Revolution

Kevin Morgan & Roberta Sonnino | 2008 | Earthscan

Taking sustainable development as its starting point this book examines how the public purse has transformed school meal provision in different settings across the world. Using case studies from capital cities, rural Britain and the developing world, it shows how community food planning could be the answer to building sustainable societies. EB

The Transformation of Agri-Food Systems

Ellen McCulloch et al. (eds.) | 2008 | Earthscan

Well-researched and full of case studies, this book is a must-have for students of agriculture and international development. It documents the impact of changing food systems in developing countries, and investigates ways that smallholder farmers and the rural poor can access markets to lift them out of poverty. EB

Unjust Rewards

Polly Toynbee & David Walker | 2008 | Granta

A timely reminder that as the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. The authors talk to Britain's super rich and people living on the breadline, discovering what those inequalities mean in practice. They present their evidence as a challenge to Britain's politicians to reform the UK's unfair tax and welfare policies. Compelling reading in today's chilly economic climate. EB

restaurant review

© Yo Sushi



Yo Sushi

**Whiteleys Shopping
Centre, Queensway,
London**

Julia Hailes

**A consultant, speaker and
writer on social,
environmental and ethical
issues. Julia is the author
of the number one best
selling Green Consumer
Guide and a member of
the Food Ethics Council**

How I rate it

Overall: ***

Health: ****

Environment: *

Taste: ****

Ambience: ****

Value for Money: **

(maximum five stars)

It's a shame there's not a Yo Sushi at Waterloo because that's my regular train station and I'm a fan. If I'm going through Paddington I often perch on one of their stools and help myself to something exciting from the conveyor belt – and at airports too.

If you're interested, it's not too difficult to find out that Yo Sushi have a policy on the sustainable sourcing of their fish. They don't sell bluefin tuna, which is one of the most endangered species on the planet but they admit that this is partly due to its stratospheric price tag.

There's plenty of yellow fin tuna though. Apparently most of it comes from the Maldives and Sri Lanka, where the fishing methods are more sustainable than in other parts of the world. Yo Sushi's fish suppliers all follow recommendations from the Marine Stewardship Council about which fish is sustainable and which should be avoided.

Their nutritional guidelines seem pretty good too. Raw fish and rice are healthy foods and not very fattening. If you're interested, there's a little table at the back of their menu booklet, telling you how much fat, sugar and salt is in their food.

And I discovered that their policy on freshness and hygiene was rigorously enforced, as you'd expect. Staff have to change their plastic gloves, wash their hands and throw away food that's been on the conveyor belt for too long. Every dish is given a time stamp. Once that expires food gets tipped into the rubbish containers. Some dishes are only given an hour, fish and rice generally get two and salads three hours.

And that's what made me wonder about how much food was wasted. A lot, it turns out. I

asked the chap behind the counter what proportion of food he thought was chucked. He said it could be as much as a third. Yikes! More is apparently thrown away at off-peak times because the conveyor belts must be kept stocked but less is eaten.

I'd noticed before how much packaging there was. What I hadn't noticed was that none of it was recycled – all the food and other rubbish was thrown into the same bin.

It's all very well sourcing your fish sustainably but if huge quantities of it end up in the bin that's not sustainable at all. And I have to admit that I thought the staff training on eco-issues could be improved. I asked an employee who'd been working at Yo Sushi for 15 years about the sustainable fish policy. He didn't know what 'sustainable' meant and told me instead about how fresh the food was.

Yo Sushi needs to go much further than just ticking the box about their fish suppliers. It should audit its systems to minimise waste, separate what it throws away and train staff on environmental issues that are relevant to the business.

The carbon impact of wasting food is huge – even worse if it's fish or meat, so fast food chains should make this a priority issue. I might be an unusual customer in some respects but I suspect that I wouldn't be the only one interested to hear what they're doing on this front. I'd also like to know if they've looked at other issues like air-freighting food and energy efficiency. I couldn't find anything on their web-site, so I suspect not.

My final verdict on Yo Sushi? Thumbs up for healthy food but thumbs down for a healthy planet. ■

forthcoming events

4th Dec '08	Rachel Carson Memorial Lecture 2008 Pesticide Action Network UK www.pan-uk.org London, UK
4th Dec '08	Ethical Shopping: The Producers' Perspective Co-operative Forum www.fairandsquare.coop London, UK
6th Dec '08	International Day of Climate Action Campaign Against Climate Change www.campaigncc.org London, UK
9th Dec '08	3rd National Food Markets Conference: Growing a Market Market Squared www.nationalfoodmarketsconference.co.uk Blackpool, UK
9th Dec '08	Environmental Investment Forum Environmental Finance www.environmental-finance.com London, UK
10th - 12th Dec '08	Biomass and Energy Crops I National Rural www.nationalrural.org York, UK
11th Dec '08	Biofuels - A Viable Approach to Carbon Reduction? SCI Cambridge and Great Eastern Group www.soci.org Cambridge, UK
11th Dec '08	Climate Change: Effective Communication Talk Action www.talkaction.org London, UK
12th Dec '08	How To Ensure Food Security Today and Tomorrow? Syngenta Foundation www.foodsecurityconference.ch Zurich, Switzerland
16th Dec '08	Water Footprint Summit 2008 London Business Conferences www.water-footprint.com London, UK
20th - 23rd Dec '08	Slow Food Christmas Market Slow Food www.southbankcentre.co.uk London, UK
6th - 7th Jan '09	Organic Research Centre's Producer Conference Organic Research Centre www.organicinform.org Shropshire, UK
20th - 21st Jan '09	Conference on Global Trade and Farm Animal Welfare Animal Welfare and Trade www.animalwelfareandtrade.com Brussels, Belgium
21st - 22nd Jan '09	Sustainably Sourcing and Tracing Agricultural Raw Materials and Ingredients www.sustainable-sourcing-agricultural-raw-materials.com/ London, UK
25th Jan '09	London's Charity Potato Fair and Seed Exchange Potato Fair http://potatofair.org London, UK
11th - 12th Feb '09	Green Retail - Engaging your Stakeholders Eventrus www.eventrus-corporate.com/Green_Retail_09.htm London, UK
12th Feb '09	Food Labelling in the Dock: Food Labelling Conference 2009 Food Manufacture www.foodanddrinkevents.com/foodman Warwick, UK
17th - 18th Feb '09	International Conference on Sustainable Production, Trade, Consumption and Lifestyle NürnbergMesse www.sustainability-conference.de/en/ Nuremburg, Germany
19th - 22nd Feb '09	BioFach 09 - The World Organic Trade Fair NürnbergMesse www.biofach.de/en/ Nuremburg, Germany
5th - 8th Mar '09	18th Annual Meeting: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics Association for Practical and Professional Ethics www.indiana.edu.ac Cincinnati, USA
15th - 19th Mar '09	International Food and Drink Event Fresh RM www.ife.co.uk London, UK