

Defining Food Culture- Challenges and Threats

A talk given at the Food Culture Conference in Cork, September 2007 Food by journalist and author, **Joanna Blythman**

I am very pleased to be given the opportunity to speak at this conference, not least because it is always an absolute delight to come to Ireland. I usually leave Ireland feeling full of optimism and restored in my belief that good food culture is alive and well, here at least. Trips to Ireland have always given me a badly needed gastronomic shot in the arm.

As an investigative food journalist, bad food news is my business. And when at home, I am never short of material. Rarely a week goes by without some negative story about food. I spend most of the year looking at the less savoury aspects of the British food chain and agriculture.

Some of the issues I look at are new and highly alarming, such as the outbreak of the potentially deadly H5N1 bird flu virus at Bernard Matthews intensive poultry factory in Norfolk.

Others are highly repetitive, such as the dire state of school meals or the recent report that tells us for the 10th time something we all knew- food colourings effect children's behaviour for the worse. Such Groundhog Day headlines can be particularly depressing, because they underline what appears to be a lack of progress.

Past visits to Ireland, have provided an antidote to all this. I have been deeply impressed by what seems to be a profusion of artisan foods which would seem to point to a healthy, buoyant food culture. You may say that I have been particularly fortunate, or been in the hands of highly informed guides, but from shopping for food in Ireland and eating out as well, it seems much easier to me to eat well here than it is in the UK- and that goes for Scotland too, sadly.

In Scotland, for example, it is still shockingly difficult to find anywhere that sells or serves really good bread, made in a patient, time-honoured way because industrial pap, made to the Chorleywood process, rules the roost. At least in Ireland, you can usually depend on finding a reasonable soda bread.

We Scots feel an instinctive cultural affinity with the Irish, and always prefer to be on the same side as them- especially if that means being on the opposite side from the English- but when it comes to food culture, I have to admit that Scotland seems to have more in common with the rest of the UK than with Ireland.

Despite the proliferation of celebrity chefs and the wall-to-wall diet of food and cookery in the media, Britain is still widely perceived from abroad as having one of the poorest food cultures in the world. On the battleground of food, Britain habitually sits with the US on the side of food globalisation and junk food against countries like Italy or France, seen as representing food diversity and having a population with a more intuitive feel for food. I think, for the time being at least, Ireland, I'm glad to say, sits in the healthy food culture camp, outside what the French scathingly refer to as the 'Anglo-Saxon' food model. Long may that continue.

So why does Irish food culture seem to be in better shape than that of Britain ?

One reason might be that Britain industrialized early and this created the rapid growth of a highly urbanised population that was divorced from the countryside and food production.

Religion played its part too. British food culture has suffered from a Protestant work ethic which spawned a breed that would rather build an empire or a factory than, as it sees it, waste hours preparing and eating food. Indeed, a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon form of Puritanism holds that it is immoral to enjoy or cherish food too much, because parsimony and abstinence are higher goals.

The inhabitants of the British Isles have always identified closely too with the United States and 'time is money' American capitalism. Whatever the historical explanation, the fact remains that food never has been a British priority and shows no signs of becoming one in the near future.

And if Britain was to improve, how would it have to change ? What are the defining characteristics of a thriving 'food culture' anyway?

To me, a healthy food culture is one where people celebrate food as one of life's great pleasures. They recognise the vital contribution good food can make to our psychological and physical wellbeing, and are prepared to invest in it with their time, money and effort. They expect to devote a certain amount of time to shopping for food, preparing food, then cooking and eating it. In healthy food cultures, communal meals, cooked from scratch from mostly local foods, are a cornerstone of daily life.

And because they are in daily or weekly contact with local food producers, people who live in healthy food cultures do not grudge spending a reasonable amount on food because they know enough about food production to understand that good food isn't automatically cheap, and that producers need to be able to make a reasonable living.

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Another hallmark of vibrant food cultures is that they are essentially conservative. They protect and sustain their own indigenous small-scale independent food producers and traditions, and are eternally suspicious of industrial food in its chameleon-like processed food manifestations. Ask any French or Italian person where you find the best food, and they will point you to a much-respected local food shop or producer, not the nearest Carrefour.

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This is one reason why good food cultures will tend to have a much lighter carbon footprint, because they are based much more on local food networks that are constrained by seasonality, climate, and tradition rather than permanently looking for technofixes to circumvent natural processes. Neither do they borrow magpie-like from every culinary tradition on the planet.

Judged against these criteria, contemporary British food culture has collapsed and is on death row. Here are the 7 key manifestations of how things have gone wrong. These also represent the key threats and challenges to your much healthier food culture in Ireland:

1. We are hooked on industrial convenience food

The British eat more ready meals, crisps and sweets than the rest of Europe put together.

Our taste for processed foods is actually killing us. Last week's report on the NHS by Sir Derek Wanless predicted that 33% of men, 28% of women and about 20% of children will be not just overweight, but obese (that means extremely fat) by 2010. Wanless warned that obesity in Britain could actually bankrupt the NHS. No health service, however effective or well-funded, can ever cope with record numbers of ailing citizens suffering from poor diet-related conditions like diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

2. We have become a 'no time to cook' society

Cooking your own food from scratch on a regular basis is increasingly seen as hopelessly old fashioned, a minority pursuit like making your own clothes that makes you some eccentric flat earther or incurable romantic, puttering away on the backwaters of modern life. Conversely, having no time to cook is seen as a sign of status, an indication that you are a high performer who has dispensed with this rather lowly, and unimportant activity.

On current trends, it is expected that by 2010, the average time taken to cook a meal will be just 8 minutes. Increasingly, food preparation is seen as an oppressive burden that should be offloaded at the first opportunity.

The other day in a second hand cook shop I came across a copy of the 1931 US classic cook book, 'The Joy of Cooking'. It struck me how no publishers in their right minds would ever contemplate publishing such a hopelessly uncommercial title these days with the words 'joy' and 'cooking' in the same phrase. It would have to be something like 'Miserable Meals in Minutes', or 'Cheat's Dinner Parties' or 'The Ready Meal Diet' or 'Eat Yourself Thin in Ten Minutes' or similar....

3. We have become a 'no time to shop' society too.

80% of the Britain's food is bought in supermarkets, and independent food shops are closing at the rate of about 2,000 a year. We increasingly refuse to invest any time and effort in sourcing the food we eat, preferring a one-stop trolley dash around the supermarket. We assume that supermarkets are cheap places to shop with an unbeatable selection of foods, although neither of these propositions stands up to scrutiny.

The critic, Jonathan Meades, once observed how the name of the now defunct supermarket chain, Kwik-save, was brilliantly designed to stir the pulse of the British food shopper because it encapsulated the promise of cheapness and speed so endemic in British attitudes towards food shopping.

The joyless, functional, food-is-fuel, one-stop supermarket shopping trip deadens the urge to cook and encourages the consumption of over-processed convenience foods in its place. It also encourages monumental waste- a third of all the food we buy goes straight into the bin at the end of the week, uneaten.

4. We are obsessed with cheap food

Britain is locked into a mindset where it views food as one of the first things on which economies can be made. This expectation has been fostered by supermarket price wars. Now the proportion of household budget we spend on food has plummeted in recent years, down to 16 %, down by 23% in the last decade. This is indicative of the low status we award food in our lives. The average British household now spends more on motoring than what it eats.

Countries with a more thriving food culture know that there are different qualities of food within a food category, and that any type of food comes in forms that can be plotted on a scale from most to least desirable. In the UK, we have been discouraged from thinking too hard about what we put in our mouths. A chicken, is a chicken, is a chicken and there is only so much we are ever prepared to pay for one. And when you can buy a supermarket bird for as little as £2.99, a better-produced bird seems unjustifiably more expensive.

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Yet all the time we are being conned into parting with astronomical amounts of money for over-packaged, over-processed, added-value products that look good and appear to offer convenience, yet we bitterly resent stumping up food for good quality raw ingredients.

5. We have swallowed food industry propaganda about food quality

Worryingly, a significant number of British people now believe that supermarkets stock such great food, there is no need to shop elsewhere, no need to even consider independent food shops, farmers' markets, box schemes or farm shops. I call this the 'Marks & Spencer's effect'. You will all have heard those breathy, drooling ads 'This is not just food.....' etc

Even in their most upmarket forms, supermarket ranges such as M&S's 'Cook!' range are the food equivalent of painting by numbers. They represent another dumbing down of what passes for food culture in Britain. Nevertheless, consumers are now convinced that you can give up cooking entirely and risk nothing, no taste penalty, no food quality penalty, nothing.

Increasingly a growing number of people also believe food industry and supermarket propaganda that it is possible to exist on a diet of processed food and still stay healthy and slim. All you have to do is consume the diet or 'healthy living' versions of standard convenience foods. Just think of those signs above the ready meals shelves that read 'As good as eating out'. It's only a matter of time until they replace them with ones that read 'Better than anything home-cooked'.

6. Regular meal times and communal meals are becoming a thing of the past

In the UK, a dining table is rapidly becoming a redundant item of furniture. One in four British households no longer has a table that everyone can eat around. Sociable communal meals are slowly and insidiously being replaced by serial snacking on the hoof and solitary eating of convenience food: one out of every two meals in Britain is now eaten alone. Yes, there are many more one person households nowadays- more elderly people and separated partners. But the fact is that eating in the UK is becoming more and more a solitary activity. Once it was considered sad to have to eat on your own: now it is considered quite normal.

7. Attitudes towards food in Britain have been blighted by social class

In Britain there is a pervasive attitude that to devote any time to food is pretentious. We think that people who talk about, or take an interest in food, are elitist. There is probably no other country in the world where a love of eating, or interest in good food is considered to be the exclusive currency of the upper and middle classes. No country where whole categories of food - such as game or artisan cheese- are consumed only by the moneyed few.

You can't pick up a magazine these days without having some winsome golden couple thrust in your face, frequently celebrities with loads of money who have moved to the country, bought a farm, and started making cheese or growing organic vegetables. It would be easy to get the impression that people who are interested in food are all rich and beautiful. That's an enormous turn-off for the vast majority of people. In Britain, food awareness is in danger of being seen by many as an exclusive hobby that allows you to flaunt your Marie Antoinette-style indifference to the masses.

Taken collectively, these 7 factors have pushed what passes for food culture in Britain, beyond the tipping point. For all the column inches and broadcasting time given to food, anything approaching good food culture in the UK has become marginalised. It is increasingly seen as a virtual food world, a Mickey Mouse hobby land, inhabited by the neurotic rich, while food reality for the masses consists of a processed food, no-cook lifestyle. Instead of a food culture, we have a supermarket culture. In place of genuine food diversity, we have every food on the planet, on our shelves, 365 days of the year. In place of genuine delight in good food, we have an endless diet of food pornography- a stream of light entertainment food shows to watch while we eat a convenience meal on our laps.

Against this backdrop, voices calling for better food, for organic food, for markets (not supermarkets) and so on have a very steep mountain to climb.

But to me, Ireland feels different. It feels as though, for the time being, good food culture has not yet been marginalised and is still seen by many people as having a practical presence and value in their everyday lives.

For Ireland to maintain its lead, it needs to keep up the momentum that drives a healthy food culture and keeps it centre stage. There is no new or special way to do this other than avoiding any aura of exclusivity, and giving the widest possible range of people as many affordable and easy opportunities as possible to buy, use and enjoy the inspiring range of foods that have put Irish food culture on the map in recent years. I wish you luck with this project. More power to your elbow !

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