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The other day, I happened to come across my old geography A-level folder. And judging by the number of scribbles on the cover, geography was the last thing on my mind. But among the girly “I love Russell” and “the Pixies rock” were the more charged words: “Meat is murder”, “Vegetarians against the bomb” and “Live and let live”. Food, in those troubled teenage years, was a loaded issue.

Nearly two decades later – and now a happily converted carnivore – I am still passionate about food, only now it is more about where it comes from and what’s in it. And I am not alone. Films such as Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me*, and programmes such as Jamie Oliver’s *Jamie’s School Dinners*, have put the spotlight firmly on our poor eating habits; and suddenly, people are thinking twice before throwing the chicken nuggets into their shopping trolley. A cheap food policy that has filled our supermarkets and schools with processed bargains, and a decline in food education in the classroom are mostly to blame. But finding a solution to the problem, not apportioning blame, should be our main concern.

“Live and let live” is an admirable slogan for animal welfare. But allowing people to continue living in this way will have serious implications, not only for the health of our nation but also for economic productivity – research now suggests that poor nutrition affects our levels of concentration and achievement. Perhaps if I had known that all those years ago, I could have scraped more than an “E” grade in my geography exam.

Natalie Brierley

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Hippy days

It used to be the domain of the alternative people. But, says **CRAIG SAMS**, healthy eating is now firmly in the mainstream

How did food in this country go so wrong? In the 1930s, Dr Innes Pearce’s “Peckham Experiment” showed conclusively that when she and her colleagues educated working-class people in the basic concepts of nutrition and personal hygiene, it led directly to a significant improvement in social indicators such as health, marital stability, domestic income and educational achievement. In 1942, the Beveridge Report projected that the cost of running the National Health Service would decrease during the 1950s – the impact of a healthy postwar diet and better hygiene were expected to bring about huge improvements in public health.

By now we could – and should – be brimming with robust good health, eating a superb diet of healthy foods, rich in wholegrains and vegetables, and no one should be suffering from nutritional deficiency due to poverty. Instead, we have a situation where the poorest are also the fattest and where, increasingly, the onset of diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease occurs in children, who can hardly be blamed for the consequences of the food they eat.

In 1946, Pearce and Lady Eve Balfour founded the Soil Association in response to the belief among doctors, scientists, farmers and nutritionists that postwar Britain could feed itself on healthy foods produced on healthy soils. But lobbyists for ICI and the chemical industry argued for subsidies on chemical fertilisers to encourage farmers to increase production. The 1947 Agriculture Act, in allowing them to do that, came down on the side of maximising production. The result was the centralisation of food production which brought about the concentration of power in the processing industries and, subsequently, in the retail sector. A true market, diverse and responsive to local demand, was replaced by a food chain of oligarchies. Small farms were vacuumed up into megafarms and the farmhouses were sold off as country retreats.

Subsidised rapeseed in the EU and soya beans in the US drove natural hard fats such as butter, lard and palm oil off the market to be replaced with the cheaper, hydrogenated rape and soya alternatives. To make matters worse, in the 1980s and 1990s the NHS urged Britons to switch from natural fats to margarines, even though they were full of trans fats, which are formed when manufacturers ►

► hydrogenate fats and oils. Walter Willett, of the Harvard School of Public Health, called the hydrogenation of oils the “biggest food-processing disaster in history”. According to Willett, for every 2 per cent increase in trans-fat consumption, a woman’s risk of heart disease increases by 93 per cent. In Britain, trans fats still represent one-third of the average fat intake, itself 30 per cent of the overall diet.

Why did government policy go for cheap food as opposed to cheap clothes, cars or holidays – luxuries that exceed expenditure on food in the modern domestic budget? Who gained from such a budget? The direct beneficiaries were the oil and chemical industries, on whom industrial agriculture depended for their nitrates and pesticides. Indirect beneficiaries have been the medical and pharmaceutical industries, which have flourished on the back of the degeneration in public health.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, my brother and I built a flourishing business by supplying some of the poorest members of society with healthy food. Our Ceres Grain Shop on the Portobello Road sold sacks of organic brown rice, wholewheat flour, grains and beans. And despite keen competition from the street market, we sold large amounts of organic vegetables. Healthy eating was not a class issue. Nor was it a problem that stemmed from low income. It is, and remains, a question of attitude.

In 1974, when my daughter came home from school requesting white bread sandwiches, to be like the other children, we gave them to her. Three days later she’d had enough and begged for wholewheat bread again. When the pupils from St Peter’s Primary School in Nottinghamshire – where the original dinner lady Jeanette Orrey is catering manager – went on to junior school, they flatly refused to eat the appalling food. “We don’t eat that stuff,” they announced. Well-trained taste buds stay with you for life.

At the first Glastonbury Festival, brown rice-eating hippies barred the entrance to hot dog vans. They saw healthy eating as part of the alternative lifestyle and society they hoped to see emerge into the mainstream. They read John Seymour’s *Complete Book of Self Sufficiency*, scraped together the money for a farm in the Welsh hills, then settled down to dreary factory jobs to make ends meet – until the market for their organic carrots suddenly took off in the early 1990s. As the healthy movement entered the mainstream, they felt they were losing control to the “big boys”, and my brother and I saw our commercial monopoly on brown rice broken by the big white-rice packers as soon as it became big enough to be

interesting. But with organic chocolate we somehow managed to steer a brand – Green and Black’s – to category dominance before selling to Cadbury Schweppes.

When Stonyfield Farm Yoghurt, a hippie brand in the US, reached \$200m turnover, it was bought by Danone, a French multinational. Frank Riboud, the chief executive, told the *Wall Street Journal*: “Stonyfield is more than just a balance sheet. Stonyfield represents an ethic and it’s an ethic that we at Groupe Danone have to adopt if we’re going to be successful in the 21st century.”

You don’t need a weatherman to tell you which way the wind is blowing in the corporate boardrooms. David Croft, who developed the Co-op’s Fairtrade range, is now in charge of ethical sourcing at Cadbury Schweppes, while Nestlé’s wholegrain.co.uk website outdoes the Food Standards Agency in extolling the virtues of brown rice, wholemeal bread and pasta.

This trend will continue and, with luck, trans fats will become a historical anomaly. The health benefits of this single change are inestimable. It will fuel the rush to quality as manufacturers return to more traditional ways of

processing food without the crutch of what is, essentially, a plastic made from vegetable oils instead of petroleum. Good food and healthy eating are now firmly in the mainstream. The principles and ingredients of a healthy diet that were derided in the 1970s are now the subject of glossy food magazines and riveting TV programmes.

The Soil Association’s Food for Life campaign supports dozens of local authorities determined to rectify the error of prioritising cheap food in school meals. Children can visit organic farms to see where food comes from and understand the issues that organic producers espouse with such passion. Vegetable box schemes, the refocus on local, often organic, food production and the renaissance of cookery are restoring good food to its rightful position in our culture. The repercussions will ripple through our entire value system and affect the way we think about ourselves and the world we live in. A crass nutritional materialism has left us with a generation whose health problems will be a burden on their ageing parents and on their own children. The social cost of a misguided cheap food policy has been enormous. The postwar vision of good food and health for all may have turned sour, but the dream has been revived and Britain is on the path to a food culture that combines the best of tradition with a deeper and more widespread understanding of good nutrition.

Craig Sams is chair of the Soil Association, founder of Green & Black’s and author of The Little Food Book

Healthy eating is not about class or low income. It remains a question of attitude

The end of the affair

New Labour has fallen out of love with farming. Agricultural reform is useless unless Britain and developing countries are encouraged to feed themselves.

By **TIM LANG**



Does Europe need farming? Britain is in danger of appearing to argue that it doesn't. The battle over Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform is always bitter, but its sudden injection into the European budget and constitutional crisis is a risky strategy, not just for Blair but for Europe too. The fury being unleashed against agricultural subsidies comes just when analysts are recognising the importance of huge structural crises – climate change, water shortage, rural labour shortage, escalating diet-related health costs, and corporate concentration – which all suggest a need for a strategic rethink about food policy.

Instead of building these challenges into a new model food policy, the Treasury and No 10 seem to argue that Africa and the developing world ought to feed us. Not only is this a simplistic policy for the developing world – not least because export-led growth policies promoted by the World Bank have caused commodity prices to collapse, leaving those countries unable to service their debts – but Britain's own health, environment and security will all suffer as a result.

This is not an argument against CAP reform; far from it. Reform of the CAP – whose export subsidies wreak havoc on the economies of developing countries – is welcome, perhaps more so than the cancellation of debt. But, in all the debate, there has been little consideration of what will replace CAP. Present reform, although ending production subsidies, is all about cutting costs. There is a failure of vision and a warped view that agriculture has no value other than as a playground

for golf, tourism or “country living” fantasies.

The logic of such a view is seductively simple. In Britain, less than 1 per cent of the working population is employed in farming. Farmers, with an average age of 57, are dying off. And their products have declining value. Most of the value added to food, to meet consumer needs, occurs in factories, retail chains and food-service sectors. New Labour has fallen out of love with farming, its disregard reflected in the replacement of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with

A radical shift in Britain's food policy is not unprecedented. Labour reconstructed farming after the war

the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). It now prefers to leave such matters as food production to the likes of Tesco. If BSE was a Tory problem, foot-and-mouth disease, which took hold in 2001, was Labour's, and the £4bn compensation bill was the final straw.

The 2002 Commission on the Future of Food and Farming, set up in the wake of foot-and-mouth, tried to chart a new direction: efficiency in global markets, meeting the needs of the food giants and incorporating a soft-green environmental focus. But the silence on nutrition-related public health was deafening. Recent reports from the World Health ►

► Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation note with alarm how diet-related ill-health is unsupportable worldwide. Developing countries, especially Africa, cannot afford the double-whammy of non-communicable diseases such as cancer, heart disease and obesity on top of infectious diseases and malnutrition.

New farm and food policies are required that reduce the consumption of sugar, fat and meats, and maximise the output of healthy products for home populations such as fruit and vegetables, so that countries can feed themselves.

Another impending danger stems from the belief that food supplies are safely bought on “open” world markets. A tenth of world agricultural output is traded. The over-producing US wants this to grow. It’s thrilled at the alliance-curbing CAP, which rejects the post-Second World War notions of food security that promoted a strong home base of production. Nowadays, food processors, retailers and food service giants roam the world to source fresh foods from wherever land and labour are cheap. This global food economy has become totally dependent on oil, not just to move goods, but to process and produce them. Oil prices that rise above \$60 a barrel, and national experiences such as the UK lorry drivers’ strike in 2000 show just how fragile the food system is.

One could argue that affluent countries such as Britain can always buy food from wherever quality and price suit them best. Developing countries cannot afford the same luxury. They are already feeling the tight squeeze of the multinational retail giants, who encourage them to divert their energies from feeding themselves to supplying an over-fed west.

European food policy is currently verging on a new food imperialism and it has to change. Moreover, the dangers of climate change urgently require the development of more sustainable farming, not further intensification abroad. A new farm and food policy ought to have public health goals, encouraging appropriate national production, with ecological farming not a niche, but the norm.

A radical shift in Britain’s food policy is not unprecedented. Labour reconstructed farming after the Second World War, after a century of dangerous reliance on the far-off lands of the British empire, and built on health improvements, despite the war.

Eight years ago, the Blair government inherited a mess from the Tories. But allowing farming to disappear will not solve the problem. We need a food and farming policy that simultaneously meets environmental, economic, societal, public-health and global responsibilities. Allowing European or even British farming to abandon food production will not deliver that necessary mix. Not without reason do fair-trade bodies now apply thinking honed in the developing world to farming nearer home. A culture that cannot feed itself is at risk, wherever it is.

Tim Lang is professor of food policy, City University, London. He is the co-author of Food Wars, and The Atlas of Food, both published by Earthscan

Desert island dinners

What couldn’t you live without?

George Monbiot writer and environmentalist

I’ll eat most kinds of road-kill if it’s no more than a couple of days old. I have a diverse diet. I grow 40 different kinds of vegetable, and 30 varieties (across seven species) of fruit. I’ve eaten more than 60 species of wild fungus, and pounce on anything that moves and is in season. I catch crayfish, perch and pike from the river, and mayflies when there’s a hatch on. Pity, too, the grasshopper or beetle grub that crosses my path. Basically, I eat everything. Except parsnips. They’re disgusting.

Arabella Weir author and comedian

I start the day with wholemeal toast spread with marg and low-sugar marmalade, all washed down with two cups of decaf Earl Grey tea. I don’t “do” lunch. But if I’m out I’ll have sushi (I try not to eat bread after breakfast). And if someone else is paying I’ll always have pudding. I rarely drink at lunch as I can’t stop once I’ve started. I join the kids for supper, especially if I’ve cooked risotto. It’s less likely if I’ve made fish fingers and baked beans. I try to eat fish and vegetables for dinner, but usually end up with a packet of oatcakes and a bottle of wine. I couldn’t live without pudding, as long as it doesn’t wobble or contain bananas – a cooked banana is an abomination. I could happily never eat oysters again. They taste like cold sperm (not great when it’s warm either).

Roger Scruton writer and philosopher

I couldn’t live without tomatoes, basil, olive oil, white Burgundy or red Bordeaux, all being essential to my dreams. I would be happy never to eat chocolate ever again, since it is associated with all that I dislike about children, my own included.

Sinclair Beecham co-founder of Pret A Manger

I’d be hard-pressed to list a typical breakfast, lunch and dinner. I eat everything. I like fish and I should eat more of it, but I eat a lot of green vegetables. I love cabbage. We get our meat from local farmshops in Hampshire. I’m not a great pudding fan – if they were cancelled I wouldn’t care. My weakness is a great burger, but they’re hard to come by – PJs in the Fulham Road and Caprice are both good exceptions. It’s also true that everything tastes great with butter. We probably eat too much butter.

Ann Widdecombe MP and TV agony aunt

A world without potatoes would be my idea of hell. But I would cheerfully never see another cooked mushroom – ghastly slimy things – or kidney (why must people ruin perfectly good steak pies with them?).

1 Romy Cuisine Welsh lamb and garlic confit

What is it? Rare breeds Welsh lamb, organic carrots and fresh herbs

Easy? Order from the website of French-born Romy and partner Guy (www.romycuisine.co.uk). Empty into a pan and heat for five minutes.

Verdict? We were impressed by the easy cook method and how the finished product looked. The taste was good, but a bit too salty, and the carrots were soggy. At £7 a jar, it's pricey, but we welcome the pure ingredients. **5/10**

2 Waitrose beef stroganoff

What is it? Aberdeen Angus beef strips in cream, mushroom and paprika sauce.

Easy? Microwave for nine minutes, or oven cook for 40 minutes.

Verdict? Not for the health conscious. Creamy, tasty but heavy on the double cream and butter. Real stroganoff uses sour cream. £6.99. Serves two. **7/10**

3 Steam Malaysian chicken laksa

What is it?

Chicken, coconut, bok choy, yellow courgettes and egg noodles.

Easy? Available at Waitrose or from www.steamdelicious.com. Five minutes in the microwave.

Verdict? Looked good, tasted awful. "Dry", and "rubbery noodles" were some of the comments. At £3.99 it should be a winner, but it wasn't. **1/10**



4 Simply Organic mixed bean chilli

What is it? Organic tomatoes, kidney beans, red peppers, lentils etc.

Easy? Readily available. Microwave for three to four minutes.

Verdict? Typical veggie ready meal. Not very spicy, a bit bland, but lentils were good. Very cheap at £1.99. **4/10**

Chef-in-a-box

The *New Statesman's* ready-meal taste test

The choice, consistency and cost of ready-meals has changed dramatically since Birds Eye launched its frozen food packs in 1939, and "boil in the bag" products arrived in the 1960s. The 1970s saw British culinary tastes explode, and when the microwave appeared the scope for ready-meals was endless. Today, more people want organic and healthy ingredients but have less time to cook them. So what are the options? We tested ten of the best ready-meals from independent local suppliers and national supermarkets.

5 Down From The hills Gloucester Old Spot pork and mustard casserole

What is it? Leg of Monmouthshire pork and whole grain Dijon mustard

Easy? Order from family-run supplier of fresh or frozen handmade food – (www.downfromthehills.co.uk). Defrost, microwave for five minutes.

Verdict? A little watery, but the pork was good. Look online for other dishes. Also pricey at £8.25, but the efficient, friendly service makes it worth it. **6/10**

6 Dining-Made-Easy Thai red duck curry

What is it?

Duck, coconut milk and vegetables from Thailand.

Easy? Boil in the bag or microwave for eight minutes. Order at www.dining-made-easy.co.uk.

Verdict? The absolute winner on all counts. "Delicious", "colourful" and "very authentic". Expensive at £10.95, but it does serve two. **9/10**



7 Marks and Spencer Gastropub range cod, prawn and smoked haddock fish pie

What is it? As the title suggests, with potato and cheese.

Easy? 45 minutes in the oven.

Verdict? Comfort food. Delicious if you're in the mood, but a bit too cheesy and the prawns are lost in it. Serves two amply. £4.99. **7/10**

8 Chef on Board vegetable tagine

What is it? Aubergine, cashew nuts, potatoes, apricots, chickpeas, sultanas.

Easy? Buy at www.chefonboard.com. Oven cook for 40 to 45 minutes.

Verdict? Not bad on taste. Nice ingredients, reminiscent of student food. Not a bad price at £3.75. **5/10**

9 Graig Farm Organics turkey dinner

What is it?

Organic turkey, celery, leek and onion sauce.

Easy? Order at www.graig-farm.co.uk. Microwave for five minutes.

Verdict? Thin slices. "Brings back memories of school dinners", but "tastes better than it looks". Not bad at £5.65. **5/10**



10 Bighams salmon primavera

What is it? Salmon, béchamel sauce, asparagus, fennel and courgettes.

Easy? Buy at www.bighams.com or at Waitrose. In the pan for ten minutes.

Verdict? Delicate and delicious flavour, sauce not too heavy. Good price £5.99. Serves two. **8/10**





We are what we eat . . . aren't we?



Michael Bailey, CEO of Compass Group PLC, argues that the increasingly politicised debate about food and public health is missing the key issue – the need to reconnect consumers with the food they eat and where it comes from

You may not have heard of Compass Group, but we are the world's leading foodservice company employing over 400,000 people and serving 20 million meals a day for over 25,000 clients in more than 90 countries. We feed people at work, in hospital, at school and at university; people on the move, at leisure or in remote, and sometimes hostile, environments.

Our scale and geographic spread gives us a unique insight into, and an enormous influence on, what people choose to eat. In the four decades that I have worked in the industry, I have seen enormous change, but there has never been as much focus as there is in Britain now on food and its impact on our health.

As a nation, we are obsessed with food – television channels and magazines are devoted to it, two of the top ten bestselling books on Amazon are about it, chefs are television celebrities and the choice in supermarkets and restaurants has never been greater. Yet traditional meals, when families sit down together, are being replaced with a “grab and go” culture of eating what we want, when we want and where we want. Food scares such as BSE, avian flu and Sudan 1 have shaken confidence in the food industry. But at the same time, record numbers of people are obese or overweight, and cases of coronary heart disease and Type 2 diabetes continue to increase.

Media commentators, politicians, and health and food experts all put forward theories as to why, as a nation, our waistlines are expanding. Most blame fast food and a more sedentary lifestyle – we simply consume more calories than we expend. Intuitively, this feels right, but hard evidence is lacking and the causes are probably more multifaceted than a simple “calories in, calories out” argument. In any case, seeking to apportion blame distracts

from finding solutions. It seems to me that what is missing from the food and obesity debate is the simple truth that, as consumers, we are increasingly disconnected from what we eat and where it comes from.

Food is essential to life. Some of us live to eat and others eat to live, but Britain, as a nation, does not respect the important role that food can play in defining our identity. You only have to look across the Channel to France to see the difference. Just one in ten French adults is obese, compared to one in five Britons and one in three Americans. A recent survey conducted by the French government's Committee for Health Education (CFES) found that eating is still very closely linked to a national heritage of consuming good food for pleasure. This is true not only in the home but also in French schools and workplaces.

For the French, the “lunch hour” is sacred – they sit down to a three-course meal with time to enjoy it. Not so in Britain. Eurest is Compass Group's global workplace catering brand and every two years in the UK we survey lunchtime eating habits. The latest survey published last year showed that the average British worker's “lunch hour” was just 27 minutes, a 25 per cent reduction on 2000, and that one in five workers didn't take a break at all. The survey also revealed that British workers spend an average of just over £2 a day on lunch, but an additional £3 is spent on snacks during the day. Rather than sitting down and savouring their food, British workers are most likely to eat standing up or while checking their e-mails or in a lay-by, with little thought being given to what they're eating, where it comes from and whether it is good for them.

In schools, the number of children eating a school lunch has declined from two-thirds in 1980 to two-fifths today. The National Curriculum also focuses on food technology and design rather than where food comes from and the practical aspects of how to prepare, cook and enjoy it. No wonder children think that milk comes from Tesco and that fish have fingers. In some schools, children even have to be taught how to use a knife and fork.

Critics would argue that this sorry state of affairs is all the fault of the food industry, and that regulatory intervention is needed to

turn back the tide. Conversely, the food industry would argue that they are only responding to consumer demand for greater choice and convenience and that what people choose to eat is a matter of personal choice. But whoever is to blame – and that really isn't the most important issue – there are no quick fixes. Improving the nation's diet requires an integrated approach in which all the interest groups co-operate.

At Compass, we recognise that we have a role to play in this effort. What differentiates our business from food manufacturing or the fast-food sector is that we have thousands of chefs in units up and down the country and across the globe, preparing and cooking food to meet the needs of their customers. There are no central menus or recipes, no one-size-fits-all portion control. For us, cooking is a craft skill and food is something to be savoured. But sadly, not all our clients see it that way. The current debate ignited by Jamie Oliver over school meals has highlighted what happens when best value is interpreted as lowest price and when caterers are pressurised to deliver on cost rather than quality.

What concerns me about the current debate, not just over school meals but in general, is that we are in danger of categorising foods as being good or bad. This is short-sighted. The traffic light labelling/signposting scheme favoured by the government would put food such as bread and lettuce in the red light, "bad category" – bread has a high salt content and lettuce is high in natural sugars.

Foodservice companies such as Compass have always been at the forefront of developing innovative, high-quality nutritious products that meet our customers' lifestyle choices. We have put in place a set of guiding principles that reflects the diverse needs of our clients and customers in different sectors and locations. Entitled "Balanced Choices", they adopt a philosophical approach to wellness that reflects our chef-led culture and passion for good food. We are committed to:

- providing a wide choice of safe, high-quality, wholesome and enjoyable dishes that enable our customers to eat healthily
- giving our customers access to information that helps them choose the right food to suit their chosen lifestyle and improving our employees' understanding so that they can better advise customers on their choice
- using fresh, seasonal products which, wherever possible, are from sustainable sources
- working with suppliers and manufacturers to ensure that the ingredients we use and products we serve meet our objectives



- working with other parts of the food chain, our clients and national governments to promote the benefits of healthy eating and an active lifestyle.

Central to these commitments is a belief that we need to reconnect consumers with the food they eat. The Curry Commission that was set up 2001 in the wake of the foot-and-mouth outbreak recommended "reconnecting farmers with the food chain and the food chain with the countryside". It suggested that we need to "reconnect with the role of consumers, their perspectives and the health impact of the food they eat".

As chairman of Business in the Community's (BiTC) Rural Action Leadership Team, I have established a small group of BiTC members from the food industry to work with the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs, the National Farmers' Union and English Farming and Food Partnerships, on a project called "Plough to Plate". The project highlights what the food industry is already doing to achieve this reconnection, and what more can and should be done.

Central to the team's work is how we can introduce the next generation to food, farming and countryside. I passionately believe that while improving the quality and nutritional value of school meals is a priority, any actions must be taken within the context of a whole-school approach, one that embraces food and health education, physical exercise and reintroduces practical

cookery as a compulsory subject. We also need to explore ways of helping parents better understand what constitutes a healthy diet for them and their children.

Some commentators want to turn the clock back to a time when food served in schools, hospitals, workplaces and at home was prepared and cooked from fresh ingredients bought in the local market by cooks and housewives. It is a romantic and appealing notion, but in a world where technological advances mean that convenience is the key driver, sadly unrealistic.

Recently I came across a book written by Dr Magnus Pyke, entitled *Townsmen's Food*, in which he explores the tension between nutrition and food science. He writes: "The more intelligent nutritionists now appreciate that nutritional completeness and orthodoxy can be obtained without requiring the consumption of specific 'health foods', while enlightened technologists realise that their business prospers best if the products they manufacture are wholesome as well as attractive."

He's right. What surprised me is that he was writing this more than 50 years ago – real food for thought.

Please Sir, can I have some more?

From wholesome and nutritious food in the 1960s to the Turkey Twizzlers and fizzy drinks of today – whatever went wrong with our school meals? By **BEE WILSON**

Queen's pudding. Manchester tart. Applemeringue pie. Pineapple sponge. Date pudding and custard. Banana jelly with cream. Milk pudding with rosehip syrup. Apricot flan. There was a sweet melodiousness to the puddings served to children in postwar British schools. They came fortified with fruit, milk and motherly love, to feed up growing bones. Doubtless, they were sometimes stodgy. Some children dreaded their semolina, and tried to hide it under their spoon when the teacher wasn't looking. But there is something about these names that produces a feeling of comfort – the feeling of being well provided for.

In the 1960s, all of these puddings were on the school menus for the Inner London Education Authority. An official pamphlet from 1967, *Meals for School Children*, shows just how much care went into the preparation of school meals in London. Green vegetables would arrive in a school kitchen three times a week to be sure of remaining fresh and crisp, with seasonal variation depending on "what is available". All vegetables should be cooked "for the shortest possible time", and without bicarbonate of soda. The pamphlet's author is enlightened enough to see that many children prefer raw vegetables to cooked and advises including watercress, tomato and parsley as well as grated raw cabbage. Potatoes were mashed, fried, roasted or boiled, but not generally chipped. Rosehip syrup was given for vitamin C, and because children liked its sour-sweet taste.

Perhaps the most impressive thing is the meat cookery. It wasn't all baked liver and spam fritters (though these did pop up on certain days). On the best days, the lucky children were treated to roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; cold veal and ham pie; stuffed lamb loin with mint sauce; steak and kidney pie; or beef olives. It was expected that every kitchen should have a stockpot, with bones procured from the butcher boiled down to make a good rich stock. Minced meat was not ready-minced, but bought in the piece and minced by the kitchen.

Compare this with the kitchen culture that greeted Jamie Oliver nearly four decades on when he arrived in the kitchen at Kidbrooke Secondary School in Greenwich for his recent Channel 4 series. Instead of a seasonal rotation of plentiful vegetables, there was a single meagre bowl of frozen peas to go between 500 children. Instead of freshly minced meat, he found an array of nastily pink turkey burgers and what Oliver himself has called "f***ing Botswanan free-flow beef". We all know the public outcry that ensued. Not since Upton Sinclair published his novel *The Jungle* in 1906, on the horrors of the Chicago meat industry, prompting Theodore Roosevelt to introduce federal meat inspection, has a cultural event

produced such an immediate shift in government policy on public health. The result in Oliver's case was the £280m pledged to improve school meals and the acknowledgement at last from new Labour that "something must be done".

But the question remains as to why British school meals went so badly wrong in the first place. How and when did a service that was meant to be part of a child's education – providing for their bodily development while teachers fed their minds – get reduced, in places, to a morass of Turkey Twizzlers, chicken nuggets and potato smiley faces? Unusually, this is a question on which almost every expert agrees. When did the school meals service first deteriorate? 1980. How? The Local Government Act of Thatcher's first term of office.

The school meals expert Nan Berger has written that "the 1980 Act was a piece of political assassination calculated to destroy the school meals service". This undermined the nutritional content of school meals and the breadth of their provision. Until 1980, the price of the meals was fixed nationally.

The LEAs had to subsidise free school meals. It was not in their interest to keep quality up

This gave a level of nutritional security, especially to children on free meals. In 1950, the price of lunch was sixpence; by 1969 it was one shilling and ninepence. But in 1980, the national price was abolished and replaced with any price the local education authority saw fit to charge. Given that LEAs had to bear the cost of subsidising free school meals, it was not in their interests to keep the price high enough to keep up quality.

The result was huge discrepancies in the price of school meals across the country that remain to this day. If you are a child receiving free school meals on the Isles of Scilly, your lunch will have cost £1.75, of which a generous 90p goes on ingredients (according to recent figures produced by the *Guardian*). By contrast, a child in Stockton-on-Tees is given a meal priced at £1.35, of which 39p goes on ingredients. Even allowing for the magic that a good cook can work with meagre ingredients, the chances are that the Scilly Isles child will have had a proper meal while the Stockton child will have had little more than a processed snack.

In 1978, the then secretary of state for education, Shirley Williams, told the House of Commons she would "deplore" any attempt to replace the school meal with a "snack meal that

had nothing like the same nutritional value". But after 1980, this happened in many places, as several LEAs introduced "cash cafeterias" in secondary schools, some of which churned out low-cost burgers, chips and fizzy drinks to turn a quick profit. Many good cooks were made redundant, their skills no longer needed. (In 1981, Tim Lang calculated that the 1980 Act resulted in 30,000 lost jobs.) How did the LEAs get away with this? Because the 1980 act abolished any minimum nutritional standards for school meals and did this in the name of "parental responsibility" and "choice". Things got even worse in 1986, when the Social Security Act withdrew provision for free school meals to half a million children. Worse still, in 1991 the Conservatives introduced "compulsory competitive tendering", which handed the contracts for school meals services to those who could do it cheapest – in many cases, the big private firms such as Scolarest, exposed on *Jamie's School Dinners*.

It is all very different from the 1944 Education Act, when a universalist system of school meals was set up, financed mostly by central government. This act required LEAs to provide a free meal to every child in a maintained school. Cooks were to work on the assumption that for many children this would be their only substantial meal of the day. Clear nutritional guidelines outlined the ideal balance of proteins and fats. School lunch, moreover, was to be seen as an integrated part of the school day. This was in contrast to the 1906 Education Act, which treated school meals not as a universal part of education but as a way of treating "needy" children who might otherwise starve. This left school catering tainted with a whiff of the soup-kitchen and a stigma that attaches even now to free school meals. The 1944 Act was designed to remove this stigma and make a wholesome midday meal – complete with Manchester tart or apple meringue pie – available to every child, rich or poor.

So far, in British history, there have been three philosophies of school meals: a charitable philosophy – the piecemeal feeding of the malnourished of 1906; a consumerist philosophy – the give-children-what-they-want-at-a-low-price-and-never-mind-if-they-become-diabetic-and-obese ethos of

1980, 1986 and 1991; and a universalist philosophy – the inclusive spirit of 1944. These are, essentially, the three models of how to treat children (especially poor children): as pitiable Oliver's asking for more; as walking wallets; or as citizens deserving health and a dignified life.

As it enters its third term of office, it is still unclear what the government's philosophy is. In 1997, David Blunkett, then education secretary, lamented the way the quality of "school dinners" had deteriorated over the past 18 years, suggesting a universalist approach might return. But the messages since then have been mixed. Labour has increased the numbers eligible for free school meals, yet repeatedly declined to ban vending machines selling fizzy drinks in schools, as if Coca-Cola had a God-given right to worm its way into a child's education and teeth. There is still no clear



Feed the needy: for years school catering had the whiff of the soup-kitchen about it

connection between what is taught about food on the national curriculum and what children actually eat in the dinner hall. In 2000, the government gave schools the freedom to opt out of LEA provision of school meals, which has had good results – in schools such as St Peter's Primary in Nottinghamshire, where that inspired cook Jeanette Orrey introduced local and organic food; and bad results – in schools that signed themselves over to rapacious private contractors.

The National Fruit Scheme gives all children aged four to six a free piece of fruit every afternoon. But what of those over six? As on so many other questions, new Labour has tried to square a universalist philosophy with a consumerist one, with odd touches of charity here and there. The confusion isn't helped by the fact that school meals fall between three Whitehall departments – Health, Education and Social Security – all of which would see a benefit if only the government could reclaim the spirit of 1944, and make a decent, well-cooked school lunch a universal entitlement rather than a matter of chance.

Bee Wilson is a food columnist on the Sunday Times. She is writing a book on the history of adulteration

Meat ain't what it used to be

Food has become a global commodity. People can no longer name the parts of an animal. But **PETER DE BOLLA** has happy memories of life as a butcher's son

My father had very distinctive hands. The fingers were thick cut, slightly fleshy, the palms wide and smooth. There was evidence of mistreatment, scars and blemishes that bore witness to his trade. He had the soft but powerful hands possessed by all master butchers; soft on account of the frequent libation of animal fats and grease, and powerful since they were constantly exercised in the daily practice of his craft. Even if they were well worn by the time he died, they remained as sensitive as a surgeon's.

In the early 1950s when he started his business, Miles and Sons, in south London, butchers were the nobility of the high street. They were proud of their craft – my father's shop was built upon a simple principle: to supply the best meat at a competitive price. A typical working day began at 3am with a drive to the central London meat market. On returning, the window was prepared: hind quarters of beef were cut up, standing roasts prepared, and shins boned for casserole meat; lambs were split lengthwise, the loins cut into chops, breasts rolled and stuffed; sides of pork were broken into roasting joints; chickens quartered and, at Christmas, turkeys boned out, stuffed and reformed. Along with offal and all manner of game, the meats were displayed on the marble slab. He would then stop the traffic, stand in the middle of the road and inspect his handiwork. In the evening, after the shop had been meticulously cleaned, he loaded the van and made his deliveries. Supper would often be eaten after 10pm.

My father was introduced to farming when, aged 17, he was adopted into my mother's family, who kept goats, three pigs, chickens and geese. The company he later founded was very much a family affair. My grandmother, mother, uncle, three brothers (two of whom took over when my father retired through ill-health) and I all helped, and his lifelong fantasy was the foundation of a retailing dynasty to rival Sainsbury's.

But economies of scale crush all competition, which shows up in the decreasing diversity of animals bred for human consumption. Over the past 20 years, more than 300 breeds of farm animals worldwide have become extinct. The foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001 accelerated this process alarmingly.

The beef my father sold came from animals that had spent most of their lives grazing the lowlands of Scotland, moving from pasture to pasture through the season. Only during the harshest winter months would the cattle be moved to shelter and feed on hay or other winter feeds. He was passionate about the breeds he bought – Aberdeen Angus for rib, and the less common Dexter, which provided meat with a nutty flavour for small tenderloins. Late in life, with a couple of empty fields lying idle next to his house, he tried his hand at

rearing animals. He began with chickens, producing free-range eggs, and these were a revelation to me since their size and taste were unlike any I had eaten. Lambs and cattle followed. By the time the lambs appeared I was an ageing adolescent with little time for my father's practice of feeding them out of a baby's milk bottle. Furthermore, I thought he was getting far too attached to them. Indeed, when the time came to take the lambs to slaughter, he could not see it through and had them sent to market instead.

Cattle were less lovable, but he still took them to the slaughterhouse and did all in his power to ease their way. He was very proud of the meat he sold to his best customers. He knew how these animals had been cared for, what they had been fed, and how the meat had been prepared and hung. He was connected to the entire process and felt it to be quite natural.

One day my father showed me how chickens were killed. This was how I found myself in the yard helping him fetch dinner. Chickens do not willingly give up their freedom, and

After much commotion, the bird was cornered and its neck broken with a twist of my father's hands

the one we had in mind escaped the coop as soon as it realised our intentions. Its shrieking alerted the 80 other birds, which led to a huge commotion, with feathers flying everywhere and laying hens knocked off their perches. The old bird headed for my father's prize geranium bed, destroying it, before reaching the greenhouse. We were soon among the tomato plants. It was only a matter of time before the bird was cornered and its neck broken with a powerful twist of my father's hands. Animals, like humans, react to danger physiologically. High secretions of adrenalin immediately prior to slaughter makes for bad meat. Supper that evening tasted like shit.

Meat brought us together as a family. It had a ritual significance and we marked the seasons with it – Michaelmas goose, Christmas turkey, spring lamb – which my father believed connected us all to a long and deep cultural tradition.

The meat came from London's Smithfield Market. There has been a market there for centuries. When I first visited it as a child in the 1960s, it still felt like a Victorian trading hall. The "shops" – the areas of the trading floor allotted to different wholesalers – were minimally equipped with rails for hanging sides of pork or hindquarters of beef. Sawdust was on the ground to catch the drips from the hanging carcasses.

Chickens, with head and feet still attached, grouse and pheasants were packed in boxes; rabbits and hares in their fur slung against walls. The market had its own language, “backslang”, and fluency was essential for bartering and negotiations. The shops employed “cutters” to break down the large carcasses, though my father disapproved of wholesalers doing any butchery at all, since it impinged on his expertise and role in this complex system for the provision of meat. Once the item had been selected, a “bumeree porter” loaded the carcasses on to barrows and transported the meat to purchasers’ waiting vans. By the 1970s, with the rise of the supermarkets, the volume of meat passing through the market was declining.

Today, the market is not much more than a food mall. It looks splendid – in the early 1990s, the City of London Corporation spent millions refurbishing the old Victorian trading halls to current EU standards. Each shop is now refrigerated. Only those wearing all white – hard hats, overalls, trousers and shoes – are allowed in to the partitioned areas where the meat hangs. Everyone else is permitted only to browse the chill cabinets at the front of each shop. These are full of vacuum-packed lumps of meat – a whole beef tenderloin or leg of pork – that have been butchered in the chilled rooms out back. The morning I was last there, I walked along the main aisle of the market behind two elderly women. They were able to buy cakes from one shop and large jars of pickled cucumbers from another.

My father’s skill lay not only in driving the hardest bargain, but also in selecting the best carcasses. His eye was impeccable. He could tell a steer from a knackered dairy cow without pausing for breath; the age of the animal at slaughter was assessed from the size of sections of the carcass; the feed it had



Endangered species: though London's Smithfield Market retains some of its Victorian charm, the butcher's trade is dying out as our eating habits change

been finished on was indicated by the outer covering of fat. Buying ready-butchered, vacuum-packed meat yields rather less information, but this hardly matters since there is no longer the range of products. The bumerees and their barrows have been replaced by fork-lift trucks and the 19th-century cold store is now a nightclub. Smithfield is a thriving “foodie” destination – a deli sells four kinds of foie gras and hand-crafted French tableware. The market is now a meat boutique.

Meat these days is a global commodity. On a recent visit to my local superstore, I bought pork from the West Country (300 miles from where I live), lamb from Wales (200 miles), beef from Scotland (400 miles), chickens from Loue in France, salami from Tuscany, ostrich from the United States and venison from Ireland.

In this changing food culture, the meat industry develops “value-added meats” and “home-replacement meals” to cater to altered lifestyles. This

contributes to the extinction of both knowledge and expertise. Where once my father demonstrated to his family how to carve a saddle of lamb, and discussed subtle changes in taste and texture depending on the method, today many people would be unable to locate a shoulder of lamb on the living animal; even fewer know where sweetbreads come from.

There was a butcher at 121 Kirkdale, the site of my father’s shop, for nearly 200 years. The delicate Georgian ladies of Dulwich would buy their meat there, the Victorian grandees of Crystal Palace would have known the shop. Miles and Sons ceased trading in 1998. The premises are now a fast-food chicken outlet. It would have broken my father’s heart.

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Does the health of the nation depend on the media?

Has food, particularly in the media, ever been more popular? The headlines – on health, obesity, school meals, advertising to children, the benefits of breakfast, sugar, fat content, weight loss, weight gain, GI v Atkins diets, blueberries as the new “superfood” – are unending. So what do readers, viewers and listeners really think of all this well-meaning advice?

When IGD asked shoppers what they thought of the current health advice in the media, 61 per cent believed that their diet was already healthy enough, so the advice didn't apply to them.

Most people believe that a healthy lifestyle is not just about diet and should encompass a range of activities. Half the people who IGD researchers spoke to believed that the major factor in a healthy diet was eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day – no matter how much fat, salt or sugar the rest of their diet contained; 12 per cent never thought at all about the nutritional value in the food they bought.

The primary catalyst for eating a healthy diet is either to lose weight or stop gaining weight. But some people believe that, as long as they eat a healthy diet, this will compensate for the problems attributed to being overweight.

So what do they think constitutes being overweight? IGD found that the most common way people decide is to compare themselves with those around them. Of the people asked, 30 per cent thought that they were fine if they were smaller than their peers. A further 26 per cent made a judgement based on how their clothes fitted and only 18 per cent consulted a weight chart.

The debate on food advertising that targets children on TV has been ongoing fodder for the media. But how much influence does television really have? Not much, according to the parents

spoken to by IGD. Certainly among pre-secondary school-age children, parents believed that sponsorship of TV programmes and food-brand sponsorship of popular sports teams or clubs have little influence on their children's eating habits. Only 33 per cent believed that advertising food on TV during children's TV did have an influence. Eating at home was more important still, according to 41 per cent of parents. Parental influence was identified as the most important by 84 per cent of parents.

Teenagers, as any parent knows, are more complicated. What they believe and what they do are often at odds. Research among groups of teenagers across the UK showed that their concept of healthiness was a bit like their view of pensions – something you do when you are much older. As one 17-year-old boy said: “I will eat junk food until I am 30, and then I'll start acting like a grown-up.”

So, while 74 per cent of those teenagers asked could recognise that eating good food was related to being healthy, 45 per cent said that they would only worry about eating healthier food when they were older. That's not surprising when their perception of “healthy” means food that is boring and lacking in variety. They knew that eating fruit and vegetables was important, but could only imagine vegetables in the context of a roast dinner. They couldn't think of dishes where vegetables were the main ingredient, even something as common as vegetable lasagne.

Though cereal was identified as a food that was often preferred as an evening snack by teenagers rather than as a breakfast choice, when it came to the crunch 75 per cent actually ate crisps, chocolates or biscuits before bedtime. That same combination was the favourite choice for an after-school snack by 52 per cent of teenagers. However, 38 per cent did admit to eating fruit after school, and 42 per cent ate





a sandwich or toast. Teenagers also wanted the most they could get for their money. But their analysis of “value for money” did not always match that of their parents.

For teenagers, the image and prestige of a brand was often as important as the physical quality of the product. The value of a product was often related to peer-group acceptance and, for some, this was priceless.

When it comes to brands, reputation was based on expertise and penetration in specific markets. For teenagers, a brand's reputation could be weakened if it diversified too far from its original area of expertise. “A brand such as Adidas should just make sports wear. They shouldn't make everything. They should specialise,” said a 14-year-old boy.

Though teenagers often display considerable brand loyalty, at times this appeared to be mainly driven by a reluctance to risk trying something new. They do, however, admire companies who have invested heavily in an innovative new product and fought off strong competition to be the first to launch it.

“Proper brands will put more research into something to make it taste nice. Supermarkets would just put it together quickly so it's cheaper,” said a 17-year-old boy.

And advertising? Teenagers see advertising with very logical eyes and relate it to building awareness of a brand in order to

build sales. But, if all the television programmes and magazine features devoted to food and healthy eating are failing to persuade the population that their habits are leading them into obesity and health-related problems, perhaps now is the time to review just what will make a nation take notice of the need for radical change – before it is too late.

IGD is a leading source of information, research and education on the European and global food and grocery industry. It has a membership of more than 500 companies, which includes farmers, manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors, retailers and catering companies. As a think-tank, it tracks, analyses and forecasts developments, which result in insightful and thought-provoking reports and events. Because of its reputation for impartiality, IGD has a unique relationship with leading industry figures, and encourages companies across the whole of the food industry to work more closely together. It also has a consumer research programme that monitors trends and behaviour and acts as an early-warning system for the industry. For useful factsheets, research reports or further information, visit the IGD website www.igd.com or contact us at IGD, Grange Lane, Letchmore Heath, Watford WD25 8DG. Tel: 01923 857 141.

Two little piggies went to market

CRAIG MOYES and **WILLIAM SKIDELSKY** are passionate about cooking and eating. They set off to find and feast on cheap, local, seasonal, nutritious food fit for a family

Local markets seemed not so long ago to be heading towards extinction. Food that is cheap and easy to prepare has come to be seen as a basic right for postwar Britons; and rightly or wrongly, street markets are seen as being unable to provide either bargains or convenience. Often, those markets that still thrive, such as Borough Market in Southwark, have managed to transform themselves into purveyors of fine, rare and often expensive delicacies.

But if street markets and local traders could furnish our basic grocery needs 40 years ago, can they not still do so today? Have supermarkets so cheapened our palates and gratified our purses that we can no longer do what generations of good English cooks have done before us, which is quite simply to serve up tasty and nutritious food made from seasonal produce bought at a reasonable price? The answer, as William Skidelsky and I discovered, depends on your culinary adventurousness as much as on your neighbourhood. My own, around Hackney's Broadway Market—only last year a semi-moribund place with two original independent traders, but now reinvigorated by a weekly street market—responded admirably to the challenge. Here is the itinerary of the resulting meal, a dinner for four adults and two children.

Friday evening, and I'm already pondering tomorrow's menu. I stop off on the way home from work at James Elliott, a butcher's shop in Essex Road (in neighbouring Islington), in search of some interesting offal. Salad of pigs' ears? Always good value, but apparently demand is down: they need to be



pre-ordered. Tripe? Not really a summer dish. Then I see a large bowl of lambs' tongues on offer at only £4 a kilo. Pickling them overnight will tenderise the flesh and provide a refreshing and meaty accompaniment to the celeriac I noticed at last week's market and am hoping will be there again.

Rinse eight to ten lambs' tongues, place in a pot with parsley, tarragon, a bayleaf, mixed peppercorns, a sliced onion, two garlic cloves, a pinch of sea salt, and water to cover. Bring to the boil and simmer until the tongues are just tender (about an hour). Drain and peel the tongues when cool enough, slice them in half lengthwise and place in a jar.

In a small saucepan, combine a handful of tarragon, mixed peppercorns, five allspice berries and half and half of water and white wine vinegar (I used Maille walnut vinegar, which has a lovely sherryish aroma, but any good vinegar will do). Boil for a minute, pour over the tongues, cover and place in the refrigerator overnight.

Serve with a celeriac remoulade (grate the celeriac, parboil for one minute in acidulated water, rinse and mix with a mayonnaise made with extra vinegar and a dollop of mustard).

Saturday morning, and Will and I arrive at Broadway Market. First stop, the fish stall, a tiny table covered with a glistening array caught off the Suffolk coast that morning. We hesitate between the sublimely bug-eyed red gurnard (which I suggest we bake, then serve cold with a mayonnaise) and the slightly more expensive, but finer, red mullet. But mayonnaise is already accompanying the lamb's tongue, so perhaps



just a simple pan-fried starter? Will, keeping steadfastly to our brief of culinary economy, notices the mullet is bulging with roe and asks the fishmonger to fillet two, reserving the liver—much prized, he says, by the Romans—and the roe. The fishmonger even gives us extra, foolishly neglected by earlier clients. It all comes to less than a fiver.

Season the fillets, then lightly dust in the flour. Season the roe and liver.

Heat a little olive oil in a frying pan and place the fillets skin-side down. Fry for two minutes, then turn over. Add the roe. Continue to cook fillets and roe, turning regularly, until cooked (about one minute). Remove and keep warm.

Add the liver, and cook, turning regularly, for 30 seconds. Add a glass of white wine, and mash the liver into the liquid. Reduce by half. Add diced tomato and chopped parsley and take off the heat. Drizzle in some olive oil, stirring all the time. Pour sauce over mullet fillets and roe, and serve.

On to the main course. Henry Tidiman, whose father had a butcher's stall in the postwar, pre-Tesco days, when the market was a daily occurrence, has good-sized French rabbits in his window for £7.50. Wild English rabbits are available in the market from £3.50 each, but Tidiman's are much larger and still have their heads and innards, which means we have an *amuse-gueule* of split, grilled rabbit's brains, and pan-fried livers and kidneys on toast. Almost directly in front of the butcher's is Ted's Veg, which not only has the celeriac and the herbs, but beautiful spring carrots, bunches of small dark beets with their leafy tops, mushrooms, tomatoes and freshly-picked oak leaf lettuce (£6.50 for the lot). It is time, we feel, to revive that forgotten 18th-century classic, Salmagundi—a salad of anchovies, eggs and leaves with a heap of roasted and dressed meat in the centre—a sort of northern *salade Niçoise*. Hannah Glasse (*The Art of Cookery*, 1747) made hers with chicken, but we used marinated grilled rabbit. We also used roasted beetroot, sliced mushrooms and capers, but the nasturtium flowers called for by the venerable Mrs Glasse were, alas, unavailable. At this point I must confess to using some green beans I found in the fridge (they may even—*o tempora, o mores*—have come from Sainsbury's). The resulting dish, in any case, was a great success. Served with buttered steamed carrots and Jersey Royal potatoes from John, the original fruit 'n' veg man of Broadway Market, and—so as not to waste anything—a gratin of beet greens (added to a mixture of mushrooms, garlic, ricotta and eggs, topped with breadcrumbs, Parmesan and olive oil before being baked in a hot oven), the meal grew from a few things that caught our eye to nothing short of a feast. All for a little over £20.

Of course, if you want fine imported cheeses, or Continental specialities, all that is on offer too. But as Mrs Glasse warned 260 years ago: "If Gentlemen will have *French Cooks*, they must pay for *French Tricks*." A good English cook, however, will find that if he goes "to Market, the Ingredients will not come to above Half a Crown". That's two shillings and sixpence; or, in today's money, the equivalent of roughly £21.

What are you waiting for? Gentle reader, get thee to market!



ns food for thought

panic attacks

Don't believe what you read

WILLIAM SKIDELSKY

Unless you drink two litres of water a day, your body won't be properly hydrated. People in the west consume far too much salt, increasing their risk of high blood pressure. Non-organic foods are covered in harmful pesticides. The incidence of obesity would be drastically reduced if only we stopped gorging on Big Macs.

Many people would regard all of the above claims as true. After all, they are repeated incessantly in the media, by health officials and in general conversation. They have become nuggets of wisdom that shape our understanding of the relationship between what we eat and the healthiness of our bodies. So they must be true, mustn't they?

Well, not according to the authors of a bold new book: *Panic Nation: unpicking the myths we're told about food and health* (John Blake). Edited by two biochemists, Stanley Feldman and Vincent Marks, it sets out to demonstrate that, when it comes to food, we are collectively the victims of an incredible amount of hogwash.

The basic problem, according to the authors, is that our society is in thrall to the "precautionary principle". Ours is a worse-case-scenario mentality whereby any small or medium-sized risk is converted into a portent of near-certain catastrophe. Relatively trivial dangers – such as the recent Sudan 1 scandal – are magnified out of all proportion. Food is a natural focus for scaremongering, since it is common to everyone. According to Feldman and Marks, this is why so many of us believe that the food we eat is killing us, even though life-expectancy is longer than at any time in human history.

It is hard not to concede that they have



Be careful what you swallow: book suggests we are victims of exaggerated health scares

a point. The tone of the book may be trenchant, but the arguments are sensible and even-handed. The authors do not deny that the food we eat affects us, or that it is important to eat healthily. What they do say is that our ability to look rationally at the issues is hampered by the prevalence of all sorts of myths. The chapter on junk food is particularly thought-provoking. The term "junk food", it is suggested, is an oxymoron, since if a substance has nutritional value, then by definition it cannot be junk. Fat is fat, whether it comes from processed ground beef or from an Aberdeen Angus steak. Big Macs may not be good for you, but they are not outrageously unhealthy either: in fact, they contain roughly the same calories as a Safeway tomato, chicken and basil salad.

Fine, but does this matter? Is it really a problem if we exaggerate the danger of Big Macs? Well, Feldman and Marks would retort, it does matter, because

it changes the way we view an issue such as obesity. At present, the responsibility for obesity is placed squarely at the door of a group of foods that we arbitrarily choose to label "junk". If these foods were banned, or at the very least taxed, then obesity would disappear. In fact, the issue is more complex. A number of factors cause obesity, among them exercise levels, metabolism and diet. Whether or not a person habitually visits McDonald's may not be all that important.

The book makes other provocative claims. Pesticides are not present in large enough quantities to be remotely dangerous. The virtues of organic food are largely mythical, as are the hazards of GM. And as for fluid intake, it seems that you can safely put that bottle of mineral water away. Of the two litres the average person requires daily, half is provided as an inevitable consequence of the food they eat, and the rest by two cups of coffee and a glass of beer.

french dining

A hot lunch is just the ticket

CLARA YOUNG

When the French banking conglomerate Société Générale bought Hambros in 1998, one of the first people to get sacked was the head chef in London. The French company acquired Hambros for its financial expertise, but when it came to culinary matters, it was not trusting its kitchen to an Anglo philistine.

Yet, the cornerstone of France's gastronomic strength is not so much how well the nation cooks, but how well it eats. From the age of three, children at school are initiated into the great national table tradition of the four-course hot lunch. It begins with a cold entrée such as cucumber slices or grated carrots in *vinaigrette*, followed by a main course – *hachis parmentier* or *brandade de morue* are classics – and finishes with cheese and dessert. Until recently, it was a ritual that was maintained throughout one's school years and into the workplace. And even as the four-course institution gives way to the more ignoble realities of a sandwich *jambon-fromage* gobbled hastily in front of a computer, the leisurely lunch is an ideal the French defend as vigorously as universal medicare.

The €3 cafeteria lunch and sheaf of employer-subsidised lunch tickets – *tickets resto* – are a fundamental part of France's paternal corporate embrace. In a series of articles on eating habits in the workplace in October 2003, the French daily *Libération* reported that 75 per cent of all French companies have cafeterias that feed 65 per cent of the workforce in Paris and 50 per cent in the rest of France. And though the lunch break has been considerably reduced from the hour-and-a-half average in 1975, a study by *Journal du Management* this

year reports that, among its readership, executives still spend an average of 56 minutes at the table.

But, the French, like the rest of the world, are succumbing to eating on the run. Jean-Pierre Poulain, a socio-anthropologist and author of a study on changing eating habits, laments that the French are now often skipping cheese and dessert at lunch. Many blame the 35-hour working week that squeezes the workload into a shorter period. But the fault also lies with cafeteria food itself, which, though grandiosely laid out in four courses, can be as uninspiring in France as it is in other countries.

The model for the *restaurant d'entreprise* is the school lunch canteen, which first appeared in Paris schools in 1877. However, by the 1960s, institutional canteen lunches were no longer cooked on the premises but pumped out of centralised factory-like kitchens that ensured low costs and hygienic standards. The process has been streamlined even further with kitchens that merely assemble food that has already been cleaned, prepared and cooked in industrial food-processing plants.

Assembly-line lunch prep was a natural solution for the French, with their formidable agro-foodstuffs industry and appetite for rationalisation. It was the French, after all who invented food canning, and they are the world leader in the export of processed foods. But the result of all this industrialised efficiency has been industrial food, and *la cantine* – whether at school or at work – has become synonymous with soggy vegetables and tough meat.

To win back lunch-eaters, contract caterers such as Sogeres – the fourth-largest institutional catering company in France – have had to cook up something new. When Sogeres chefs were sent on a five-day training course with Alain Ducasse last February, they came back armed with sexy emulsion techniques. Instead of cardiac-arrest *blanquette de veau* and *cassoulet*, they now serve Cornish hen tenderly stewed in its own juices. Sogeres has also invented

the “scramble” for hurried customers, where different courses are simultaneously presented on a compartmentalised, TV-dinner platter. And they have turned canteens into food courts – an Alsatian booth serves choucroute, a Moroccan one, couscous and an Italian kiosk serves pastas, for example.

Institutional caterers such as Sogeres, Sodexo, Compass and Elixior are reforming canteen food to preserve profit margins, but there are also ideological and palatable concerns at stake. Ideological, because a sandwich wolfed down between meetings is the beginning of the descent towards the American vices of snacking, obesity and gastronomic ignorance. And palatable, because the midday meal will soon be a bygone pleasure, a lost *art de vivre* if corporate France does not entice its workforce back to the lunch-table.

supper clubs

The decadence of dining

CHRIS MOONEY

As instructed in the e-mail – sent to me by the friend of a friend of the man who runs the operation – I park my car a block away and walk a deliberately circuitous route to the address. It turns out to be a house, respectable enough, with lush foliage lining both sides of the cobble-stoned path to the front door. Still following instructions, I turn the knob and enter without knocking.

The willowy young woman who greets me doesn't look like a criminal, nor do the dozen or so well-dressed people seated at her table. They seem relaxed, sipping champagne and conversing quietly, but you can tell by the gleam in their eyes and the way they hungrily sniff the air that something illicit, even dangerous, is going on. ►

► And then, suddenly, it starts: the man who runs the operation, a concert promoter whose name I have promised not to divulge, but who just so happens to be my brother (sorry Kevin), enters the room and places a small bowl in front of each person. Pan-seared Digby scallops in five-spice carrot reduction. The crowd collectively moans, tucks in, and moans again. And that first taste, that first delectable gulp of perfectly seared scallop delicately napped in a lustrous, dark ochre, slightly Peking duck-tasting sauce, seals our fate, and begins our communal descent into crime.

Crime? What crime? Since when is it illegal for your brother to throw a dinner party?

Since the guests started paying.

Underground restaurants and supper clubs are springing up everywhere, from London to Vancouver, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Berlin and Paris. Besides the one allegedly run by my alleged brother out of my alleged sister's house (the willowy young woman – a nurse by day, an outlaw hostess/waitress/kitchen help by night), I'm particularly fond of the Paris address, mainly because I founded and run it.

Having told you this, I will now have to kill you.

What started as a lark last spring – a way of showing off my unique culinary talents to a selected coterie of devotees – has since grown into a thriving, tax-free, £4m-a-year business, with a guest-list that reads like a Who's Who of the hot and happening, and a steady line of Michelin-starred cooks clamouring for the special guest-chef spots.

In your wildest dreams. I'm lucky to break even. Like most underground restaurants, mine was born from expediency: we didn't have enough chairs, let alone table space, in our cramped Paris flat to comfortably seat our friends for dinner. And my wife resented the clean-up after. And, because of my love for expensive ingredients, I was spending a small fortune on every meal. So, after lengthy negotiations



Clandestine cuisine: underground Supper Clubs are flavour of the month in Paris

with the patron of a small, kitchen-less café across the street, the Paris arm of the notorious Supper Club syndicate opened its doors.

Our first meal had seven courses, starting with tiny cornets stuffed with basil cream and smoked wild Pacific salmon (smuggled over in my sister's luggage), passing through cockles, scallops, rabbit and beef cheeks, ashed *chèvre* cheese with tricoloured organic beet salad, coconut ice-cream and black Thai rice pudding, and finishing, finally, with chocolate marzipan truffles (made without a permit by my friend Simone, a Danish actress who also contravened a number of labour laws when she stitched together the tablecloth and napkins). Since then, the patron has put in a fridge and a cooker, which means we no longer have to dodge cars carrying each course over from our third-floor apartment.

Are we breaking the law? Aside from

the lack of health board and fire department certificates, the absence of food-handling, liquor, water and business permits, the temperature, structural, equipment, ventilation, insurance and zoning violations, and the tax fraud, well, yes, of course we are. But we are also providing a valuable community service. We break bread far beyond the sterile confines of the traditional restaurant, building friendships and offering that most ancient and sacred of experiences: a sinfully rich meal made with love. If our friends want to kick in a "donation" to cover groceries, where's the harm in that?

So what if we don't have separate restrooms and a snooty *maitre d'*? We have something that even the trendiest "legitimate" restaurant can't provide – true outlaw status, a seductively subversive commodity traditionally found only in speakeasies, opium dens, brothels, and backroom poker games.

So forget Jamie, Gordon and all the other brand-name beans-on-toast bad boys of the culinary world. Instead, join our merry band. Come over to the deliciously dark side of dinner.

community cooking

Man can't live on bread alone

RUTH SHELDON

When Caroline Clark spoke to children in Shoreditch about food, prior to setting up a new healthy living initiative in the area, she was shocked by their limited diets. "They would turn up after school starving," she said, "and one boy confessed that the only food he had at home was white bread." As a result, the Shoreditch Trust – the local provider of the government's New Deal for Communities initiative – for whom Clark works, ploughed resources into a new project. The Shoreditch Spa Healthy

Eating Programme, has now been running for two years.

At the Prospect Centre in Hoxton Square, where the programme is based, a fully equipped kitchen is used by Kye Lockwood to help local people learn about cooking healthy nutritious food. The centre offers “cook and eat” sessions, Sure Start drop-ins, short cookery courses and also puts on cookery demonstrations in local schools and community centres. The aim is to bring people together, while helping them to overcome a range of obstacles that make it difficult to eat nutritiously.

Many of the events are aimed at vulnerable members of society such as young parents or mental health groups. Lockwood recalls one pregnant 15-year-old girl, who was feeding herself on £10 a week. She owned only a microwave – no oven or pots and pans – and was living off microwave meals. A lack of access to decent ingredients is a major problem facing these people, who often rely on corner shops for their supplies. Faced with a selection of processed junk such as spaghetti hoops and pasties, it is near impossible to cook healthy, tasty meals. The programme helps people locate local, fresh produce, and also teaches parents how to make their own baby food.

The ethos of the centre – to provide a counter-voice to the food industry’s advertising and help people realise that they are not alone in struggling to create healthy and cheap meals, without lecturing to them – has been the key to its success. Jesse, who has two sons aged four and ten says: “It’s very personal, because you’re in a kitchen and everyone’s helping and sharing knowledge. We all want to be healthy, and I, as a mum, can’t afford to be ill.”

Lockwood admits that working on the project can be challenging – there have been times when he has held up an aubergine to be confronted by bewildered expressions. “But,” he says, “cooking is a great way of connecting with people and communicating the importance of healthy eating.”

ns diary of a gourmet's wife

What do you do when offered pig's head on a plate?
Open a packet of noodles, says **NATALIE BRIERLEY**

I should have known there'd be trouble when his friend asked me if I had passed the “pig's ear test”. I thought back to our first two dates to see what metaphorical moment he was alluding to. How good/bad I looked? How I held (and spilt) my pre-theatre champagne? Not, I hoped, anything that happened after the taxi home? It turns out that Mr B was known for testing his dates by offering them a pig's ear entrée. A girlfriend who'd refused didn't make it past dessert. I had been saved. I was vegetarian. The friend laughed as if to say “I'll give you a month”. Did he mean to be dumped or converted?

The month passed and the vegetarianism lasted two years until I was pregnant and craved meat. It started innocently, with a slice of chicken, but the descent was rapid. Two children later and my weekly fix of rare steak shows no sign of retreat. Mr B can hardly conceal his delight.

When it comes to food, he takes no short cuts. I try to insist on my childhood favourites, Oxo cubes, Bird's custard, Paxo stuffing, but no. Everything must be done with proper ingredients. To be fair, he does all the cooking and I reap the rewards. But I do sometimes crave the simplicity of baked beans *à la tin* rather than maple syrup infused with lard and slow baked, a recipe popular in his home town of Montreal.

When I went into labour at 3am, we sprang from our bed, too excited to sleep. I grabbed cleaning products; he prepared a postnatal feast. The NHS birth centre where I had my children has a communal kitchen. I'd have been happy with the white bread and

cornflakes they kindly left out. But his selection of cheeses, salads, patés and pastas, washed down with Veuve Cliquot, certainly hit the spot.

We are lucky enough to spend a lot of time in Burgundy. Mr B usually plans our route there around food. An early ferry means we pass Troyes by dinner time. Troyes is home to the Andouillette, a sausage made from a pig's lower intestine. Naturally, it smells – and tastes – of shit. A late ferry means a Paris stopover and a trip to a supper club or to Au Pied de Cochon, where at 5am nothing beats “La temptation de Saint Antoine”, pig parts, from trotters to tails.

Spring in Burgundy and lambs abound, so Mr B plans an Easter feast. Contrary to popular belief, the spring lamb in the shops is raised intensively, indoors, to meet the Easter deadline. The newborns in the field, we learnt, won't be ready until August. Instead, we have rabbit in chocolate sauce with spring carrots – a delicious irony.

“Pig's head is underrated,” Mr B tells me. At the market, he waits as people buy slices of porchetta. He is hoping that, if he waits long enough, he will get cheeks at a good price. He arrives back with the whole head. Our son, who adores snails and brains on toast, examines it carefully and, after polishing off the most delicious bits, poses for a picture with it.

Back in England, it's Friday night and Mr B's out with the boys. A haircut and shave, then grilled testicles and beer – local Turkish specialities. I switch on the TV, pour a glass of red and serve my steaming bowl of two-minute noodles. *Bon appétit!*

gardening

Grubby hands make good food

KIM WILDE

If we have learnt anything from Jamie Oliver this year, it is that showing healthy eating habits down kids' necks is not the way to convince them to eat fresh fruit and veg. I know some children who have never had any at all and they get quite upset if they are confronted with broccoli or carrots. The best way, as Oliver proved with his primary school classes – encouraging them to draw, talk about and cook the food themselves – is to engage children gently over a period of time.

Gardening is a great way for children to learn about where food comes from, while stimulating and exciting them at the same time. And like good food habits, good gardening comes from a collection of experiences. My own children, Harry (7) and Rose (5), are no different from others their age – they love Xbox and Bratz dolls. But they also spend hours in the garden, digging for worms or watering pumpkins ready for Halloween.

Parents often say that they don't have enough time to garden, but it doesn't have to take over your life. Tomatoes, courgettes and peas can all be grown in a container or grow-bag right outside the back door, and only need to be watered occasionally, while evergreen herbs such as lavender and rosemary are easy to grow in a sunny well-drained position and great for children to rub their fingers into and smell.

Delighting our senses is a thorough way of engaging interest in gardening in us all. For example, plants such as lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*), and the silky grass *Stipa tenuissima* feel lovely to touch. Creating a sensory area for children is a great idea; somewhere they can discover wild strawberries

growing from crevices, hear wind chimes as they rub mint between their fingers and gaze up into the faces of sunflowers. And don't worry if your own little seedlings lose interest for a while, and revert to the indoor world of computer games. You haven't failed; failure is not bothering in the first place.

cookbooks

Stripped to the bare essentials

NICHOLAS CLEE

Gastro-porn suggests various definitions. One was given on the Paul Whitehouse comedy series *Happiness* when Johnny Vegas, watching Nigella Lawson on TV, reached into his trousers. Another came from the food-writer Joanna Blythman: gastro-porn is the kind of programme we watch while consuming a ready meal. In a 1977 article in the *New York Review of Books*, Alexander Cockburn wrote: "True gastro-porn heightens the excitement and also the sense of the unattainable by proffering coloured photographs of various completed recipes . . . The delights offered in sexual pornography are equally unattainable." Gastro-porn offers satisfaction but never delivers it, and is therefore addictive.

Publishing industry research shows that cookery book aficionados try out only two or three recipes from each book on their shelves. A dismaying revelation perhaps, but judging by the buoyant market, nothing to worry about. People will always feel the urge to go back to the shops for more. Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay are among the most popular authors in the UK. They are the latest in a line going back through Keith Floyd and Anton Mosimann in the 1980s to Fanny Cradock and Philip

Harben in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet the rise of the cookery star has coincided with a decline in the amount of time people actually spend cooking.

Of course, there are many genuine cookery enthusiasts, who will buy, say, *The Moro Cookbook* and work their way enthusiastically through Sam and Samantha Clark's dishes. Many more buy those books – as they would a travel narrative such as Chris Stewart's *Driving Over Lemons* – in order to dream of escape to an idealised Spain. They may even admit the dishes in to their repertoires. But they soon discover that, perhaps as a result of their defective techniques or inability to source precisely the right ingredients, the recreation of Iberian delights in their own kitchens is elusive.

For the rest of the population, gastro-porn has no allure. Sea bream with roasted fennel, olives, clams, garlic and thyme (from Ramsay's *Kitchen Heaven*) is not a dish for the harassed parent on a limited budget. Those of us who are interested in cookery wring our hands over the reliance on convenience foods in many households.

But it is our own appetite for cookery as escapism that has created this division between foodies and those who, thanks to the dominating influence of gastro-porn, have come to think that cooking is a pursuit for the leisured classes.

We crave recipes; but what we need – cooks and non-cooks – is techniques. Most recipes employ a shorthand: they cannot include all the procedures that the cook might need to follow in order to achieve a successful result. If we lack the hobbyist's ardour, we take one look at these recipes and give up. Only Delia Smith has been effective in promoting basic cookery skills, which are far more valuable to the home cook than any number of lists of ingredients and instructions. But even Delia has not been able to halt an overall decline in our willingness to spend time in the kitchen handling fresh ingredients.

A further connotation of porn is that

it is obscene. You might use that word to describe a worship of food as a consumerist ideal divorced from the practicalities of cultivating and preparing it.

Nicholas Clee's Don't Sweat the Aubergine: what works in the kitchen and why, will be published in October by Short Books

mrs beeton

Cooking up a rural fantasy

KATHRYN HUGHES

The frontispiece of *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* of 1861 looks uncannily like the photographs on the walls of branches of Fresh 'n' Wild, which show the store's various artisanal and ethical suppliers in their natural habitats. In Mrs Beeton's version, an extended family group clusters around the door of a cottage at harvest time. The men are plump John Bulls. The principal female figure is serving them beer, probably brewed from her own grain. Ducks dabble, hens peck and cows drowse under a tree. The caption says the scene represents "The Free Fair Homes of England"; a time before industrialisation scarred the land, cutting off a generation of urban Britons from the source of their nourishment.

You just know that Mrs Beeton would love to step in to that picture. Her book is saturated with a longing for an agrarian world that had already slipped into extinction but just might, by some enormous effort, be brought back. So, in her instructions for making a syllabub, she suggests mixing up some sugar and nutmeg and then simply squirting the milk from a cow's udder straight into the bowl.

Animals destined for the table are described in their natural habitat with

such lulling, lyrical grace that you feel you are watching them from a hot, summer meadow. Mrs Beeton describes how a sheep "indolently and luxuriously chews his cud with closed eyes and blissful satisfaction, only rising when his delicious repast is ended to proceed silently and without emotion to repeat the pleasing process of laying in more provender". Pigs, meanwhile, snuffle in well-kept sties while deer bound through the heather.

Such soft-focus rural fantasy was only possible because Mrs Beeton was a sharp-edged daughter of the industrial age. Her guidelines for domestic bliss have less to do with the farmhouse than the factory. Briskly, she divides the working day into segments and allots each household member a set of tasks that read like a time-and-motion study. The labour is specialised, repetitive, often mechanised. Kitchen equipment is described like industrial plant.

Despite her dewy-eyed gestures to the days when households produced their own butter, eggs, bread and wine, she recommends short-cuts such as commercially bottled sauces. As for baking, she is ambivalent about whether you should even bother to do it. The illustration to "General Observations on Bread, Biscuits and Cakes" may show a pyramid of rustic-looking loaves, yet a few pages later Mrs Beeton writes enthusiastically about a new system for mass-producing bread.

None of this makes her rusticism phony, despite her vision lacking any mention of intensive farming, seasonal unemployment and poverty among



Pastoral longings: Victorian writer Mrs Beeton's yearning for the old agrarian Britain is vividly expressed in her prose

the rural working class. What she shares with our own age is a niggling feeling that something about Britain's relationship with its own food supplies had gone badly wrong. But what that "something" was exactly, and whether it was too high a price to pay for convenience, safety and comfort, was something she hardly considered. Whirling not so much like a dervish, more a cog in an intricate machine, she pressed on, determined to finish her 1,112 pages in record time. "The Fair Free Homes of England" remained a lovely, compensating dream.

Kathryn Hughes's biography of Mrs Beeton will be published in October by 4th Estate



Food is knowledge



Sarah Long works for Precise Public Affairs, which was commissioned by Compass Group to research the link between nutrition and academic attainment. She discovered that, by feeding our children junk food, we may be doing far more harm to our children than was initially thought.

You may recall the desperation of exams, with copious amounts of coffee being drunk, frantic cramming, skipping meals, and last-minute panics. But here's a thought: perhaps our results are not just to do with how much we studied. Could a balanced diet hold the key to educational success?

The link between nutrition and academic performance has long since been assumed and often branded as "obvious" and "common sense." Yet increasingly, scientific research is providing definitive evidence that nutrition is directly linked to the academic attainment, mood and behaviour of children in school.

The trends in British children's eating habits are disturbing. Consumptions of nutrient-deficient processed food, packed with fat, sugar and salt, have resulted in 30 per cent of all children being overweight or obese. The health implications of this have been well documented, but, so far, less attention has been paid to the impact on academic performance and productivity.

"Does food affect the brain and behaviour? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes'," said Dr Alexandra Richardson, senior research fellow at the University of Oxford's physiology laboratory and co-director of the Food and Behaviour Research Group. "The effect of food on the body is apparent, but the brain is part of the body and just as sensitive to food," she explained. Research from higher education institutions, research councils, private companies and not-for-profit organisations around the world has shown that factors associated with bad nutrition negatively affect a child's ability to learn and overall educational performance. Poor nutrition is associated with shortened attention spans, fatigue and lower cognitive performance. Conversely, good nutrition has been shown to reduce absenteeism and lateness,

improve behaviour and grades, and to lower levels of hyperactivity.

Richardson led the recent study of dietary supplements that were shown to have dramatic effects on the performance of schoolchildren. The research found that essential oils such as omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, found in foods such as fish, seeds and green leafy vegetables, play a key role in brain development and function. Richardson studied more than 100 children in mainstream schools in County Durham who were underachieving. Half of the children were given a supplement of omega-3 oils for three months and the other half placebos. More than half of the children who

received the active supplement showed marked improvements in spelling and reading, and on average, achieved progress of six and nine months respectively in only three months, whereas the other group made only normal progress in reading and fell further behind in spelling. "This provides firm evidence that diet is important not only for physical health, but also for optimal mental development and functioning," she said.

A dollar invested in an
early-education nutrition
programme in a developing
country could potentially return at
least three dollars-worth of gains in
academic achievement

Research in the UK has also linked the consumption of food additives such as tartrazine and E-numbers with hyperactivity in children and a subsequent decline in levels of behaviour and concentration. Researchers from Southampton University assessed 300 children and found that they became less hyperactive once additives were removed and became more hyperactive once they were reintroduced.

We have all been told that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but for children at school it is crucial. A study undertaken by CDR, an independent research organisation, on behalf of Cereal Partners UK, tested 29 school children throughout the morning on four consecutive days and found that consuming cereals high in complex carbohydrates had a positive effect on levels of concentration and memory recall.



But research has not just been confined to the UK. The link between good nutrition and academic attainment has also been evident in developing countries. International agencies such as the World Food Programme, along with national governments, have spent billions of dollars on school feeding programmes aimed at improving rates of academic achievement. And evidence shows that they have been highly successful.

One study examined the effect of the school meal on achievement in Jamaican schools in poor and rural areas: 115 students, aged between 12 and 13, who didn't normally eat breakfast were examined and enrolled in three classes. One class was served the standard school meal at 9am and the other two classes served as a control. After one semester, the class who had been fed the meal had improved in maths results and attendance. The results showed that when malnourished children missed breakfast, their cognitive performance was weakened.

However, the US is leading the way in research in this area. A study in New York revealed that malnutrition, too small to be measured clinically and commonly found in countries such as the US and the UK, had an impact on the student's intelligence and academic attainment. A sample of 5,398 children also found that 3 per cent were iron-deficient. Their results showed that children with iron deficiency were twice as likely to achieve below-average results in maths as children with normal iron levels.

"We should also be looking at the long-term consequences" said Richardson. "If bad eating practices are going to hamper educational success, this is clearly likely to have an impact on the economy as a whole." But what weight can we give to this argument? Could our children's diets have a direct bearing on economic productivity? The answer appears to be "yes".

Evidence, from both developed and developing countries, suggests that improved educational performance encourages economic growth and reduces levels of poverty. Research on Filipino children concluded that the money spent on the school feeding programme would be recuperated by the economic growth that would result. The report suggested that "a dollar invested in an early-education nutrition programme in a developing country could potentially return at least three dollars-worth of gains in academic achievement."

This view is supported by the World Food Programme. "School feeding focuses on the individual child while yielding tangible results for society. By reducing children's hunger and improving their educational opportunities, school feeding helps create the human infrastructure needed for nations to prosper," it argues.

A major research paper undertaken in the UK by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research highlighted the link between education and economic growth. They found that people with a limited education often found it difficult to function in developed countries. "Education is needed for people to benefit from scientific advance as well as to contribute it," it concluded.

"It is clear that more research needs to be done in this area," said Richardson, "but initial research shows that, in the long term, our current children's diets have the potential to decrease their chances of success in life, and hold the economy back."

Richardson is critical of the UK government's lack of investment in research into the link between good nutrition and academic performance. "Many children are costing our schools and local authorities large sums of money because of their bad behaviour. If some of the money spent on excluded pupils was used to educate children and families on the importance of eating a balanced diet, and feeding them better in school, all the

evidence suggests that we would see fewer behavioural problems in the classroom, and a greater capacity for children to learn," she said.

The issue of child nutrition has risen up the political agenda recently due

to *Jamie's School Dinners*, a documentary where Jamie Oliver gave a damning insight into the food in British schools. The problem had a lot to do with a lack of funding – previously between 37p and 45p per child. This has now risen to 50p per child, but it is clear that this is not enough to fundamentally change what our children are eating or change their attitudes to food. Encouraging the government to assess the situation, and take more significant action to improve the food that pupils receive in school, will have a positive effect, not just on academic success, but also on economic growth.

For further information see www.fabresearch.org

Does food affect the brain and behaviour? The answer is an unequivocal "yes"

ns interview ed mayo

Jamie Oliver is a candidate for sainthood, says the chief executive of the National Consumer Council. And his kids agree

by **ELLIE LEVENSON**

Ed Mayo's children must be nice people. During half-term, as a child I was taken into my lecturer dad's office where I wrote, in permanent marker on his whiteboard, "Howard's students are stupid." Ed Mayo's children, however, have been far kinder. "Ed is the best dad in the world," one of them has written.

Above that, in slightly neater handwriting, is even more praise, this time from Alan Knight, a commissioner at the Sustainable Development Commission: "Ed is the best sustainable consumption co-chair in the world!"

High praise indeed, on both counts. It is probably through his children, however, rather than his work on sustainable consumption, that the chief executive of the National Consumer Council keeps in touch with the food issues that affect young people. "Anybody who has watched children's TV on a Saturday morning, or at other times, will be shocked by the sheer scale of the bombardment and sophistication of marketing and advertising to children of junk food," says Mayo. Consequently, he is passionately in favour of restricting this, something that should be relatively easy to implement.

"We need to restrict the use of cartoon characters and celebrities when advertising foods to tweens"

"Advertising controls already exist in relation to alcohol and tobacco, so it is quite possible to tighten those controls and apply them to junk food. It doesn't require new legislation to make it happen."

This is not a puritanical approach. Mayo does not claim that he never succumbs himself. "I think most consumers understand that health is not a cross to bear," he says. "We all like a packet of crisps, many of us like a fag. All of these things we can enjoy." But he does believe in making it easier for consumers to make healthy choices. He believes that with regards to children, this means taking three steps: "First we need to limit the sheer volume of adverts for junk food targeted at children. The current codes look at each advert in turn but they don't address the cumulative effect of marketing to children. Second, we need to restrict the use of cartoon characters

when advertising foods. We know that children, particularly tweens [eight- to 12-year-olds] look to cartoon characters and are influenced by them, so it's particularly damaging to use them to target such young children. The third is the appropriate use of celebrities. It does seem strange to promote junk food through people that children look up to in society, whether that is ex-footballers or others."

But it's not just their dad's firm views that have influenced the Mayo children. They have become consumer champions in their own right, choosing to boycott Nestlé cereals over the company's controversial promotion of baby milk in developing countries. By pure coincidence, the three children all attend Greenwich schools and were participants in Jamie Oliver's experiment to change school dinners. Aged eight, ten and 12, two are at primary school and one is at secondary school. "They loved having Jamie come into to school. For my eldest, it was somebody he could relate to. He said to me: 'Well, it's not Delia Smith. He's not posh' – and what Jamie did was to talk to the children in a way that they could understand. My son is now absolutely convinced that it shouldn't be chips on the school menu," says Mayo, proudly. "My second son," he continued, "is bit more mechanistic about the whole thing because when Jamie Oliver came into his school, a primary school, he allowed children to have seconds. So in a Dickensian way he liked the food, but he also liked the fact that he could have another helping." One of the most important things that came out of the Jamie Oliver experiment, Mayo explains, is that you have to have children signing up to the ideals of healthy eating as well as the parents.

For Mayo, Oliver is a candidate for early sainthood. "The good news is that he's not going away and he's committed to all these kinds of issues." Mayo admits that some industry groups that he has talked to are very scared about the "Jamie Oliver effect. They are worried that it is going to come their way and look at what they are doing in terms of marketing or how they are not increasing awareness through proper information on nutritional food." But, that, of course, is the point.

However, Mayo's consumer awareness, unlike that of a large proportion of the British population, did not begin with Jamie Oliver. He has been involved with a variety of consumer campaigns for a number of years and was one of the co-founders of the Fairtrade Mark which now

covers more than 400 products. For Mayo, this was merely continuing a trend that began with consumer protests over bread in 15th-century England and was still going strong when the NCC was founded in 1975. "Food is absolutely at the top of our agenda as a consumer campaign group, and it has been right from the very start. Somehow we've made cars safe, toasters safe, and children's toys safe, but the system we have still doesn't deliver food in the same way."

Mayo insists that the current debate on food and nutrition needs to extend beyond talking about obesity. "There is a peak of concern at the moment around the issue of obesity. In part, that is because the government has been so slow to wake up to the transformation in eating habits that we as a consumer group have seen. But it is worrying that food issues are reduced down to obesity, when there are actually a whole host of other issues going on around food and health."

One of these issues is access to food. "There are food deserts all across the UK. I use a measure which I call 'access to fresh lettuce'. It looks at whether the only way you can get to shops that can offer a balanced diet of food is in an inconvenient way. So perhaps you could hop on a train or get on a bus and travel for a long time to get healthy food, but with busy lives that is unrealistic."

Mayo is also adamant that eating healthily, and sustainably, is not just something middle-class families care about. It is not, contrary to popular belief, a class issue. "The work that we've done with low-income consumers," he explained, "shows that they are very interested in organic and sustainable food. The problem is that they are too expensive." Mayo

wants to work towards widening access to organic and locally produced food, rather than make it the middle-class enclave it seems to be.

Indeed, he predicts that issues around food and sustainability are going to be the next big area we concentrate on. "Issues that will become increasingly important," he says, "are going to be things such as the contribution the household food budget makes to climate change, and how much fish we should eat, when we know that in the North Sea we're running out of cod."

For this, and all food-related issues, Mayo believes that the large retailers have to take much of the responsibility. "Four out of five pounds spent on food gets spent in the large retail establishments, so they have to take the lead in addressing these problems. The good news is that retailers are starting to pick up their acts." If they don't, Mayo thinks that consumers will lead the way and hit them where it hurts most—in the pocket.

"This is not to say that children will have less pocket money to spend on food or that adults won't be spending the same amount on food, but rather it will be targeted towards the more healthy rather than the high-fat, low-nutrition lines."

Mayo has given manufacturers plenty of warning. "I have told them not to assume that their competitors are not ahead of them."

Next time they are in his office, perhaps they might like to add their own comment to his whiteboard: "Ed gives the best advice in the world!"





Better school meals — a catch-22?



Since the late 1970s, school meals have rarely been out of the headlines. Issues of nutrition and healthy eating in schools are as important today as they were in 1978, when the government set out to halve the £380m cost of school dinners. Local councils' obligation to secure best value through competitive tenders has further eroded school meal services in many parts of the country, as the opportunity to cut costs by accepting the lowest bid was taken.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many schools took control of their own budgets from local education authorities. Without money being ring-fenced for catering, hard-pressed head teachers used the funds to support teaching and buy much-needed equipment.

Over the past few years, there has been a huge focus on rising obesity levels in children and, as a result, campaigns to encourage healthier eating. This has put an enormous expectation on the school meals service to provide more fresh produce, more food from local suppliers, and more menus that exceed national nutritional standards. In some regions, more pupils qualify for free school meals than ever before.

But all this costs money and, until recently, there has been no extra funding available to councils from the government. All these expectations have had to be met for the same price, and there is no agreement nationally on what the price should be. Across the UK, prices for primary school meals range from £1.20 to £1.80. This price has to cover food costs, wages, uniforms, training, equipment and administration.

Schools lack essential facilities

These issues have left caterers such as Scolarest needing to feed more children with increasingly less resources. And not just less money. Often in overcrowded schools, valuable kitchen and dining space has been sacrificed for classrooms. With many schools not having any catering facilities, there is little choice but to bring food in from central kitchens, which compromises quality.

"We estimate about 50 per cent of state sector schools desperately need investment in new kitchens or equipment,"

said Tony Sanders, managing director of Scolarest's primary schools business. Interestingly, it has been the contractors who have, over the past decade, provided investment capital to help cash-strapped councils refurbish their dining facilities.

Lack of proper dining facilities, pressure on the curriculum and increasing student populations have also put enormous pressure on the school lunch hour. Where children used to be able to enjoy a proper sit-down lunch, they are now forced to eat in ten- to 15-minute sittings. The growth of convenience and grab-and-go food in secondary school meals has, to a large extent, been driven by these constraints.

Whole-school approach

The nation's preoccupation with improving diet and nutrition is understandable. About a third of all British children are now either overweight or obese. Obesity, and its associated risks, is now the most common disorder of childhood and adolescence.

While campaigners such as Jamie Oliver have helped put school meals back on the government agenda, will the dinners actually get healthier? "It's important to remember that everyone who works in providing school meals is as passionate as Oliver about improving the service and encouraging children to eat more healthily," said Steven Watts, managing director of Scolarest's secondary schools business. "While caterers like us have an important role to play in reversing the obesity trend and improving children's diets, we cannot do it alone. We need a 'whole-school' approach from parents, teachers, governors and local authorities. We also want advertisers and the media to work with us." The Education secretary Ruth Kelly's recent pledge to increase school-meals funding by £220m is seen as a move in the right direction.

"We're delighted that more money will be put into school meals, but we would like to see the minimum food cost per primary school pupil set higher than the new recommendation of 50p. By increasing it to 60-70p, we could make a significant difference to the menus in terms of nutritional, fresh, home-cooked food, and meet the expectations demanded of us," said Sanders.



Scolarest, which has its own in-house nutritionist, has been working with the government on this issue for a number of years and has already developed a range of primary school menus based on a 60p food cost. These are currently being trialled across the country.

New menu trials

"The new Select menus we're trialling in primary schools offer increased fruit and vegetables, fresh meat sourced from UK farmers and more freshly cooked dishes," said nutritionist Gina Gorvett, who also explained that this is just one of many new healthy-eating initiatives the company has introduced during the past three years. These include removing salt from the cooking process, reducing the fat and sugar content of dishes, and the use of healthier cooking methods such as oven baking, steaming and grilling.

Scolarest has also worked closely with suppliers to remove as many processed foods as it can from the menu, and has introduced a range of healthy-eating initiatives such as salad, fruit and milk bars and healthier vending machines.

The launch of its Wellgood healthy-eating programme for secondary schools in 2003 has also seen successful take-up by youngsters. "Wellgood is a healthy-eating approach based on the premise that any change to children's food culture needs to be sensitively managed and gradually introduced. The objective is to create 'evolution' rather than 'revolution' by introducing healthier foods alongside existing and familiar products, so that children can make wiser choices," explained Watts. Wellgood also encourages students to choose fibre-rich foods such as more wholegrains and fresh fruit. In vending machines, juice, milk drinks, and flavoured bottled waters are replacing fizzy drinks and processed snacks to help influence healthier choices.

Skills training

Wellgood is also supported by On Your Marks, an interactive cookery roadshow, which Scolarest hosts and runs in secondary schools around the country. Two teams of students each work with a Scolarest chef to produce a healthy, balanced meal from scratch in 15 minutes. They cook in front of a school audience, which then judges the results. Both teams' dishes go on the school menu the next day. "On Your Marks has been a big hit with the kids," said Watts. "Not only does it encourage them to try new tastes and think about healthier food, but also to learn and develop basic cooking skills."

This year, the company has been the first to pioneer a healthy-eating distance learning qualification for all its school cooks – the NCFE Intermediate Certificate in Nutrition and Health. The course covers aspects of diet and nutrition, including the nutritional needs of different age groups, food labelling, and additives.

With about a quarter of a child's life spent at school, Scolarest believes there is a big opportunity to do something about the obesity problem. "Initiatives such as On Your Marks, which teach kids about food and diet, are as important today as teaching them maths, physics or chemistry, because most kids are not learning these skills any more at home," said Sanders.

"Cookery is a basic life skill," Sanders continued. "Raising its importance in the curriculum and making it a core subject is, in our view, one of the most important routes to tackling obesity and winning youngsters' hearts and minds over to the healthy-eating front. Not only does it give them hands-on experience of choosing and preparing a meal, but it gets them interested and excited about real food and nutrition at an early age – when there's still time to learn."

Scolarest is the specialist education operating company of Compass Group PLC.

Back to the chopping board

Processed food and BSE have ruined our image. But daring chefs are fighting back, writes **WILLIAM BLACK**

Blessed be he that invented the pudding,” wrote the French writer François-Maximilien Misson when he came to Britain in the late 17th century. “To come in pudding time is to come to the most lucky moment in the world.”

Yet, though an English establishment – Heston Blumenthal’s *The Fat Duck*, in Bray, Berkshire – has recently been voted the best restaurant in the world, it is unlikely that we would hear similar words of praise today (especially not from a Frenchman). For the most part, Britain’s delightful culinary heritage – which included such delectable treats as the Salmagundi salad (of French origin), Hindle Wakes (chicken and prunes in lemon sauce, brought to Lancashire by Flemish weavers in the 17th century) and Throdskins from Fylde – remains firmly in the past.

The cheap food policy, promoted by British governments for decades, has played a large part in this demise, as has Britain’s love of the appliance of science in the kitchen. Food processors have refined the science of reconstituting meat, creating household favourites from chicken nuggets to the now infamous Turkey Twizzler. The Twizzler, a truly Frankensteinian creation, was recently singled out as being fatty, tasteless and of no culinary value in *Jamie’s School Dinners*. But despite such negative publicity, sales of the Twizzler have recently increased.

It is the ultimate irony that the cheap food policy, which such unhealthy products help to implement, forced us to feed herbivorous cattle with minced sheep brains, which in turn produced our most famous export: Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). Since 1986, when the first cow was diagnosed with BSE in the UK, buying food has become fraught with worry and danger.

The easiest way to avoid the problem is to buy organic and local. Hence the rocketing interest in farmer’s markets. But the sense of threat is further increased by products on the supermarket shelves such as bacteria-killing chopping boards and detergents. On a culinary level, without bacteria we would have neither yoghurt nor cheese. Nor would we be able to digest any food at all.

One of the main problems today is the lack of education about nutrition. Gone are the days when domestic science was taught in schools. In its place, food

The cheap food policy has played a huge part in the demise of the UK’s culinary heritage

technology tells eager students little about food and cooking, but much about designing pizza boxes. Supermarkets, especially, seem to be reticent about trumpeting the benefits of fresh vegetables. Nicely trimmed and packed vegetables, flown in from the other side of the world, yes. But truly fresh, local produce, whose high levels of photochemicals can mop up the cancer-forming free radicals that course through our veins, no. Where is that lesson in the curriculum?

Heston Blumenthal, the creator of snail porridge, is a pioneer in educating people about food. Following in the footsteps of the *übermeister* of “molecular gastronomy”, Ferran Adria – chef at the renowned *El Bulli* Spanish restaurant – Blumenthal consistently tests and teases culinary boundaries. Plates of egg-and-bacon ice cream, sardine-on-toast sorbet, and salmon cooked in

liquorice wow those lucky enough to get a table at his restaurant.

He encourages his diners to enjoy themselves, to have fun. This is a marked change from the days when gastronomy was profoundly class-bound, and the refuge of the humourless and the obsessed. “It’s a complete package of enjoyment I’m after,” Blumenthal said. “It’s like when you see an incredible view, or drink a great bottle of wine – the experience is heightened if you share it with someone else.”

British food has always been open to influences from all over the world. Today, our national dish is chicken tikka masala, and even our sacred fish and chips have a part Jewish-Italian, part Irish connection. But the most influential of our culinary relationships is with France. Since our slavish adoption of *haute cuisine*, when Michelin stars ruled, the past decade has witnessed the rise of a group of passionate, essentially self-taught and intelligent chefs. Marco Pierre White, Fergus Henderson, Sally Clarke, Rowley Leigh, Simon Hopkinson, Phil Howard and Blumenthal among others, have brought a marvellous element of inventive British amateurism to bear delicious fruit.

In the same way, change is now being forced on the government’s pathetic skimping on school food – there is something very Dickensian about feeding a child on 37p – by the passion of a few individuals, Jamie Oliver, and the original pioneering dinner lady, Jeanette Orrey, to name but two.

Critics may decry any attempt at British revivalism as being misplaced and nostalgic. But, tucked among the infamous list of great restaurants of the world you will find *St John* in Clerkenwell, London, a truly blessed place, where Fergus Henderson has been cooking good, honest and essentially British food for years. The proof of the pudding is, as ever, in the eating. British food has a past, present and future.

William Black’s most recent book is The Land that Thyme Forgot (Bantam Press)

Festive fare around the world



BRITAIN

Cooper's Hill Cheese Rolling (above)
Brockworth, Gloucestershire
May Bank Holiday (29 May 2006)

Info: www.cheese-rolling.co.uk

Not for the faint-hearted, this is the hazardous quest to become Brockworth's "cheese catcher". Every year, those eager to claim the coveted title run and tumble down a steep hill in pursuit of a huge Double Gloucester. The winner is the one holding the cheese at the bottom. The point? No one can quite remember. The prize? Being alive at the end, oh, and the cheese.

Banglatown International Curry Festival
Brick Lane, East London
4-17 September

Info: www.bricklanerestaurants.com

The ideal place to sample our national dish, the chicken tikka masala, this two-week event in London's curry capital is filled with international experts cooking platefuls of sumptuous food. Spicy dishes from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan can be sampled at selected restaurants on the "curry house strip".

Celtic Food and Drink Festival

Crannog Centre, Aberfeldy, Scotland
Final Sunday of every April, 11am-4pm.
Info: www.crannog.co.uk

Inspired by underwater discoveries of the remains of food from the Iron Age, this festival of traditional Celtic food features a spit-roast, smoked fish, pit cooking, local smoked meats, dairy products and tasty herb and nut dishes, all washed down with authentic beverages. Learn about bread-baking, Celtic cooking methods and other ancient techniques.

EUROPE

Thorrlabot Feast,
Reykjavik, Iceland
Every year, January-February.

Info: www.icelandtouristboard.com

Following the ancient Viking culinary tradition of Thorrlabot, or "Midwinter feast", revellers may indulge in local delicacies such as boiled lamb's head and putrefied shark meat. Fortunately, there is plenty of traditional booze to ease the experience.

Alba Truffle Festival and market

Alba, Piemonte, Italy
Every weekend in October
Info: www.deliciousitaly.com

The *tartufo bianco* or "white diamond" as it is also known, is the king of truffles. Chefs at this market will often spend £500-£1,000 on this aphrodisiacal delicacy which sells for £1,600 a kilo. If you don't have that kind of budget, bring a pig to hunt some down.



La Pourcailhade Pig Festival (above)
Trie-sur-Baise, France
Every August

Info: +33 (0) 5 62 35 50 05

In one of the largest pig-infested areas of France, this *fête* is all about pig. As well as eating it from snout to tail, you are invited to gamble on a piglet race or oink your way through the pig imitation competition.

THE WORLD

Kansas City Barbecue
Kansas City, USA

American Royal Barbecue Contest,
two-day event, usually first week in October
Info: www.kcbs.us

Forget the Aussies: if you like your authentic BBQ fare, Kansas is where it's cooking. — and competing. They take their charring seriously, with contests taking place across the area throughout the summer. The Olympics of barbie action can be found at a two-day event in the autumn, when 100 teams descend on the city, to battle for first place in an invitation-only cook-off. When the smoke of war clears, the victor gets to carry off the spoils, in this case a \$10,000 prize.



Hokitika Wild Foods Festival

Hokitika, New Zealand
11 March 2006

Info: www.wildfoods.co.nz/wildfoods/foodfest/

Think the Antipodean wilderness is no place for food fests? Think again. In the gorgeous New Zealand countryside, you'll find revellers taking on the "bushtucker gourmet extravaganza" challenge. Menus including such eclectic delicacies as earthworms, wallaby, emu, huhu grubs and, er, shark penis. A veritable bushman's cornucopia.

Mexican Mole Fair

San Pedro Atocpan, Mexico
October annually

Info: www.mexicotravel.co.uk/

Many of us enjoy the taste of meat, chillis and chocolate — only not at the same time. *Mole*, sometimes called *mole poblano*, is a pre-Colombian recipe combining chillies, unsweetened chocolate, sesame seeds, garlic, ground cloves, coriander and cinnamon. The fair has been running since 1978 in San Pedro Atocpán, which has, no kidding, 50 mole-mills (yes, *mills*).



Chidinma - Supervisor - Chertsey, UK
 Neil - Barista/Senior Duty Manager - Chertsey, UK
 Julie - Catering Manager - London, UK
 Robert - Chef Manager - London, UK

Alber
Shirley
Robert

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