

The Irish Foodscape
A Century of Food in Ireland 1916-2016
Airfield Estate Food Series
27 April 2017

Cupcakes in a Time of Crisis: How Ireland's 'Foodie' Culture Masks the Cracks in a Fractured Food System

With the threat to the Irish food sector deepening daily from a combination of Brexit and other global geo-political turmoil, the general public is at last waking up to the fact that all is not as it should be in the Irish 'larder'. But Joe McNamee has long believed that, in the much-vaunted 'Food Island', all is not as it seems, that Ireland's contemporary celebrity-driven food culture, fuelled by a hyperbolic media, social and mainstream, has masked serious fault lines for quite some time.

Joe McNamee is a food & travel writer and food consultant. (Irish Examiner, John & Sally McKennas' Guides, Taste of Ireland, FFT, Sunday Business Post, Member of Irish Food Writers' Guild; Author & Ghostwriter, Clifford & Son (Liberties Press)) Consultancy: Food Production, Product Development, Hospitality, Retail. www.josephdmcnamee.com

Cupcakes in a Time of Crisis

A surprising amount of Irish people seem to think we only happened upon 'proper' food roughly a decade ago. Before that, apparently, we lived on the Three P's diet: porter, potatoes, porter. They say,

God, food is after becoming very big, isn't it?

No, food in Ireland has been 'big' for a long time. Our modern hospitality culture of superb native chefs cooking superb Irish produce began in 1964 when Myrtle Allen opened Ballymaloe House.

Our specialty food sector began in 1977 when the late, lamented Veronica Steele began experimenting with excess milk from a cow named Brisket, creating Milleens cheese. Today, our farmhouse cheeseboard is world class, as is the rest of our specialty food sector.

In a country blessed with such a clement growing climate, it is possible to source produce from land and sea that is quite simply some of the best in the world.

No, Irish food has been 'big' for a very long time. What happened was the nation began to talk about it. A lot.

Fuelled by a hyperbolic mainstream media, both print and television, and even more by social media, we began our own era of celebrity-driven foodie culture.

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Chefs, Food writers, bloggers, Masterchef, Twitter, food festivals, artisans, food heroes, Facebook, cookbooks, this restaurant, that restaurant, bucket lists, Instagram, plating, Michelin mania, food porn, hashtag, hashtag, hashtag, blah, blah, blah.

The noise grew and grew and we all gave thanks and praise to be the chosen anointed, dwelling on the Food Island, but the noise also drowned out those few voices daring to suggest anything to the contrary.

As a food writer and restaurant reviewer, I added to the clamour and though I seem to have a nose for the cracks, the fractures, the fissures in our food system, there was little appetite for me to write about them whereas there was a lot of appetite for light fluffy features driven by celebrity chefs. We were all complicit: newspapers, writers, readers. Even more so, when the recession happened and food again became the great comforter, a sanctuary from bad tidings outside the foodie cocoon.

I have a great and warm admiration for many of the prominent chefs and food personalities, some of them good friends, who have brought Irish cuisine to its current level and, as is self-evident from this fine belly, I love food and all the culture surrounding it.

Food can be a glorious and even blissfully sybaritic pleasure and I too have posted the Instagram dishes and Tweeted the menus, but amidst what, at times, could resemble fin de siècle decadence, I found it increasingly hard to shut eyes and ears to the larger world. I found it increasingly difficult to write about the more trivial aspects of foodie culture even though the harsh reality is it pays my mortgage.

In fact, I confess, I have never liked the word 'foodie', it sounds as if food were some sort of hobby. Do you think there is currently a thriving foodie scene in Aleppo? Is anyone posting #hashtag no filter food pics from migrant camps in Europe? What of the 1.3 billion people around the world going hungry each day? Let them eat cupcakes?

I have nothing per se against the cupcake, especially as its 15 minutes of fame seem to have passed. Though pretty to look at, enjoyable to eat, this momentary pleasure is hollow in terms of nutrition and real substance; a good metaphor, perhaps, for that noise I spoke of earlier, a good metaphor for a fractured food system?

So what are the symptoms of a fractured food system and how does it relate to Ireland?

The food marketing image projected to the rest of the world is of a pristine green isle nestling in crystal waters far from the smog, smoke and fumes of a madding industrialised

world and utterly blessed by nature's bounty. But in exploiting this bounty, we have done much to damage the goose laying those golden eggs.

The industrialisation of food production to produce more food at lower prices to facilitate greater profit for agri-biz, not the primary producers, is destroying ecosystems all around the world and Ireland is not immune. To quote Dan Barber, author of the Third Plate, this is neither 'business' nor 'agriculture'.

Our agricultural land is essentially a chemical cocktail and say the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), "Eutrophication of rivers and lakes due to phosphorous losses from agriculture continues to be the most critical impact of Irish agriculture on water quality", and over 70% of phosphates reaching inland waters emanate from agricultural sources. Eutrophication is a gentler way of saying Dead Zones.

What about our seas and coastal waters? Several years ago I was commissioned by a national Sunday newspaper to write one of those faux-worthy articles, this time on sustainable fish. In other words, furrow the brow then move swiftly along to 'what fish should we be hashtagging next?' But any mention of the phrase 'sustainable fish' turned out to be problematic. Nobody in the Dept. of Marine would talk to me. Nobody in Bord Iascaigh Mhara would talk to me and I was left to pick bones and chew scant fat with a lot of very angry fishermen who justly feel abandoned by the State.

Ireland, it seems, doesn't want to have a serious conversation about the seas even as the decline in global fish stocks becomes daily more horrifying. Some marine biologists privately believe the only sustainable way to eat fish is not to eat fish. Others say the only food we will eventually consume from the sea is jellyfish.

Getting back to dead zones. Dead zones are caused by nutrient enrichment from nitrogen and phosphorous runoff, most of it linked to industrialised agriculture. They can be found all around the world. Algal blooms develop, the food chains alter, oxygen is depleted. In the Gulf of Mexico, at the mouth of the Mississippi river there is a dead zone, it varies in size but generally is somewhere between 6,000 and 7,000 square miles, nearly the size of Munster.

Ah yeah, but that's all the way round the other side of the world, we're fine here, crystal clear waters of the wild Atlantic and all that.

I'm sorry, there are no borders in the oceans, there are no checkpoints to keep out undesirables, it's like saying,

Yeah, I do have multiple organ failure but did you see my foot, it's very healthy altogether.

But did you know we had a giant algal bloom off the Southwest coast of Ireland in September 2015? Did you know similar blooms in 2005 and 2012 killed substantial fish and shellfish stocks?

You know, now that you mention it, I do have a twinge in me foot, I wonder if there's something wrong there too.

Health issues? The industrial food system is very heavily implicated in the rise of obesity, diabetes and a whole host of diet-related illnesses and conditions.

The prophylactic administration of antibiotics to the world's billion plus pigs, 1.5 billion cattle and 19 billion chickens has bequeathed us an anti-microbial resistance in human beings to many mainstream antibiotics.

Carbapenem antibiotics are the option of very last resort when you are in hospital and all else has failed; The Lancet Infectious Diseases Journal states that Mcr-1, resistant to carbapenems, has been identified in pigs in the US and China and has also now been found in humans.

A recent UN report savages the global pesticide-manufacturing corporations, accusing them of "systematic denial of harms", "aggressive, unethical marketing tactics" and heavy lobbying of governments, "obstructing reforms and paralysing global pesticide restrictions".

It says pesticides have "catastrophic impacts on the environment, human health and society as a whole", including an estimated 200,000 deaths a year from acute poisoning. Its authors call for "a global process to transition toward safer and healthier food and agricultural production."

Acclaimed US food writer Michael Pollan believes we have systemically destroyed the soil microbe community, that is so crucial to our health, a possible cause for the massive increase in auto-immune diseases in the West.

Food Waste? According to Irish NGO Voice Ireland, globally, we throw away 1.3 billion tonnes of food annually with about the same number of people going hungry every day. Irish households and businesses waste a million tons of food each year—2 ½ times Croke Park, filled up to the top.

Again, the State doesn't appear remotely concerned, content to leave the problem to the voluntary sector. What's more, the supermarket chains who now offload 'waste' produce to charitable enterprises such as the Bia Food Initiative or Foodcloud get to further burnish their public images while doing diddly-squat about tackling fundamental food waste iniquities, entirely of their own creation.

Dear Irish State, just to inform you, money saved carries exactly the same spending power as money earned.

The driver at the heart of the industrialised food and agriculture sector and the root cause of all these problems is the commodification of food. Beginning in the 20th century, the market has converted food into a commodity to be traded through a series of enclosure mechanisms restricting access to a human right and entitlement.

This market of mass consumption has turned human beings from eaters into consumers and the only properties truly valued by the market are those that enhance trade-ability (durability, physical appearance, standardisation). Nutritional values and health benefits are left in the ha'penny place.

This industrial food system operates by sourcing from primary producers at the lowest possible price and maximising profits for the industrial sector.

In Ireland, we are no different, a state indentured to a frantic global marketplace driven by neo-liberal values. But we are a small open economy, they say we have to compete or die? But do we really have to be so utterly passive, so compliant, so fawning to the multinationals?

Hardly surprising when a primary economic policy for decades has been to lift the national skirt as high as possible until the garter of low corporate taxation is visible. We get jobs and an artificial boost to our GDP figures; the corporations walk away with the real loot.

There is real terror at State level of doing anything at all to upset the corporate sector. France beat the EU to the punch by banning Roundup, a glyphosphate then being linked to cancer. When the question arose at EU level, Ireland abstained and one Irish agronomist even claimed a ban would be 'a disaster for Irish agriculture'.

The State is a very keen fan of light touch regulation for the industrial food sector yet, counter-intuitively, displays bludgeoning ignorance and arrogance when dealing with the small specialty producer sector that so gilds the Irish agri-biz image abroad.

I would trace the birth of industrial agriculture in Ireland to the recently departed civil servant TK Whitaker and his highly influential Programme for Economic Expansion, published almost 60 years ago, the bulk of it devoted to agricultural policy. It remains to this day, the core ethos of Irish state agriculture policy.

In the programme, he continually emphasised the need for driving higher productivity, stressing the importance of securing export markets for our food production. He said the "... most important feature of Irish agriculture", is its rich grassland resources, and "... future agricultural expansion will depend mainly on a dynamic policy of grassland

development". "Phosphorus is the key nutrient", he wrote and a fertiliser subsidy duly followed.

TK Whitaker and his fondness for the bit of grass lives on, it is at the core of Teagasc educational ethos and at the heart of current State agricultural policy, beginning with Harvest 2020, published in 2010 and superseded by Foodwise 2025, published in 2016.

The members listed on the advisory committee of Harvest 2020 included, amongst others, representatives from most major Irish agri-biz companies and supermarket multiples, homegrown and foreign. Yes, that included, Tesco, a British company that so contemptuously refuses to disclose its Irish earnings yet is invited to advise on the future of Irish agriculture. There was one farmer.

A small section devoted to the organic sector supplied touchy feely warmth. Some years back, I spent an entire afternoon on the phone being passed around multiple state departments seeking information on the progress of organic goals in Harvest 2020. Nobody knew anything. Foodwise 2025 saw *two* farmers on the committee but the organic sector representative was gone.

The stated aims in Foodwise 2025 are to increase value added in the agri-food, fisheries and wood products sector by 70%, to in excess of €13 billion, and increase the value of Primary Production by 65%, to almost €10 billion, all by the year 2025.

I struggle to comprehend how this can be viable in the context of climate change alone. Atrocious weather in recent years has seen us subsidise fodder purchase from abroad having exhausted all native supplies—in other words, we struggle to feed the existing national dairy herd in adverse conditions yet plan to double that same herd? Can our precious pastures survive the projected massive increase in this type of weather? What is the endgame for our already greatly compromised inland waters and surrounding seas when we further crank up the chemical dosage to those pastures to meet targets? Do we eventually turn to CAFOs and, if we do, what happens to our USP in the marketplace of *grass-fed* beef and dairy cattle.

Economist Kenneth E. Boulding once stated, 'anyone who believes in indefinite growth in anything physical, on a physically finite planet, is either mad or an economist.'

There is no denying the spectacular economic success of these plans for the sector to date in strict monetary terms. After the recession it remained the primary homegrown contributor to our GDP figures, after subtracting the artificial contribution of the multinationals.

But what about the primary producers, the farmers themselves, the bulk of whom operate within the EU Common Agricultural Policy subsidy system. More to the point, what

happens if their subsidies should be dramatically slashed or removed entirely when they next come up for review in 2020? Couldn't happen? A lot of things have happened in recent times that couldn't happen.

A Marine Le Pen victory in the French elections could have huge ramifications for the EU itself—wither CAP subsidies then?

The largest funding for a private farmer in 2015 was €389k. Two farm enterprises in, Co Louth, controlled by beef baron Larry Goodman, were collectively paid €483k. These were double digit percentage increases on the previous year. The average payment to individual farmers fell from €13,167 in 2014 to €12,460 in 2015. Farmers in Co Mayo had the lowest average EU payment at just €8,361.

Proposed CAP reforms include setting a limit of €150k for private farms but meanwhile the Irish Farmers Association and Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association continue to call for payments to be unlisted to protect individuals' rights to privacy.

You'd imagine an Irish *Farmers* Association would better serve their supposed constituency by calling for immediate limits on subsidies and far more equitable distribution but then this is an organisation that arranged a pay package for their president of nearly a million euro in 2013, about 125 times the amount Mayo farmers received in annual subsidies just two years later.

The former single farm payment scheme only added to the erosion of mixed farms, once so common in Ireland, further substituting agriculture for monoculture, the stated condition being as follows: 'Farmers receiving the SFP have the flexibility to produce any commodity on their land except fruit, vegetables and table potatoes.' Table potatoes? Ireland?

This situation prevailed until the introduction of the Scottish Derogation in 2013 after which tentative commercial growing of onions began again for the first time in some years. Can you imagine that? We'll never grow lemons, I know that, but we can certainly grow onions.

And what of the social costs to the farming community? The touchy feely message in Foodwise2025 was all over that with pictures of happy smiling farmers and families. But in terms of hard copy, it was pretty much limited to the following, "There is a need to achieve better integration of family farms into local economies by increasing their diversification, by creating more open farms, developing agri-tourism opportunities and increasing the range of goods and services provided to local communities. This will allow many family farm enterprises to improve their profitability and provide on-farm employment opportunities for the next generation of farmers."

Open farms? Chuck a few llamas in the back haggard and charge kids to ride them? Is the fate of the smallest farmers in the West of Ireland to operate a giant provincial petting zoo?

Well, kids where shall we go today, hell or Connacht?

Suffice to say, the market doesn't care about small Irish farmers; the market is content as long as there is land, all managed with maximum efficiency and with all cost savings going to the market.

The Consumer price weights index for food in Irish households in 1922 was 57%. In 2011, it was 10.25%. Think of those figures as the percentage of overall household expenditure spent on food. Food has become infinitely cheaper and it's not all down to progress. These are artificially contrived prices with no reflection of the true product value and the farmer *always* takes the hit.

It is very telling to read a 2014 progress report on Harvest 2020 from the Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Marine, trumpeting, in bold pullout quote, the fact it had essentially met targets to that point of 33% growth in exports from the agri-biz sector yet, buried down at the very end of the page was the admission that "the quantum of the output gains has not translated into income gains for primary producers".

A rather opaque way of stating, output may have grown by billions but farmers ain't seeing *any* of it.

Energy? Two years ago, at the Paris UN climate change conference, Taoiseach Enda Kenny crossed fingers behind his back and swore faithfully to personally refreeze the polar ice caps or something to that effect and then outside the conference briefed Irish journalists from the other side of his mouth. A supportive Irish Farmer's Journal editorial was headlined 'Climate change should not shape global food production'.

In light of my time limit today I am taking a leaf out of Foodwise2025's book and largely glossing over the implications of our enormous vulnerability, as a net importer of the bulk of our energy needs. The Foodwise2025 coverage of one of the most pressing and fundamental global issues in an era of peak oil reminds me of those bits at the end of ads, the legally required info that is always raced through, you know,

This product is actually a load of bollocks; tough titty, terms and conditions apply.

As a writer, how have I addressed our multiple vulnerabilities in the global marketplace? Well, I have spoken about it at various conferences and gatherings—note, spoken, there is no great appetite for this sort of thing in traditional food writing outlets.

I would outline a doomsday scenario of the precariousness of our dependence on world markets: energy costs spiral affecting productivity and distribution, wars and geo-political

turmoil close markets, first world food shortages—that last one usually drew at least one especially contemptuous snigger.

But then the Russians began cutting off gas supply to the Ukraine. They have done it three times to date. The 147 billion cubic metres of gas Russia delivers to Europe represents about a third of the continent's needs, 40 per cent of that arrives via Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered retaliatory sanctions from the EU, Russia replied with an embargo on EU produce, and we lost one of our food export markets, a market then worth €230m.

The truly unbelievable happened, Brexit. It has already damaged the Irish economy to the tune of €500m because of the impact on confidence alone. Current IFA president Joe Healy said recently, "The implications of a hard Brexit are stark; in an Irish context, it would mean a fall of €1.5 billion in meat exports, €600 in dairy exports." What will a land border with the North do to Irish agriculture? By the way, the UK is also a large net contributor to the CAP budget, you know, those subsidies that skew the real picture of Irish farming.

Trump happened. No further explication needed.

Food shortages? Just recently we saw a shortage of courgettes, peppers and ice berg lettuces in Western Europe because of adverse weather-related growing conditions (*you know, because the market doesn't like us saying climate change all the time*). Some of the big UK multiples began limiting customers to two icebergs apiece.

I wouldn't care too much because I prefer infinitely superior local, seasonal Irish produce any day to the bland, tasteless, out-of-season and nutritionally inferior fare from Southern European polytunnels but it was an early warning of something that will become increasingly common. What happens when we have a wheat shortage? As shortages become more frequent, how will we feed ourselves essential-to-life vegetables and fruit when we have already eviscerated our native horticulture sector? Food Security and Food Sovereignty are areas where State policy is deeply suspect and it would be truly ironic to find out in the not-too-distant future, that when push came to shove, 'The Food Island' was incapable of feeding itself.

OK, enough. This is the Henny Penny/Chicken Little moment where I tell you the sky is falling in. I could go on, and on and on, to the point of absolute despair, but I won't.

For starters, I have my own selfish reasons, three of them in fact, my children and I would do anything to help change the future we are currently bequeathing them. I also happen to believe passionately in all the hugely positive things about Ireland and its food culture, the stuff that makes it one of the very best countries in the world to cultivate produce and raise livestock.

Who has the answers? The brilliantly inventive and utterly frustrating human race has all of the answers; we just need to wake up and start asking the questions.

For Ireland, we need to begin a national conversation, a very difficult conversation, especially for a people fond of saying one thing and meaning another. We need stakeholders at all levels, from the ordinary citizen right the way up to those operating at the very top of the agri-biz sector and all of their State enablers, to acknowledge the profound environmental and social damage this manic pursuit of what Foodwise 2025 has, laughably, dubbed 'sustainable intensification', an oxymoron on a par with 'justifiable genocide' or 'pleasant murder'—whoever coined that particular phrase could do PR for Satan himself. And then we need to start talking about what we do next, honestly, openly and fearlessly.

It works outwards and gradually upwards, beginning with the ordinary individual at the very bottom because this type of change will never come from the top but keep this quote from 2016 Terre Madre in mind: 'They may be giants, but we are millions.' Actually, we are billions.

Professor Tim Lang, of London City University, and the man who coined the term 'food miles', said: "Food isn't just about nutrition, or the environment, or questions of sustainable farming, or food industry practice, or ethics, or trade justice, or affordability. It is all these things."

I am not calling for a revolution. I'm not talking about switching horses mid-race or of dropping out of the race entirely. But I am talking about entering a second horse in the race, running at a different and more sustainable pace and to an entirely different set of instructions to better prepare us for the utterly inevitable challenges of the future, challenges being caused by our current market driven policies.

TK Whitaker, a civil servant who, to the best of my knowledge, had no particular expertise in the innate fragility of environmental ecosystems or any heightened prescience of the hugely damaging impact of a chemically-adulterated planet, published his programme some 60 years ago and it remains, intrinsically, State doctrinal agricultural policy to this day. Do you think a nation with such a reputation for producing brilliant minds, might manage to generate a *second* idea after 60 years?

Finally and most fundamentally of all, food is not a commodity, it is an essential human requirement along with air, water, sleep and shelter. It is time we began making that principle the core value at every level of our food system.

