

WHY ORGANIC FOOD?

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I am lucky in many ways.

I have led an eventful and exciting working life – from hand-harvesting Brussels sprouts in Lincolnshire, with a “Lazy Wind” (going through you rather than bothering to go round!), to managing a 10,000 acre cattle ranch in West Africa, to being involved, from the early stages, in a food revolution in Britain.

I can trace my own inspiration for this unconventional food and farming career back to a farmhouse in north Devon in the 1950's. It was a small family dairy farm, run by my great uncle and aunt. For some reason, events which happened there have stuck with me ever since, and were undoubtedly the seeds of my future life. If I may also be slightly presumptive, I believe that some of the feelings engendered in me as a young boy go some way to explain the current extraordinary explosion in organic food, which even threatens to make “hippy food” mainstream!

Turning left inside the front door of the old cob farmhouse at Sparks Farm was a dairy, with lime-washed stone walls, and a wonderfully cool, yet slightly sweet atmosphere. However, above all, was the smell.

For those who have never been lucky enough to be near raw, fresh milk, there is an indescribably creamy, rich aroma, which to me sums up happy summer days spent in this rural idyll. Outside, behind the house, was a wire-sided chicken run, where I always volunteered to go with my aunt to collect the eggs. To go round to the nesting boxes and pick up the warm, smooth eggs from their pillow of straw was something that excited me as a young boy in those days of almost pre-industrial farming.

Then there were the meals - sitting on the wooden bench with cushions, at the long wooden table - meals which seemed to go on for ever, and around it all the smooth round vowels of my relatives in their glorious Devonian accents. This was surely real slow food!

It was this world which inspired me to read agriculture at university and go on to a career involving a number of very different aspects of food and farming. Perhaps it's my age, but I have been wondering recently what was it about those events, smells and sensations on that Devon Farm 50 years ago, which had such an impact on my life?

I think it can be summed up in a four-letter word - REAL. It was real in the sense that it was an intimate mingling with nature and the "fruits of the earth" with no intermediary between them and myself. It was a raw, essential experience - as close as I could get to the stuff of life itself. In a sense it was a rather spiritual experience.

The 10 or so years I spent in African Agriculture were “real” as well. There is nothing to compare with the African bush when it comes to raw nature. Human life there was all too “real”. Perhaps what stays with me most is the poverty. When you employ farm labourers to live on 26 pence a day, life was pretty close to its most basic level. In managing an irrigated sugar estate with smallholder farmers, I felt I was sitting at a blank sheet of paper, and that any extra effort I put into improving the lives of the local community did make a very genuine difference. It was a very real experience.

On returning to the UK in the mid-1980’s my wife and I felt we wanted to create something. When living in Africa we had annual leave which was a month’s snapshot of life in this country. We were able to step back and see changes going on which, had we been immersed in it, we would not have seen. One of those snapshots showed the blandness of food produced from an ever-intensifying system of farming. And in many ways these two things are connected. Certainly in meat production, there is a correlation between age of the animal and the flavour of its meat.

We started Graig Farm Organics in 1988, with the purpose of supplying better tasting meat, produced in a non-intensive way, with the highest standards of animal welfare.

Our market research in 1987 showed strong interest in naturally produced chickens (which was our original plan) with 80% of those butchers and shops we questioned saying they were interested. However, whilst shopkeepers generally thought it was a “nice idea”, their ideas on price were less positive - only a small majority thought their customers would pay the extra price needed to produce these special chickens. They wanted the benefits without paying the price.

“Customers frequently ask for naturally reared meat; the idea is good – but the price is very high”, as one butcher in Cheltenham told us.

Before carrying out our trials with this non-intensive, drug-free, welfare friendly poultry, we went to see the “experts” – the NFU, ADAS (the advisory service), and so on. So many of them told us the same thing that my wife and I coined the “*Ooooh, you can’t do that*” syndrome. One even told us that if you allow sunlight into a building with chickens in it, they will go mad! Then came across a farmer in Somerset who was doing exactly what we had in mind, and we realised that of course “you CAN do that”, as poultry keepers have done for millennia!

We found a more positive response when we took a stand at the Royal Welsh Show in 1989, and were sufficiently encouraged by the positive response to our chickens that we sold our lives to the bank and started the brand of Graig Farm Organics – appropriately enough in what was previously the dairy of our own farmhouse! Soon we had contact with

several strange people called organic farmers who started supplying us with other animal species.

By the mid-1990's there was the beginnings of supermarket interest in organic meat, so we developed Graig Producers, a collaborative marketing organisation for organic livestock farmers. The idea of this was to give individual farmers a stronger voice in the market place than if they were on their own. With currently some 250 members across Wales, and more in new Groups in South West England and Scotland, we are making genuine progress in our aim of ensuring the financial viability of family-run organic livestock farms, and through this a positive contribution to the maintenance of the social fabric of rural areas.

The increase in organic food has been extraordinary over the past 10 years. But why is that? Consumer Research consistently shows a mixture of reasons why people buy organic food – the environment, health and taste being the normally cited top 3 reasons.

Even the price issue is now becoming a lesser barrier to purchasing organic food – in contrast to our own original research.

The proportion of incomes spent on food has declined over the past 50 years – it is less than half what it was 30 years ago. As a result, what you buy to eat becomes a question of priorities, not so much of

absolute inability to “afford” organic food, for the majority of the population.

But is the increasing popularity of organic food not part of a bigger phenomenon – going back to reality? As our lives become more virtual and detached from risk and reality, so we seem to have a proportionate need to get back to something basic, earthy and real. And what could be more so than organic food, grown without any modern aids of chemicals or artificial fertilisers?

It is not just the food which has become real – the way we buy it is changing, albeit modestly in the overall scheme of things. Farmers Markets have increased since the first one opened in Bath in 1997 to over 500 now. Farm shops and other direct-selling outlets where the customer has close contact with the person who produced the food have blossomed; The phenomenon of Local Food is another sign of a need to get the sense of communication, if not with the soil, then at least with real producers of food.

This back to reality movement is not restricted to eating food either – Gardening is now showing a renaissance of interest, with Royal Horticultural Society membership increasing by around 50% in the past 10 years. Nature programmes attract huge TV audiences; the Ramblers Association membership continues to increase annually, as do wildlife and other nature-based organisations; even the “Bible” of Self

Sufficiency, by John Seymour has just been re-published. Finally. the environment is, at long last, beginning to come centre-stage even in the political arena (although perhaps not quickly enough for some of us!). By contrast, interest in DIY is, by some measures at least, in decline.

Membership increases 1987-2005:

Royal Zoological Society for Scotland +62%

RSPB Scotland +112%

Scottish Wildlife Trusts +166%

Royal Horticultural Society +58% (in 10 years).

Organic food has caught the public imagination and is, I believe, part of this craving for a reality and an unchanging stability which so many of us now seem to need in our world of virtual reality and excessive materialism.

What about the future – where will organic food be in 20 years time?

Cost is one key element of organic food vs intensively produced food.

Let's look at how this has, and possibly will develop:

Since the War, chemicals were increasingly used in food production in order to fulfil successive government calls for ever cheaper food.

Putting aside for a moment the wider question of the true cost of this intensive food production (the clearing up of chemical residues from soil and water, and so on), it is logical to say that if you remove the

chemicals and produce organic food, then you revert to a more "expensive" form of food production – on the shop shelf at least.

There is no getting away from the fact that organic food will, with current system of paying for it, be more expensive than intensively farmed food.

But, what happens when the oil starts to run out, or is increasingly taxed and prices rise? One of the main fossil fuel costs in intensive farming is the production of nitrogen fertiliser – essential for rapid plant growth in such systems. As oil prices rise, so will fertiliser, and so will costs of producing intensively produced food. It may not be that long before these costs result in organic crops being grown for similar prices to intensive ones.

The polluter pays approach to cleaning up the environment is already increasing the costs of intensive chemical farming. It seems likely that this trend will continue.

What if pesticide residues are proven to contribute to modern diseases, just as tobacco now is?

There are a number of ticking clocks which may in the not too distant future mean that organic is indeed mainstream sooner than we think.

Organic Food has been a complex concept to get over to a general public who know little about how their food is produced. And yet, perhaps only now, it is that very complexity, with all its strands of benefits, which has ensured its increasing popularity. It gives consumers comfort and confidence with a touch of earthiness.

Organic food is a real thing in an increasingly unreal world, and perhaps offers the roots back to reality which we increasingly seem to crave.