

Food for thought

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Pioneering research from The University of Nottingham recommends a full government environmental audit of British restaurants. The report — ‘The Environmental Sustainability of the British Restaurant Industry: A London Case Study’ — has revealed that the environmental cost of getting food to the restaurant plate is far higher than previously thought.

BSc student Will Brookes studied 40 restaurants in London, and carried out an extensive public survey, to test knowledge of local produce and the cost to the environment of importing food ingredients.

“Everyone knows that importing food inevitably creates more CO₂ than locally sourced foodstuffs,” he says. “But we were stunned to discover that the CO₂ produced by meals based on imported ingredients from non-European countries, is on average more than a hundred times higher than that of ingredients produced in Britain.”

The study found that an average dish, using ingredients from non-European countries, produces more than five kilograms of CO₂ in transport. In comparison, food which is locally sourced by environmentally aware or ‘green’ restaurants produces just 51 grams.

It is believed that food transport alone accounts for 35 per cent of the UK’s total emissions, and the food industry is the third largest contributor with industrial use.

“The concept of food miles isn’t new” says Brookes, who has previously undergone chef training at the prestigious Leith School of Food and

Wine. “There has been extensive research into the cost of importing foodstuffs by supermarkets, but this is the first study of its kind into the restaurant industry and its considerable impact on the environment. Given that up to 30 per cent of all human-induced global warming is caused by global food and agricultural systems, this is one area which needs to be addressed.”

The study places the restaurants into four groups; Green, British, European and Non-European.

Green restaurants are those that try to run a sustainable business and promote the practice.

The remaining establishments were grouped according to their ‘home country’. Italian restaurants for example are European, while Indian restaurants are classed as Non-European.

”The UK’s reliance on food prepared for the consumer is at an all time high. This puts restaurants in a highly prominent position,” says Brookes. “The restaurant sector has the potential to be at the forefront of improving the sustainability of our food industry. This of course carries the responsibility of promoting knowledge of seasonal and local produce. This in turn could improve the sustainability of the food we cook at home.”

Among the restaurants included in the research is Konstam at the Prince Albert in London’s King’s Cross. The restaurant has a policy of sourcing local and seasonal foods from across Greater London.

The restaurant and its owner/chef Oliver Rowe were the central subjects of BBC 2’s ‘Urban Chef’ series: “We were very pleased to see this kind of emphasis on the issue of seasonal foods and local produce. It’s something we take very seriously. More than 85 per cent of the produce

used in our kitchen is grown or reared within the area covered by the London Underground system.”

The study does accept that local sourcing is not always possible. But where local sourcing is not appropriate the study suggests restaurants can save energy elsewhere. “You wouldn’t expect an Argentinean steakhouse for example to start serving British Beef,” says Will. “But they could make a difference through recycling and composting, for example.”

Another key recommendation in the report is that customers should be able to offset the carbon cost of their meal, in the same way for example that carbon credits can be bought through airlines. It would cost less than a penny to offset an average Green and British three-course meal. A European meal would cost nearly two pence, while customers would have to pay close to 8 pence to offset a Non European meal. This particular area though also produced some unexpected results.

Dr Nick Mount, from the School of Geography and Will’s dissertation tutor explains: “The research shows that generally the more expensive your meal is, the lower the carbon footprint. This is what people seem to expect, but I doubt they would believe just how high the cost to the environment is in the cheaper meals.

”It is also important to bear in mind that this study does not set out to attack the restaurants that do not use local foodstuffs. If all restaurants did source locally, the dining experience would be uniform and dull. But what the research clearly points to is the need for regulation and a governing body to make restaurants more sustainable.”

Source: University of Nottingham

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