We Want Real Food

Graham Harvey

Britain's once fertile soil has been systematically stripped of its crucial minerals by industrial farming, leaving our fruit and vegetables tasteless and a nation in chronic ill health. Graham Harvey calls for a return to nutritious food

It started with a bunch of organic carrots. I bought them in a wholefood shop. They hadn't looked particularly promising - a sort of washed-out yellow colour - but I felt sure they'd do the job.

Back at home, I grated a couple and put them in a salad. I started munching on a forkful. It wasn't that the carrots tasted bland. Nothing so positive. There was no discernible taste of any kind. Not the merest hint of sweetness. I might as well have been chewing on wood shavings.

This came as a shock. If it had been the usual chemically-grown stuff, I'd have understood. No one expects the economy end of the fresh-produce market to taste of much, but we're talking organic here. The carrots had been grown without any chemical sprays and nourished with barrow-loads of good, old-fashioned compost - or so I imagined. They ought to have been bursting with flavour.

Then again, maybe I shouldn't have been that surprised. To be honest, I'd experienced tasteless organic produce before: bananas that hardly registered on the taste buds; apples with all the sweetness and flavour of household soap.

I used to believe it didn't matter much. Why worry about the taste, I thought, so long as they're doing you good? I know better these days.

It was 19th-century sugar refiners such as Abram Lyle, of Lyle's Golden Syrup, who made it possible to put a sweet taste in junk foods. Before they started turning out their deadly white crystals, sweetness had long been associated with strength and vitality.

In nature, sweetness is often linked to rich sources of essential trace elements, including zinc, magnesium, copper and boron. Sweet-tasting natural foods such as ripe fruits, berries and honey contain minerals as well as sugars. For early man - the hunter-gatherer - there was an evolutionary advantage in developing a sweet tooth. It was a means of selecting the ripest fruits, which would be at their most nutritious.

Published by Constable and Robinson

But fresh foods no longer taste sweet. Many are deliberately harvested while under-ripe, to lessen damage in transport and to extend shelf-life. In addition, they have been robbed of many of the trace elements they once contained, although this is disputed by some food scientists. A revolution in the way the foods are grown has taken away the very nutrients that once promoted good health. Our staple foods have been "dumbed down". As a result, Britain - like other industrial countries - is suffering a tidal wave of sickness.

Degenerative conditions, such as heart disease, arthritis, diabetes and asthma, are reaching epidemic proportions. One in three of us will be struck down with cancer at some stage in our lives. Mental illness, everything from depression to dementia, is also rife.

Could food really be responsible for the health catastrophe that has overtaken the western world? It seems scarcely credible. Yet the fact remains that our basic foods have been changed. They are now subtly different from those eaten by human beings through all of history.

Britain is 50 years into a mass experiment in human nutrition. We all eat basic foods that have been stripped of the antioxidants, trace elements and essential fatty acids that once promoted good health. Is it any wonder that our body-maintenance systems are breaking down in middle age or earlier?

Nitrogen compounds, the products of a worldwide chemical industry, are the powerhouse that drives modern farming. It's those small, white pellets - prills, as the manufacturers call them - that have degraded our everyday foods and led to the upsurge in ill-health.

Nitrogen fertilisers weaken plants by stimulating excess growth of sappy tissue with thin cell walls. Crops grown this way are more prone to disease, which is why they need constant spraying with chemicals to keep them standing. When fed to livestock, they are unlikely to promote health in the animals: hence the need for routine antibiotics. It's no real surprise that such crops are no better for people.

The British were once rather good at farming. As far back as Roman times, these islands off the north-west coast of Europe were regularly exporting wheat back to the mainland. They had been blessed with deep, fertile soils - a legacy of the post-glacial forest - and a mild, moist climate that was superb for growing a wide range of crops.

In the late 18th century, the island farmers developed a revolutionary cropping system that practically doubled the output of food. It was a clever way of alternating cereals with livestock-feeding crops, especially root crops and clover, which adds nitrogen to the soil naturally.

Admittedly, it wasn't an entirely original idea. The farmers of Flanders had been doing something similar for centuries. But British farmers were smart enough to pick it up and apply it on a grand scale. That's how they were able to feed the nation during the Industrial Revolution, a time of unprecedented population growth.

In Victorian times, British farming was known and admired across the world. Our great breeds of cattle - the Hereford, the Shorthorn, the North Devon, the Aberdeen Angus, the Sussex, the Welsh Black and the Ayrshire - were sought after everywhere. For the best part of a century, Britain could justly claim to be stud farm to the world.

Now nobody wants our cattle. The land of legendary farmers is better known today as the birthplace of mad cow disease, a country of sickness and fear. The defining image of British agriculture is no longer the magnificent Hereford bull, once famed the world over. It is the pyre of burning cattle carcasses, the fiery beacon of the foot-and-mouth crisis of 2001.

Feeding people well ought to be easy by now. After all, we've been at it long enough. Farming of one sort or another has been around for 12,000 years.

The principles of sound agriculture hardly change from generation to generation. Why should they? The human body has scarcely altered since the Stone Age. The foods required to keep it in good working order are no different from those of the hunter-gatherers, or the first farmers as they planted their primitive cereals in a scratched-out seedbed.

The only requirement for wholesome, nutrient-rich crops is a fertile soil. It's the same for livestock. When it comes to raising cattle for healthy beef or dairy products, all you need is a field or two of good grassland, grown on a fertile soil. And this is the very thing that chemical fertilisers have destroyed.

Whenever I take the train north, I pass a series of intensive vegetable fields strung out alongside the railway. The sight of this sad ground invariably fills me with gloom. In the summer months, it's mostly planted up with salads or veg, laser-straight lines of cabbages, carrots or iceberg lettuce. From the train you can see the spaced tractor-wheel marks that show the pesticide sprayer is frequently taken through the crop.

In the winter, the ground is bare. There's not a weed to be seen. When the weather's wet, great pools of water lie on the surface unable to drain away. The bare ground in between has crusted over, making it impossible for air to penetrate into the soil spaces and supply the myriad life forms that could give the land "heart" and help grow healthy plants.

Even from the train you can see this land is sick. So drenched has it been in chemical sprays and fertilisers that its normal function has virtually broken down. The robust crumb structure, which allows water and air to pass through the top layers, has disappeared. Beneficial organisms such as earthworms will have suffocated. To thrive, they need well-aerated soils with open channels and pore space. Deep below the surface, processes of putrefaction will be taking place. The only way vegetable plants can be induced to grow here is with constant spraying with pesticides, otherwise they will inevitably succumb to disease.

Who will buy these vegetables? They will have been washed and packed for a supermarket somewhere. Perhaps it'll be some harassed young mum keen to do the

Published by Constable and Robinson

best she can for her uninterested youngsters. She'll cajole them into trying a carrot or a floret or two of broccoli with their chicken dinosaurs. It'll do them good, she will promise.

But she will be wrong. There will be precious little in those vegetables to help her kids grow up strong and healthy. Judging from the abused and miserable soil that grew them, it's hard to imagine they'll produce any sort of nourishment. The tragedy is that, with a season or two of care and attention, those fields beside the railway tracks could begin growing the sort of food that would make her children as strong as lions.

Is it any wonder that today's youngsters have little interest in fresh foods? The desire for sweetness is instinctive. In evolutionary terms, it directed the early hominid towards ripe fruits and vegetables, and away from poisonous plants that mostly tasted bitter. Organic food offers no cast-iron guarantee of good nutrition. As the organic market expands, more crops are grown on land "converted" after decades of chemical farming. Even under the new rules, there's no guarantee that they will be packed with the minerals and vitamins needed for good health.

Today the fields around us are filled with fantastic machines. There are tractors big enough to develop 500 horsepower at the flick of a switch. Modern forage harvesters can chomp their way through a field full of shoulder-high maize in less time than it took a French peasant farmer 30 years ago to load up a single hay trailer.

Combine harvesters are now so smart that they can monitor their precise geographical position by satellite as they move through the crop, then record the grain yield of every square yard in a field the size of Heathrow Airport. But what use is this technology when it gathers second-rate foods from land that's worn out?

There's no machine yet that can add an extra microgram of iron to a wheat grain; no machine that will boost the level of cancer-fighting vitamins in cows' milk. The only useful measure of a farming system is how well it feeds the people. On this basis, the new agricultural revolution - and the nitrogen fertilisers that power it - has been an unmitigated disaster.

Since Britain joined the European Community in 1973, we, the people, have paid out more than a hundred billion pounds in farm subsidies. The taxpayers have effectively bought and paid for the farmland on these islands. In return, they should expect to eat well.

Gene Logsdon, the American agrarian writer, has a theory that sometime in the not-too-distant future, the food we eat will come from gardens rather than what we now call farms. It's a fanciful notion, he admits. But no more fanciful than the idea that we can be fed by agribusiness companies such as Monsanto and Cargill.

Even now, millions of people in Asia live well from the production of farms that are scarcely bigger than large gardens. While a mechanic building a car in his own garage can't compete with Ford or Honda, there's no agribusiness company on earth that can grow a carrot cheaper or better than the backyard gardener.

For years Britain's farmland has been driven relentlessly to produce heavier crops at ever-lower cost. Now it's time to put it to a new purpose - restoring the people of these islands to health and happiness.