

What's in the food we're eating today

With World Food Day just gone, are we witnessing the emergence of a kind of 'food politics' in Ireland? **DAVID RALPH** investigates

THE Government's recent bailout of Irish banks cost every Irish citizen an estimated €11,111. But as disillusionment with our political system spreads, more and more people are turning to an area of life where they feel they can regain control of their destinies: the food they eat.

Attendance at food festivals and membership of 'grow-it-yourself' (GIY) associations have both exploded in the last year. Even Trevor Sargent, TD for Dublin North and former leader of the Green Party, has spoken about his passion for food growing. "It's very connected to what drives me in politics," he told TV3's *The Morning Show*.

This fusion between food and politics is a rare blend in Irish political life. But Sargent's time in the Dáil as Minister of State for Food and Horticulture persuaded him see the broader links between our politics and what ends up on our plates.

"It became very clear when you look at all the costs that come from bad eating," he said. "So to encourage people to grow fruit and vegetables is an integral part of encouraging people to eat fruit and vegetables."

And growing fruit and veg is something people have been doing in huge numbers in recent months. The GIY movement – founded by author and food activist Michael Kelly in Waterford in 2009 – has gathered 6,000 members nationwide in the last year alone, transforming once-idle windowsills and back gardens into productive patches growing fresh food.

GIY patron Diarmuid Gavin thinks that the popularity of the GIY phenomenon is in part down to people's growing curiosity over where, exactly, their food comes from. "There's a lot of fear around about how our food is produced," he says. "There's been movies and books and documentaries and we wonder, 'What is in the food we're eating?'"

Guaranteed Irish?

The investigations into the food system that Gavin men-



Growing fruit and vegetables on allotments is becoming increasingly popular

tioners refer mainly to American agri-food businesses. Eric Schlosser's bestselling 2001 book *Fast Food Nation* and the 2008 Oscar-nominated movie *Food Inc* both vividly documented the deplorable conditions in which animals are raised for slaughter on industrial-scale farms.

For a long time, such farming methods were not seen as touching Irish farms. But in the last two decades the origins of Irish food products have come increasingly under the spotlight.

In the 1980s, the outbreak of BSE – more commonly known as mad cow disease – highlighted to many the shocking practice taking place on many Irish farms of feeding livestock with the flesh of dead animals. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, food-borne E coli scares originating in contaminated supermarket meat have further undermined confidence in Irish farming practices.

As recently as 2008, Ireland

suffered yet another food scandal, as the presence of high levels of cancer-causing dioxins found in Irish pork resulted in a massive recall of all pork products.

All of this has served to unravel the pastoral fantasy spun of Ireland's farmers working in sync with the rhythms of nature. But in its place is a growing understanding of where our food comes from.

Changing attitudes

One organisation actively promoting this greater understanding of our food system is Slow Food Ireland – part of a worldwide movement founded in 1989 in Rome in reaction to the opening of a McDonald's restaurant on one of the Italian capital's most historic piazzas.

Speaking at the recent Waterford Harvest Food Festival, Slow Food Ireland president and celebrity chef Darina Allen described the organisation as an "antidote to the fast-food culture we've got

caught up in". Summing up the its ethos, Allen argues that Slow Food is food that is "good, clean and fair".

Some evidence suggests that, despite the downturn pinching many households' food budgets, people are still willing to pay a premium to ensure the presence of these three elements in the food they eat.

A 2008 Bord Bia survey into consumers' eating behaviour found that almost all people are now prepared to question the health-enhancing qualities of their food. And a 2009 Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) study into food labelling indicates that consumer sophistication is rising in terms of the type of information they want to see on products when deciding what to buy.

The changing consumer motivations pinpointed in these studies reflect what the award-winning American journalist and food campaigner Michael

Pollan has been pointing out for years. Receiving an award in San Francisco for his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan said: "The food system is unsustainable because it depends on ignorance. And when people know how that was produced, they lose their appetite for it."

CRITICS OF those promoting a different, sustainable approach to food insist that the ethically sourced, organic and local foodstuffs on offer at farmers' markets and food festivals are only affordable for middle- and high-income earners.

For people out of work or on low incomes, paying more for food when budgets are already stretched to their limits makes little sense.

And those telling them to alter their eating habits can appear pretentious and elitist, completely out of touch with the day-to-day scrimping that

getting by on little money necessitates.

But a startling fact should be highlighted: real food prices have been falling for decades. In the 1970s the average Irish family spent around 32 per cent of their weekly income on food. Yet despite recent spikes in food prices, today the average Irish family spends roughly 15 per cent of their income feeding themselves.

Hidden costs

Throughout this period, low food prices meant good politics. Driving down the cost of food kept the electorate sated and silent. But the hidden costs of subsidising our cheap food become more visible daily.

An epidemic of diet-related illnesses is inundating an already overburdened health system; the excessive use of pesticides is causing irreparable environmental damage around the world; and as a number of investigations have shown, bargain supermarket prices depend on labour exploitation and maltreatment of workers in the food processing industry both at home and abroad.

These issues around food cannot remain disconnected from conventional political debate forever. While traditionally Irish people rarely discuss the gustatory pleasures of food, we have long used boycotts of products from countries whose policies we object to as a political weapon.

The crossfire of voices that can now be heard about food and the connections with broader political issues suggest that these two separate conversations will soon become a lively dialogue. Michael Kelly, referring to GIY's objectives for the coming year, writes: "Make it mainstream rather than niche. That's what we're all about."

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