

Where's the Salad?

By Frank J. Convery, Chairperson, Comhar Sustainable Development Council

In his latest monthly article on sustainability issues, Professor Frank J. Convery, Chairperson of Comhar Sustainable Development Council, addresses the recent call from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation for consumers to eat less meat, and explores the implications for Irish agriculture.

A favourite restaurant of mine is the Sweet Tomato in Aurora, Colorado. They offer an all-you-can-eat buffet of salads and soups. This may sound vaguely penitential but, on the contrary, is a great culinary experience. It works for three reasons: in addition to the usual salad stuff – lettuce, cucumbers, onions, tomatoes, red cabbage, beetroots – there are many types of lettuce, roasted eggplant and red peppers, spinach, peas and beans of many varieties, eggs, numerous seeds, cheeses, bacon pieces and much more; and these are all fresh – not a wilted leaf or tired bean to be seen. Secondly, the 'swimming in mayonnaise' propensity so evident in Ireland is absent. Finally, there are the dressings – bewildering in their variety – that provide that extra stimulus to the taste buds, all accompanied by hearty home-made soups.

And, in the best American tradition of having it all, when you round the bend from the salad bar to a new space, you find an array of desserts, ice-creams, fresh cooked ('from scratch') muffins, all included in the all-you-can-eat price of about \$8.50 (€6). So in module A, you can pleasurably indulge the puritan streak that is still a part of the American psyche and, virtue earned, you can move to module B and pile up the desserts, pies, muffins and ice-creams, with conscience squared and budget intact.

This culinary ramble on the edge of the Rockies is relevant to the recent call from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) that we should eat less meat in the interests of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Cattle produce serious amounts of methane gas; these emissions are a very potent factor in global warming, hence the FAO admonition.

If we are to reduce our meat consumption, however, attractive alternatives need to be omnipresent, and they usually are not. In Ireland, they do exist: my favourites include the Silk Road Café in the Chester Beatty Library and Blazing Salads in Powerscourt, both in Dublin, and Paradiso in Cork. But you have to seek such places out; they are by no means pervasive, and this constraint applies in many parts of Europe.

When it comes to eating less meat, we have a particular additional challenge in Ireland: the beef and dairy industry are the bedrock of our farm economy. And many of us have a sentimental attachment: I like those belching, flatulent, curious and innocent beasts with their messy toilet habits; it seems somehow unfair to blame them for the mess we humans are making of the way in which we manage the planet.

The challenge of reducing our meat intake is compounded by the fact that – in terms of global competitiveness – it seems that, while we can compete internationally as regards dairy products, we can't – under current conditions – do so in beef.

Terry Leahy, the CEO of Tesco, which has the largest share of the grocery market in the UK, Ireland and many other markets, has already committed to putting carbon labelling on products in their stores, and the University of Manchester are at present working out how to do carbon labelling of products on a life-cycle basis. As supermarkets begin to 'carbon label' their products, including meat products, consumers will begin to shift their mix of purchases towards combinations that have lower greenhouse gases embedded in their production, processing and transport.

What to do (in addition to providing delicious non-meat alternatives)? It is clear that quality rather than quantity has to characterise all aspects of Ireland's economy, including farming in general, and beef in particular. With our relatively high costs and associated dis-economies of scale, selling into bulk markets will never be commercially sustainable. A thought experiment: if we reduced our cattle numbers by half, what value could we add to those we keep, so as to make beef farming commercially viable in world markets?

It's easy to joke about Kobe beef, where the cattle are hand-massaged and fed beer, and then you pay €100 for a thimbleful of delicious meat, but we have to think outrageously if we are to succeed. The Guinness or Murphy's-fed cow may be in our future. Carbon labelling may also be an opportunity. It may be that Irish grass-fed beef is less greenhouse gas intensive than alternatives that come from afar (e.g. Brazil) or that are predominantly grain fed (USA). If such is the case, then in Terry Leahy's world, the product will be on the shelf as the top choice of the carnivores amongst us who want to eat responsibly. And there is the potential to use grass as fuel for heat, or to convert some grassland to fast-growing fuel crops. And taxes can be important in shaping performance: the use of wood for heating in Sweden took off when a carbon tax on heating fuels gave a strong competitive advantage to carbon-neutral wood.

We need to quickly create new choices that work environmentally and commercially. In UCD and elsewhere, we have started to do research on these potentials; we all need to do more, and we must succeed. The stakes are high. If we can't find new and better ways of eating and farming, we will all suffer.

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About Comhar Sustainable Development Council:

Comhar, Ireland's Sustainable Development Council, was established by government in 1999 to advance the national agenda for sustainable development, to evaluate progress, to assist in devising suitable mechanisms and advising on their implementation, and to contribute to the development of a national consensus in these regards. Its membership comprises representatives from various sectors, including the public, economic, environmental, social, agricultural, and academic sectors. It has an independent chairperson, Professor Frank J. Convery. Professor Convery is Heritage Trust Professor of Environmental Policy at UCD. Further information on Comhar is available at www.comharsdc.ie.