

## Food and Ethical Consumption

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# Food and Ethical Consumption

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Welcome to this special issue of Journal of Consumer Ethics themed around *Food and Ethical Consumption* which has been my pleasure to edit. Having studied food and ethical consumption for almost 30 years – covering issues related to fairtrade food brands (Szmigin *et al.*, 2007); farmers markets (McEachern *et al.*, 2010), convenience and family food consumption (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006), sustainable tourist food consumption (Carrigan *et al.*, 2017), and most recently the role of generativity and family food sustainability (Athwal *et al.*, 2018) – it is apparent that there is significant interest and growing concern among researchers and campaigners about how we produce and consume food, particularly in industrialised countries. Ideas about the ethics of food and consumption are contested, and often controversial, but they are also important to everyone. What we eat shapes our physical and emotional selves, and consumers or ‘citizens’ play multiple roles in our global food systems (Cura, 2017). Our food choices and understanding of food systems emerge from a complex landscape that includes what constitutes ‘good food’, where it comes from, what we should be eating, how to prepare and share it, and the politics of hunger, eating, getting, growing and wasting food (Goodman *et al.*, 2017; Paddock, 2017; Evans *et al.*, 2017).

The purpose of the issue is to bring together work that contributes to our understanding of food and ethical consumption, and the papers that feature illustrate how broad and complicated some of the challenges are relating to food and ‘eating well’. Recent decades have seen an emerging agenda to support better food quality, greater authenticity and localness in production, sustainability, fairtrade, and animal welfare (Eden *et al.*, 2008). Issues such as food labelling, food justice and food poverty, alternative food networks, food tourism, slow food and food waste are increasingly at the forefront of discussions about the ethics of food consumption. While the special issue may raise more problems and challenges than it provides answers and solutions, it signals fruitful territory for future research in food and ethical consumption.

It is timely that JCE has chosen food as one of its early special issue topics, since food is central to all our lives. Researchers have for some time explored the role and importance of food in the shaping of families, and the identity and agency of individuals (Carrigan *et al.*, 2006; Valentine 1999). Warde and Yates (2016:1) said that “*food and what we should or should not eat is one of the contemporary world’s most troublesome topics.*” For some consumers, food is plentiful and pleasurable; for others the task of accessing food is an exhausting, daily challenge (Hall and Holmes, 2017). The Food Ethics Council (2017) recently highlighted that while for many years consumers in industrialised countries have experienced the ‘era of cheap food’, increasingly volatile food prices are becoming a significant global political and economic issue. Rising food prices tend to disproportionately impact upon poor and vulnerable consumers the most, yet we also need to acknowledge the unrealistic cost of food at the till. How can we make food high quality, respect animal welfare and ensure sustainability, while keeping food accessible and affordable?

Critics point out that our current food system while providing relatively cheap food, does not reveal the hidden costs of food production and consumption that impact on natural capital and human health (Warde and Yates, 2016). Until recently, environmental and social sustainability were overlooked in the pursuit of food industrialisation and commercialisation. However, the reality of how food production and consumption impacts upon greenhouse gas emissions, depletes finite natural resources, accelerates global warming and climate change is gaining mainstream attention (Garnett, 2016). There is a moral imperative to produce enough food to feed the world's growing population; but also to do so with high standards and integrity while working with nature to harness and protect its benefits, and to ensure the health and nutrition of consumers by providing access to a healthy, balanced diet (Food Ethics Council, 2018). While around 800 million people worldwide go hungry, two billion suffer debilitating nutrient deficiencies and another two billion are overweight and obese, vulnerable to a plethora of disease such as heart conditions, strokes, diabetes and cancers (Garnett, 2016).

For example, food security has risen up national and international policy agendas in recent years, as experts tackle the challenge of feeding current and future generations by increasing agricultural productivity without increasing environmental degradation (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2012). Food scientists, campaigners and researchers are ever more vocal regarding the unsustainability of current food supply practices and policy. Food insecurity – where people are unable to access sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food (Marovelli, 2018) – has become a persistent feature of urban inequality during the current climate of austerity (Hall and Holmes, 2017). The problem is more complex than simply increasing global agricultural productivity or sustainable intensification, as this alone will not end global hunger. Access is at the forefront of food security, as is food quality in relation to concerns about nutrition, food safety, taste and social acceptance. Even though food is abundant in developed countries, lower income consumers find they often have to compromise on nutritional quality, and the enjoyment and pleasure that is derived from 'good' food (Goodman *et al.*, 2017). Thus researchers need to study both the experiential and the emotional dimensions of food security, concerns about the affordability of healthy food - currently and in the future - and how to reduce the stress of food shopping on a low income when faced with the tensions of juggling a tight budget and the seductive proposition of cheap, convenience food.

Two of the papers in this special issue focus on the problems of food security within low income communities in the UK. Firstly, 'Where's my shop?' by Deirdre Shaw, Andrew Cumbers and Hugh Kippen examines consumption ethics in a context of long term deprivation and limited food retail access. The paper notes the social significance of food in urban space and the importance of the interaction and engagement of communities. The role and importance of community in food security is further explored in our second paper 'Food, Ethics and Community: Using Cultural Animation to Develop a Food Vision for North Staffordshire' by Emma Surman, Mihaela Kelemen, Helen Millward and Sue Moffat. This article presents a communal grassroots food initiative driven by a collaboration featuring a community food network, a local university and a theatre. Specifically the authors capture the often unheard voices and untold stories within food ethics, using creative research methods to bridge individual and state driven interventions of food consumption.

Contributing to many of the challenges of food and ethical consumption has been the distance – geographically and cognitively - that has grown between food producers and consumers in the developed world. This disconnection means that few consumers are aware of, nor understand the sometimes negative social and environmental impacts that make food production possible. Few people grow their own food, or understand how food is produced; cognitive distance is exacerbated by new technologies of production, such as genetic modification and intensive animal farming. In many countries food is increasingly bought through large multinational retail stores rather than small, local shops, serviced by global food production, extensive, fragmented food supply chains and high food miles.

Food researchers and campaigners have for some time problematized these methods of production and called for a reconnection of consumers with the people and places that produce their food (Bos and Owen, 2016). This has increased attention on alternative food networks (AFNs) with specific agendas to deliver closer relationships between food producers and consumers by producing, processing, distributing and consuming food within a limited region or local area, while avoiding the need for long, multi-actor food chains (Cox *et al.*, 2008). Examples of AFNs include farmers markets, farm shops, farm gate sales, community supported agriculture, food box deliveries, consumer co-operatives and community gardening initiatives (Bos and Owen, 2016). These shorter, more transparent food supply chains are potentially redefining relationships between producers and consumers, are founded upon quality and provenance, deliver more sustainable and ethical ways of food production (Carrigan *et al.*, 2017), and provide a route for consumers – not necessarily motivated by food politics - to contribute to the wellbeing of their local towns and communities (Schoolman, 2017). However, many argue there is still a need for researchers to push such ethical consumption developments beyond mere shopping choices to consider the broader cultural, political and economic structures that enable and limit consumption practice (Welch *et al.*, 2018; Huddart Kennedy *et al.* 2018).

Values-driven food consumption has been around for many years, although what it means to be an ethical food consumer is often contested. Many western consumers are living through an age of unprecedented anxiety (Jackson, 2010; Paddock, 2015) particularly when it comes to meat consumption. Global consumption of meat and milk products is on the rise, with countries such as China and India increasingly adopting a meat-intensive diet (World Economic Forum, 2016). Conflicting messages about health and hygiene, provenance and nutrition as well as animal welfare and disease underpin the powerful and contested mediated biopolitics of eating (Goodman *et al.*, 2017). In North America and Europe the call to eschew meat in our diets is gaining attention, either through encouraging consumption reduction – for example, ‘Meat free Monday’ - or replacing it with alternative proteins such as insect based foods or plant based alternatives.

Being vegetarian is becoming more broadly accepted, while some critics suggest humans should not consume meat or dairy foods at all (Linne and McCrow-Young, 2017) a decision that certain scientists argue is the single biggest way to reduce our environmental impact on the planet (Carrington, 2018). Meat abstinence is gaining traction even among non-vegans/vegetarians, as personal health concerns, environmental anxiety and animal welfare are driving the ‘reducitarian’ movement where consumers refrain from absolute abstinence while making substantial reductions in their traditional meat consumption practice. Navigating these uncertainties to establish what is ‘good’ food, where it

comes from and what is best for them inevitably leaves many consumers frustrated and confused. Our third paper by Morven McEachern '*Ethical Meat Consumption: Transitioning Towards Sustainability?*' provides a thought-provoking commentary on many of these issues surrounding meat consumption and abstinence.

Different stages are distinguishable in the food consumption process: planning, shopping, storage and preparation of food, consumption itself, cleaning up and disposal of items (Carrigan *et al.*, 2006), and eating is mostly driven by habits and routines, social obligations and pressures (Warde and Yates, 2016). What is the right food to buy and eat is influenced by crises and food scares, and the increasingly powerful and vocal movements that address ethical and political concerns about our contemporary food system. Food waste is just one of many modern consumption habits that are attributed to the wasteful practices and attitudes of consumers (Lazell, 2016; Evans, 2014), whereby 60% of food wasted is avoidable (Bray, 2013). Yet, the ethical framing of food and food waste is replete with tensions and contradictions; more recent work identifies a distributed responsibility for food waste that incorporates the interface between supermarkets and households (Welch *et al.*, 2018).

Our final paper '*From bean to cup and beyond: exploring ethical consumption and coffee shops*' by Jennifer Ferreira and Carlos Ferreira illuminates some of the complexities consumers face around ethical consumption in the retail environment, namely coffee shops. Recent years have seen the development of a vibrant coffee shop culture around the world, but this growing demand for coffee while driving increased consumption, has escalated waste production on a massive scale. Traditional discussions of ethical coffee have often focused on aspects such as fairtrade coffee supply chains (Lekakis, 2013) and coffee consumption in general, rather than considering the coffee shop as the point where ethical choices can be made. The paper opens up the discussion about the many and complex ethical choices facing the consumer, while highlighting how the responsibility for fostering such ethical behaviours does not always lie solely with the consumer, and requires efforts by businesses throughout the industry and policy makers to foster greater awareness of ethical consumption choices in the coffee shop industry.

We are also featuring in this issue Dan Welch's review of the monograph by Yana Manyukhina, titled '*Ethical Consumption: Practices and Identities, a realist approach*'. In completing this special issue, I firstly wish to thank the authors who have made their contributions to the papers that appear. I am also grateful for the support and advice of my colleagues on the JCE Editorial Board, and the reviewers who gave their time and helpful feedback in the preparation of the special issue. Special thanks goes to Dan Welch and Sarah Marie Hall who have been a constructive and supportive sounding board for me along the way, and of course our main Editor, Rob Harrison, for his cheerful tolerance of my deadline slippage.

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