

FOOD FILE

FLIGHT OF FANCY

photo: Euro Monitor



A SIMPLE GUIDE TO FOOD - WITH A SMALL CARBON FOOTPRINT

Now that we know that our world is under real threat from climate change, we need to make careful choices when we buy - food especially. As far as food is concerned, home or locally grown is best - it will be fresher and tastier and it will have more vitamins. There will also be much less wastage than supermarkets that often discard a large part of food grown for them.

Growing your own food is not an easy option for many people, but if you can get an allotment, or use your garden, you are going to reduce climate change right away. You won't be using a tractor, you'll use your car less and you will be fitter too.

You can only make good decisions by being reasonably well-informed about where the food has come from and how it was made - because food miles are only very crude guides to total carbon emissions.

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FOOD GROUP



photo: Abel and Cole

FRUIT AND VEG

The first rule here is to eat local, seasonal vegetables and fruit whenever possible! Farmers' Markets and veggie boxes are great for this, but look out for the more sophisticated boxes that include foreign foods that have travelled a long way in cooled lorries!

Eating seasonally is a joy, so don't fight nature - get hooked on UK apples, carrots, parsnips, cabbages, onions and many more local fruits and vegetables that give you high vitamin levels in winter (though some will have been kept in cool stores). Unless it is summer, beans, peppers and tropical fruits will have travelled a long way - many by air. It is very hard to find out how much pollution and irrigation has been involved in the growing of foreign fruit - so they are probably best kept as an occasional treat!

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FOOD MILES

Food, or flowers, that have travelled by air will have a very large carbon footprint. Transporting food by air is a fairly recent trend, which is only economic because air fuel is untaxed - if we managed without it 20 years ago, can it be essential now? Out-of-season vegetables and the majority of cut-flowers are the main culprits, so before you buy, find out where they are from! Lorries moving food around the UK also produce a high percentage of total carbon emissions - and many supermarkets move products to a central distribution point first, so that even when you buy local food, grown just up the road, it may have travelled further than you'd think!

PACKAGING

Most packaging has an enormous carbon footprint - so take your own bags and, if you've got the nerve and the time, tell shop managers how you feel. Most of all, just don't buy over-packaged goods. Local greengrocers and butchers are much less likely to use plastic cartons and double-wrapping.



photo: Daily Telegraph

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ORGANIC FARM
photo: Riverford

Bulking Up

The bulkier the goods and the higher the water content (water is heavy), the higher the climate-cost! Ask some key questions - how far has it come and what percentage of it is water. Australian and South American wines are good examples - they are over 90% liquid and they are in heavy bottles. Even bottled water has an enormous impact, because we use so much of it, because most of it will have travelled hundreds of miles and because recycling the bottles is very carbon-expensive. Foods that we use in much smaller quantities will have a much smaller impact - spices, for example..

Chilled to the Bone

Meat from countries such as New Zealand and Brazil may have been reared less intensively (fed less corn and soya and grazed on less-fertilised grass), but will have been transported in energy-hungry chilled/refrigerated ships. Their production may even be at the expense of rainforests - probably the greatest cause of climate change. One solution may be to eat less meat, but also to buy it from local sources that can tell you where it came from and how it was fed. Cattle and sheep reared on steep, less fertile or moorland farms will have had a more natural life and will not have used



photo: Craft Foods

land that could have been used to grow food crops, such as vegetables and wheat. Most dairy cows feed on grass, supplemented with wheat, barley, maize and soya. Most chicken and pigs are fed wholly on barley, wheat, maize and soya.

Most fish is caught far from shore and is frozen and packaged. You could check out which species are most sustainable and ask your fishmonger which fish are fresh and locally caught.

What goes in

There is no doubt that the world was more sustainable in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before we started using inputs such as manufactured fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, but people used to starve if pests wiped out key foods - think of the Irish Potato Famine, when blight struck! Because we have also discovered ways of curing diseases and living longer, the world population is now many times higher than it was then - much too big for organic foods to be an option for everyone.

Organic foods are very good, but, from a global perspective, we have to be aware that they usually give lower yields and need more labour (that is why they are more expensive!). Fertilisers and sprays have a large carbon footprint and can also cause pollution. Pesticide residues in food can damage health, but UK produced foods are continually tested and have to meet the highest standards. Local food from a known low-input source is a good compromise if you can't get organic. When you are thinking about inputs, include the energy that you need to prepare and store each type of food.