

Where in the world part 1: Home-grown

The term 'food miles' was first coined by Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University in London, and has since become a shorthand term for the adverse environmental impact of our globalised food system. I know Tim and I don't think that was ever necessarily his intention. His concern is around government policy and its overall effectiveness, rather than in the specific area of damage to the environment caused by long-distance transportation. Indeed, the regulatory regimes under which imported food is produced, such as the infamous American 'chlorinated chicken', are more his area. The other end of the argument is articulated by another Tim, Tim Benton, Professor of Population Ecology at the University of Leeds. This Tim, whom I also know, has research interests around "building food systems that are resilient, that do not undermine the world's natural capital, that leave space for nature, and supply a sufficient amount of nutritious food to underpin global public health". And that, of course, is the nub of the issue; the global food system has to deliver many things, and the source of any given item is just one of its attributes. Economic drivers and cultural norms have come to be dominant over the last few decades, a period during which increasing urbanisation and the rising wealth of most parts of the British population has resulted in a slow loss of connection between consumers and the food system which serves them.

Whatever your views on the rights and wrongs of Brexit, the UK's departure from the European Union is bound to bring large-scale change to the agri-food system in this country and where our food is grown. The UK has long been a large-scale importer of food; take a look at the book 'Eggs or Anarchy' - a biography of the WW2 Minister of Food, for a view of how things stood nearly 80 years ago. In recent years we have grown/reared only around 50% of what we consume, and three-fifths of the balance comes from other EU member states. Of course, there is also an export market for British produce and food, so the real measure of self-sufficiency is more like 60%. Of the net imports, some are things that won't grow here easily or at all, pineapples for instance, but many global commodities cross borders in both directions. That is not to say that exotic produce can't be grown in the UK with enough effort. In the mid-nineteenth century pineapple cultivation in the UK was a mark of both the skill of the grower and the wealth of the patron, as tropical conditions were created inside greenhouses. Most famous of these was the work of Joseph Paxton at Chatsworth in Derbyshire, later the designer of the original Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851.



The UK is a small part of a global primary food production system, with around 17 million hectares under cultivation (35% of the land area of the UK but less than 0.4% of the world's total cultivated land area) and around 0.8% of the world's total population. With those statistics we are, almost inevitably, a rather more significant part of global consumption; an analysis by National Geographic calculated average daily energy intake here in 2011 to be 3,413 calories, nearly 20% higher than the global average of 2,870 calories. Given that the UK has double the global average population density per cultivated hectare, and very little scope to increase the area of farmland, we have limited choices as to how to increase our level of self-sufficiency overall; eat less and/or eat differently. The geography and climate of the country is variable, and the broad separation of arable farming in the East of England and livestock in the West, for instance, has developed for sound economic reasons. The scope for supplying a larger proportion of what we eat and drink from domestic production is constrained by this and many other considerations.

[Where in the world part 2: Not all miles are equal](#)

[Where in the world part 3: Not all hectares are equal](#)

[Where in the world part 4: What's in a name?](#)

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