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THE PRICE OF FOOD

*Should we be paying more for our weekly shop? Food writer **Clare Hargreaves** shares her personal view that we should all consider the true costs of 'cheap' produce*

DID YOU EAT A HAM SANDWICH FOR LUNCH TODAY?

If so, was it one you made yourself from traditionally cured, free-range British ham, and bread crafted by your local artisan baker? Or was it a wrapped supermarket sarnie filled with reconstituted Danish ham at a third of the cost?

We make such choices every day. If we want it, there's food to be had at some incredibly low prices. Since food production was industrialised after World War II, cheap food has become an unalienable right, fuelled by the tooth-and-nail rivalry between the supermarkets.

As a proportion of our income, we've never spent less. Less than 10% of the average UK household spend goes on food, compared to 25% just after the war. That leaves a lot more to spend on cars, flat-screen TVs and smartphones. Oddly, when buying electronic gadgetry quality is paramount, but when it comes to the food we put in our mouths, it often isn't. We just want it cheap.

So should we be paying more for our food? Phrased thus, debate can quickly degenerate into pointless class warfare. At a time when prices of some foods are rocketing, how many of us would ask to – or feel able to – pay more? We're only human.

The real issue is that most of the cheap food we buy actually has a very high price. There's no cheap lunch, in other words. The bargain pineapple you just bought in the supermarket for a quid probably earned the Central American worker who picked it a measly 4p. They may also have incurred health problems as a result of spraying the fruit with up to 16 different chemicals to ensure long shelf life.

It's not just other people who pay the price of our cheap food, but animals, wildlife, landscapes – and our own health and quality of life. It's the chicken that cannot walk because it is forced to grow at record speed to keep its retail price under a fiver. It's the fields of plastic that disfigure swathes of our countryside to produce fruit cheaply virtually all year. It's the thousand-cow, zero-grazing factory farms that are in danger of becoming the only way to survive as a dairy farm. It's the artisan Somerset Cheddar-maker struggling in the face of imports of bland, factory-made Canadian 'cheddar'. It's our health – and our hospitals – as cheap processed foods tend to be packed with refined carbohydrates and fats that make us obese. It's the corn buntings and grey partridges flushed off intensive farms using agrichemicals that destroy the birds' foods.

Food and farming writer **CLARE HARGREAVES** is the author of four books and writes for the national press, including *BBC Good Food magazine* and *The Independent*



Going back to your ham sandwich, if you bought the Danish ham one, then it's British pig farmers (and the factory-farmed Danish pigs) who'll pay the price. Welfare standards are higher in the UK than anywhere else; the sow stalls used in factory farm-style piggeries, for example, are banned here. But higher welfare costs money, so if you bought the UK-ham sandwich, it'll be considerably more expensive, especially if it was also hand cured. Even then, you probably won't be paying the true cost, as pig farmers are now being hit by soaring feed prices so are losing £10 on every pig they sell. Many are quitting, and who can blame them?

Part of the reason we've lost sight of the true cost of food is that its pricing has been skewed by all-powerful supermarkets where we buy around 80% of our food. Air-freighting asparagus from Peru guzzles vast amounts of fossil fuels, but we consumers don't pay the environmental cost. If 'Buy One, Get One Free' offers seem too good to be true, they are; such promotions are usually funded not by supermarkets, but by their suppliers, who may be placed under huge pressure as a result.

As part of a food supply system that's global, we're also buffeted by fluctuating commodity prices. Decimated cereal harvests in the US, for instance, are sending the price of meat rocketing as grain is used to feed our animals. Only if we start producing more of our own food – we currently produce less than two-thirds of what we eat – will we become less vulnerable.

If you shop in a supermarket, paying more will not in itself help producers or animal welfare. The key is how our money is shared out between retailers, processors and producers. What many found shocking about the dairy crisis this summer was that, when some farmers were having to produce milk at a loss, the margin creamed off by some supermarkets actually rose.

But there *are* ways of paying a price for our food that's fair and doesn't abuse producers or the planet. We're buying increasing quantities of fair trade products. We've also shown we're willing to pay more for our eggs so chickens don't endure atrocious conditions. A decade ago only a fifth of the eggs we bought were free range. Now the figure is half.

Another way is to buy local, which, as CPRE's recent *From Field to Fork* report on www.cpre.org.uk highlighted, helps ensure that the food we eat is fresh, healthy and seasonal and connects us with the people and landscapes producing our food. Buying food at local butchers and greengrocers means vibrant high streets. If we care about seeing cattle grazing Britain's pastures, we can support their farmers by buying milk and meat direct from them at farmers' markets or farm shops, or through box schemes. If shopping at supermarkets, it's worth asking questions about where and how foods have been produced.

By readjusting some of our habits, by perhaps no longer expecting to eat meat every day, by wasting less food, or by redistributing our household spending, it may not actually cost more overall to pay a price for our food that's just, sustainable and doesn't clock up debts that will have to be settled by our grandchildren. Maybe it's time to behave not just as consumers, but as citizens, too. We have the power to vote with our purse strings for the sort of world we want to live in. The choice is ours.

What do you think?

Is food pricing fair? Email us at cpre@thinkpublishing.co.uk to join the debate or write to Opinion, Think, The Pall Mall Deposit, 124-128 Barby Road, London W10 6BL

