

## Fresh Thinking and Fresh Food

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It was sobering to learn at the recent launch of the comprehensive [London Food Strategy](#) that London has a three day supply of food in reserve. It is easy to speculate what things, other than Brexit, could test that buffer. And whilst shortages of other goods may lead to inconvenience building to irritation, any difficulties or delays in procuring the nourishment we need would swiftly challenge that thin veneer of civility that preserves order in our frenetic urban lives. If this isn't sufficient cause in itself for us to be actively interested in food supply then there are plenty of others such as health, poverty, migration, tourism, employment and the environment to name a few.

Food, from its production to its consumption, touches our lives deeply. The rural landscape shaped by changing agriculture, places' identities intricately linked with food production, and traditions and social interactions revolving around mealtimes. Our recent study trip to the Basque country witnessed the day-to-day routines of life being grounded around food, drink and friends.

But the food system is now global, driven by profit, convenience and uniformity and closely interlinked with global imbalances in wealth, health and population distribution. That which once was necessarily a unique identifier of places is now sanitised and traded on a global scale. We have not come across a better primer than Carolyn Steel's *Hungry City*<sup>1</sup> for setting the political context of food, which lives up to its by-line in explaining "how food shapes our lives". It is evident that a global problem prevails, riven with the kind of contradictions that presage an epidemic of obesity in some nations whilst failing to impact on malnutrition in others. So with nation states failing on a number of food fronts, despite their vast agri-budgets and public health investments, can anything be done at the lowly level of local economic development around this agenda? The answer we believe is less "well yes and no" and more "a little and a lot".

We need to pick our battles, and let those little victories infect the larger campaigns through education and enjoyment. In the 1970s the initial

skirmishes in the food wars were around beer, and wholemeal bread. Whilst the latter depended on the determination of lone consumers, the atrocities committed by the large brewers threw up an organised campaign of resistance populated by enthusiasts who arguably had little else in common than their preference for a natural and threatened product. Given the resources of the alco-opoly the beer wars can never be wholly won, but the success of the likes of [Tiny Rebel](#), the [Bermondsey Beer Mile](#), and countless other artisan brewers bear witness to the potential for a different future. What is preventing these positive examples becoming the rule rather than the exception? In large part it is the intellectual conservatism of the property industry, and their reliance on outdated models that depend on a narrow rear-view mirror to predict upcoming trends.

There are exceptions. Westfield was imaginative in including micro brewer [Tap East](#) in their offer when they opened Stratford and there is a story emerging behind [New River Retail's](#) acquisition of a portfolio of community pubs. There are others, but all too often centres looking to use food to broaden their offer seek the false security of fading chains, or to exploit the fleeting interest in street food vans. That the nadir of the build a food concept and roll it out model is close, has been confirmed by the appearance of a [TV show](#) starring a line-up of avaricious investors (sometimes comically referred to as angels) greedily selecting from a rank of committed and talented cooks.



Nothing can compete with food vans for acting as mobile soup kitchens or feeding sports crowds. But they fall short for more ambitious placemaking objectives and for countering the concerns outlined above. Much better if they are deployed as a welcome component of the kind of street markets and food festivals that historically have been integral to our urban centres and are now important hooks in their renaissance. BIDs, including several that we manage, have been a powerful force behind the revival of interest in these events. Mandy Jenkins, who manages the [Llanelli BID](#) for us, noted the importance of food to the sense of place. "The recent food festival was the pinnacle of a series of events aimed at bringing people back to the centre. Each event has been targeted at a different demographic".

Even better when this food renaissance is woven into the physical fabric of our towns and cities. Part of our work with the partners on London's [Low Line](#) for example, explores the agglomeration effects that could potentially arise from a food cluster stretching east and west along the railway arches from Borough Market.

Presenting food in novel and interesting forms is always a draw, giving new reasons for old customers to return to traditional centres. Our work in [West Norwood](#) includes finding ways for businesses to support an existing local community of enthusiastic volunteers in running the local food festival, whilst in Streatham food has been a way of showcasing the area's diversity and encouraging people to explore. The Food Festival, a four day celebration of food, includes the now well-known Streatham Food Tour, where each restaurant taking part offers a selection of dishes all costing less than £5. As [Louise Abbot](#) explains, "this allows the 'food tourist' to visit a different venue for each course; with starters, mains, deserts and even wines on offer". Food tourism is central to building visitor numbers. And more often than not those visitors are looking for authenticity, regional flavour, provenance, terroir – call it what you will. Here lies a massive opportunity for small scale agriculture, manufacturing, retail and service to differentiate their offer in the face of price competition

from online, takeaway and big brands. Is this the most obvious option to raise GVA?

Pursuing such a goal has far reaching implications for employment and skills. In a current appointment for [Coleg Sir Gar](#) *The means* has been asked to investigate the skills needs of the artisanal food sector and its supply chain. Given the disparate nature of the sector this is quite an undertaking. Once the data is collected the challenge will be to define the changes required in standard college curriculums, many of which still focus on silver service. There needs to be a fundamental shift in the way we interact with what keeps us alive. And a recent commission which explores what's required to support rural bee keeping reminds us that small actions can have far reaching effects; the honey is of secondary importance to the crucial contribution of cross-pollination of crops.

For many, food, excuse the pun, is more of a bread and butter issue. Disadvantaged communities are being deluged with cheaply addictive "fast food". I can hear the neo-liberal riposte to that statement - defending consumer choice and resisting the nanny state. But choice assumes the presence of an alternative, and for too many that simply does not exist. That's why we are looking forward to working with our clients on the Mayor of London's [Good Food Retail Plans](#). Fresh thinking and fresh food - must be a winning combination.

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