

FROM ROOTS TO FRUITS

In the first of a new series exploring where our fruit and vegetables come from, **Louise Gray** investigates her own family's history in horticulture and visits Blochairn Market to find out about the global supply chain today

I thought that writing about fruit and vegetables would be easy. It had to be easier than my last book, *The Ethical Carnivore*, when I spent over a year only eating animals I killed myself. This time I shall be growing my own fruits and vegetables and eating a largely plant-based diet. What could be more wholesome? More virtuous? In the words of the Instagram generation, more 'clean'.

Except nothing alive is entirely clean, certainly not food. The journey of fruit and vegetables to our plates may not involve blood and guts, but it does involve dirt. Not only the soil the crops are grown in, but the 'dirty' facts that we perhaps don't like to think about.

How clean is a banana picked by cheap labour? A year-old apple? A perfectly shaped carrot? A Kenyan green bean? A strawberry in December? A melon grown in a desert? A so-called 'superfood'? I don't wish to make out every food you come across is an ethical dilemma. Or take away the joy you feel in eating. But I do want to make you think. In this series of columns I want to celebrate the colour and complexity of the fruit and vegetables we eat in Scotland, and at the same time ask, could we be doing things better?

A good place to start digging is my own family history. I am fortunate in growing up surrounded by stories about the fruit and vegetable business. On my father's side is a long line of farmers growing the crops we eat. On my mother's side, it is greengrocers importing food from all over the world. My great grandfathers on my father's side supplied fruit and vegetables into Edinburgh. John Gray grew potatoes on Niddrie Mains, an estate in South Edinburgh, and in East Lothian Jack Dale ran a market garden growing beetroot, syboes (spring onions), parsnips, cabbages, strawberries, rhubarb and tomatoes in glass houses.

Both farmers would be supplying their produce direct into Edinburgh, where fruit and vegetables were sold on a daily basis in markets around the city. The average Scot ate with the seasons: asparagus in springtime, apples in autumn and cherries

“I want to celebrate the fruit and vegetables we eat in Scotland

Right: Our columnist Louise Gray explores how the fruit and vegetables we eat end up on our plates.



TOOTY FRUITY

Scotland's favourite fruit is the strawberry

25,000 tonnes of strawberries are grown by Scottish producers

In 2016, just under **28,000** hectares of potatoes were grown in Scotland

21,000 hectares of other vegetables and soft fruit are grown in Scotland

in summer – if you were lucky – and potatoes all year round. That is not to say there was not variety. Exotic fruit may have been off the menu but the fruit that was offered in season was arguably just as good, with a greater diversity within species.

For example, apples came in a dozen varieties such as the Scotch Dumpling and East Lothian Pippin, not just Granny Smith and Golden Delicious. John Gray and Jack Dale would have been organic, entirely by accident. Manure was the main fertiliser since livestock was kept on most farms. ‘Wonky veg’ would have been accepted as standard and any surplus would have gone back into feeding the animals.

My grandfather George Gray and my great uncle Tommy Dale continued to grow fruit and vegetables in East Lothian post-war, but in a very different way. As tractors became more powerful and chemicals widely available, production increased. Farmers were encouraged to specialise in particular crops and to sell into wholesalers and eventually supermarkets at lower and lower prices. Today my cousins continue to produce fine crops, but the glasshouses and the commercial rhubarb beds are long gone.

My great grandfather on my mother’s side, Willie Rankin, was developing a business importing fruit and vegetables over the same period. Rankins’ Fruit Market became a household name in Edinburgh with shops in Tollcross, Nicholson Street and the West End, as well as market gardens in Portobello to supply fresh produce.

The colourful greengrocers sold fruit and vegetables bought at the wholesale market every morning, depending on what was in season and looked good. The business transformed after the war as globalisation made it possible to import fruit and vegetables from all over the world and the amount of it eaten in the UK increased. Exotic fruit like melons and pineapples were suddenly available to everyone, not just the rich. Between 1950 and 1980 consumption of fresh fruit rose by almost a third.

The march of the supermarkets had an even bigger impact on greengrocers than farmers. In the 1950s independent shops like Rankins’ supplied 80% of the market for fruits and vegetables and just 20% of people shopped at supermarkets. By the 1980s the situation had more or less reversed as households with cars and busier lives began to shop at out-of-town supermarkets. This model means prices have plummeted and the same fare of the same size, shape and colour is available every day. But arguably diversity has diminished.

Supermarkets should have increased our consumption of fresh vegetables even more. But in fact, demand plateaued around 1970. The supply of cheap, processed foods means that eating fresh vegetables, that require cooking from scratch, has actually gone down. The consumption of potatoes, other than in crisps, has also fallen. Fruit may be more exotic but we are still not eating enough.

Most of us struggle to eat the recommended five-a-day of fruit and vegetables, never mind the updated recommendation from the NHS to eat at least seven-a-day. Despite all the gardening television programmes, only 3.8% of us grow our own fruit and vegetables, compared to 11% during the height of

the Dig for Victory campaign in the war.

To get a sense of the fruit markets my great grandfathers would have frequented, I visit Blochairn Market outside Glasgow, the largest wholesale market in Scotland, stretching over 32 acres. Despite a serious fire at the end of 2017, it is a lively place – even at 6am.

Traders have been packed into a smaller space, while the damaged area is repaired, and loud banter over boxes full of fruit and vegetables echoes under the steel roof. Unlike the markets Willie Rankin would have visited almost every day, this one isn’t limited by the seasons.

Here you can get anything you want, from anywhere. Douglas Scott, the managing director of Graham Nicol and Dow, says the market reflects the diversity of the world as well as Scottish produce. Traders are proud to supply chefs and specialist caterers with whatever they require at any time of year.

‘Our company was burned to the ground and had to be re-housed. Within 24 hours we were back trading,’ he says. ‘The top chefs rely on us to get ingredients from anywhere in the world.’

I question the wisdom of flying in asparagus from Peru or strawberries from Egypt. Why not wait a few months?

But while some of the trade is unnecessary, how else would Scotland survive in winter without some trade from abroad?

Charities such as Farm Africa argue that green beans grown in Kenya support farmers lifting themselves and their families out of poverty and that transport is a relatively small part of the carbon footprint.

I am told Blochairn is even more colourful during the summer, when the freshest raspberries and strawberries are on display. Scotland supplies some 40% of the UK’s berries. But with Brexit on the horizon and questions over migrant labour from Eastern Europe, who is going to pick the crop?

I leave Blochairn with more questions than answers, but I hope that over the next year I can find some of these. Understanding how the vegetables and fruit we eat are grown and transported to us is important. After all, you have to have roots in order to grow.

“Wonky veg would have been accepted as standard”

Get in touch

@loubgray or get in contact via her website at www.louisebgray.com with comments on the article. What fruits and vegetables did you eat as a child? Do you remember shopping at Rankins’?



From the mundane to the exotic, Louise discovers what fruit and vegetables are on offer at Blochairn, the largest wholesale market in Scotland.