



ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



Minutes of the FHF meeting celebrating British regional food

5pm, Tuesday 17 October 2006

Room G, House of Lords, London, SW1A 0PW

Present:

Lord Rea, *FHF Chairman*, Earl Baldwin of Bewdley, Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen, Ian Gibson, Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer, Baroness Greengross, Countess of Mar, Peter Atkinson, Roger Williams, 12 Associate members, Patricia Constant and Rob Hailey (Secretariat)

Apologies: 19 members sent their apologies, which have been recorded.

Guest Speaker: Alexia Robinson, British Food Fortnight

Other special guests:

The following food producers and food producer representatives were present: Gill Ainge and John Sheaves (Tastes of the South West); Eleanor Betts (Ferndale Norfolk Farmhouse Cheeses), Judy Taylor and Rona Norton (Horsted Farming Group Farm Shop, Norfolk); Stephen Hallam (East Midlands Fine Food Group); Hilary Knight and John Evans (Taste of Sussex); Tamara Schiopu and Henriette Reinders (Oxfordshire and the South East Food Group Partnership).

Many fine foods were supplied for this event and the FHF Officers would like to thank all those responsible for supporting our celebration of British regional food, including: Belvoir Brewery, Belvoir Fruit Farms, Brown & Forrest Smokehouse, Cross Lanes Fruit Farm, Dickinson & Morris, D.J.Barnards, Essence Foods, Ferndale Norfolk Farmhouse Cheeses, Orchid Apiaries, Sheppy's Cider, the Cotswold Brewing Co, the Horsted Farming Group Farm Shop, Tolhurst Organic Produce and Quenby Hall.

Introduction

1. Lord Rea welcomed members and guests to this special "harvest festival" celebration of fine British regional food. He noted that we have experienced crises in British farming and in the British diet and expressed the hope that by developing a stronger relationship between food producers and their customers, these problems could be successfully addressed.
2. Lord Rea then introduced the guest speaker, Alexia Robinson, the organiser of British Food Fortnight. Alexia Robinson, is best known for her work as the founder and organiser of British Food Fortnight, the annual celebration of British Food. Following a childhood spent in rural Dorset, Alexia worked for Anderson Consulting in London and Hong Kong before setting up her own consultancy advising the Ministry of Defence. In 2001 she was responsible for the promotion of a March for the Countryside Alliance, which had to be cancelled due to foot and mouth disease. Alexia founded British Food Fortnight in 2002 in response to the problems

Chairman: Lord Rea
Vice-Chairmen: Dr Ian Gibson MP
& Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer
Secretary: The Earl Baldwin of Bewdley
Treasurer: Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen

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suffered in rural areas as a result of foot and mouth disease. It is now established as the biggest annual, national celebration of British food.

Alexia Robinson

3. Alexia explained that she had started British Food Fortnight (BFF) as a romantic notion to coincide with harvest festival but she had wanted to this traditional celebration to be extended into the commercial sector and beyond Church congregations.
4. Alexia noted that there are lots of special promotional “days” and “weeks”, for example, Red Nose Day or Breast Cancer Awareness Week. The most successful combine successful public relations with a groundswell of activity that makes the exercise worthwhile.
5. For Alexia, BFF is all about delivering results. BFF was established to remind British consumers how wonderfully diverse and delicious British food is – not as a xenophobic backlash against foreign food. In other cultures, people are proud of their own food and we should be too.
6. BFF uses a simple formula, which is to get consumers excited about British food; this then creates opportunities for food producers and food retailers. Food producers and retailers support the event because they can see a clear commercial interest in investing in it, which makes the event sustainable. Shops who have taken part in BFF have seen their sales rise by up to 30% and 84% of new lines of food have been maintained following BFF. This success has enabled BFF to move into new sectors.
7. The catering sector can be a difficult sector to reach, but its size made it an attractive target: £34 billion is spent on the catering sector per year. After five successful years, every major catering company is now paying attention to BFF and they are increasingly thinking in terms of provenance and quality. The five largest catering companies took part proactively in 2006. BFF has also expanded into the school sector. Every year BFF supplies 26,000 schools with advice on how to incorporate food into the existing curriculum for example, via food technology and geography lessons. BFF has succeeded in this venture because it finds a receptive audience in teachers, parents and pupils and because it provides a specific catalyst for action in a defined period.
8. In 2006 BFF provided all schools in England & Wales with the first ever advice on teaching cooking within the school curriculum. In an exciting move, they have also established a network of organisations representing over 3,000 chefs that will work with schools during the Fortnight to help teach children how to cook. The aim is to emulate a similar initiative in France where the French Government sends 3,500 chefs into French schools every October to teach children about their national cuisine.
9. The resources which BFF has distributed to schools and the retail and catering sectors are available on the BFF website at: www.britishfoodfortnight.co.uk Members may in particular like to see *Putting the Ooo back into food - A Resource Pack for Schools*; *Putting the Ooo back into food - A Guide to including Cookery within the National Curriculum*; *Britain's Regional Food & Drink - Advice for Retailers & Caterers* and *Britain's Regional Food & Drink - Retail & Catering Case Studies*.

Issues raised during questions:

10. **Ian Gibson MP** asked Alexia to comment on the move by British supermarkets to “fight back” by stocking increasing amounts of, for example, organic produce. Alexia said BFF was all about increasing access to good quality food and it cannot be done without the support of supermarkets because 98% of the population regularly shop in supermarkets.

11. **John Sheaves of Taste of Sussex** commented that they have been able to persuade local supermarkets to stock good quality local food and their products are treated like any other by the supermarket (5 Asda stores in Surrey are stocking £80,000 worth of locally produced food).
12. **The Countess of Mar** declared an interest as a farmer and cheesemaker and said that her cheeses were only sold to local hotels and restaurants.
13. **Peter Atkinson MP** said that problems can arise for potential small, local suppliers because of the distribution chains used by the large supermarkets, but in his constituency Tesco have physically adapted their building so that local producers can supply them separately and this has been very helpful to local meat and cheese suppliers.
14. **Alexia** suggested that one solution might be to have an alliance of scale at every level so that small food producers supply small retailers and larger food producers supply the supermarkets.
15. **Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer** welcomed the “can do” attitude of BFF and said that she had opened a small delicatessen in a local town, which was supplied by local, small producers and this was welcomed by customers. She noted the example of Tyrrells who wanted to sell their crisps through small retailers and objected when Tesco obtained them indirectly and sold them in their stores.
16. **Baroness Greengross** noted that many supermarkets – including the smaller, London based supermarkets rather than simply the “big 4” – are promoting local food and she welcomed the refreshing attitude of BFF, which wants to work with the supermarkets rather than in competition with them.
17. **Stephanie Durham of the Institute of Consumer Sciences** noted that consumers are increasingly looking at country of origin on food labels and choosing local food. She noted that the taste of local food is important in attracting support and consumers need to be educated. Alexia agreed and said that the shops which had seen increases in sales during BFF had held lots of tastings.
18. **Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen** said there were 8000 customers for the House of Commons food outlets and wondered if BFF had tried to persuade the Parliamentary catering services to participate in BFF. Alexia thanked her for the suggestion, but the Countess of Mar noted that BFF normally takes place during the Parliamentary recess.
19. **Paul Allen, a Consumer Protection Officer**, welcomed the success of BFF in attracting good will for British regional food, but questioned whether this translated into sustained sales and asked what percentage of food eaten in Britain over the last five years was British in origin. Baroness Miller said she thought the relevant figure was some 60-70% of food by volume (not value) eaten in Britain was British, but noted we export food too, for example, poultry and milk.
20. **Stephen Hallam of Dickinson & Morris**, representing the East Midlands Fine Food Group, commended BFF for its part in gradually changing the culture of food consumption in Britain with the result that more people recognise the quality of regional British food.
21. **Jenny Lisle of the Faculty of Public Health of the Royal College of Physicians** asked if there was an opportunity for BFF to work on healthy eating initiatives. Alexia said BFF had worked with the Department of Health 5-a-day team and she was keen to work with local health networks. BFF certainly recognised the importance of promoting freshness, seasonality and information about how to cook fresh food.
22. **Christian Cull of Waitrose** said they have a very distinct way of working with small producers. They have a charter for small suppliers, provide them with advice on supplying their produce and allow them to dictate which Waitrose stores stock their products. Waitrose would not, for example, sell their products at a reduced price in competition with a local small retailer. He

noted that 100% of fresh beef, chicken and pork sold through Waitrose is British and their fresh lamb (in season) is Welsh. He also noted that the sale of ready meals is in decline. Mr Cull thought the decline of cooking skills in Britain was significant for the sale of fresh food and noted that both Waitrose and Sainsburys go into schools to promote cooking and they would like to see cooking re-established as part of the national curriculum.

23. **Lord Rea** noted that all changes that benefit health start at the top of the social scale and filter through society. He asked how BFF and the supermarket could persuade those whose diets are most in need of improvement to buy good quality, fresh, seasonal food. **Alexia** said the pub sector was very helpful in reaching people who cannot cook and many pub chains are now producing healthier food.
24. **Stephanie Durham of the Institute of Consumer Sciences** said that food labels increasingly include sensory descriptions, and this is encouraging consumers to try new foods. She noted that the supermarkets have been very supportive of this approach.
25. **Alexia** emphasised that people are attracted to food products at the point of purchase – in a shop or looking at a menu – which is why BFF works with food retailers and caterers. Contract caterers are also very important in terms of encouraging people to improve their diet because so many people in large organisations rely on them, for example, the Nationwide Building Society feeds 5000 people at its headquarters in Swindon.

Conclusion

26. Having been invited by Lord Rea to sum up her thoughts, Alexia said there was now such enthusiasm and drive for positive change, and belief that positive change could be brought about, that she was optimistic about the opportunities for good quality British food.

CLC, October 2006