

## Seminar on Sustainability Harbour & Jones Case Study

### *What do we mean by sustainability?*

Sustainability has been defined as development that “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development further expanded this definition identifying “the three overarching objectives of sustainable development to be 1) eradicating poverty; 2) protecting natural resources and 3) changing unsustainable production and consumption patterns”.



So how do we apply this principle to our business? Primarily it means looking at how we purchase our food, equipment and disposables; building relationships with our suppliers so that we can trust what we are buying from them; thoroughly researching new products and always looking for the best that we can afford; paying fairly and promptly so that no one feels undervalued and educating the consumer - our customers - by promoting the message of sustainability through delicious fairly-priced food.

### *Our approach to purchasing:*

We aim to source excellent raw materials from suppliers who understand food and who, like us, believe in seasonality and using the best local ingredients available. When searching for new producers we try to find people who have the same or similar ideals to us. For example, both our butchers buy almost exclusively UK raised meat and have clear policies on animal welfare and traceability. One of our butchers is nominated by the Rare Breeds Trust to supply meat from those breeds that need to be supported if they are to survive and both have established links with local farms in the South East to buy direct from them as well as going through the markets.

Fish is an area where it is extremely important to know what you are buying, where it is coming from and what part you are playing in ensuring stocks are maintained. We buy from a fabulous fishmonger, Matthew Stevens, based in Cornwall, consistently cited in the food industry as being highly responsible and environmentally aware. Matthew specialises in fish caught by local day-boats and buys fish seasonally and only when he can get a good size. On a visit to his premises, I saw for myself that there were no cod smaller than 2 foot 6 and that the majority of his stock was tagged as line caught. Obviously this is not the cheapest way for us to buy fish, but by accepting that it is now a luxury food, buy being creative with what we cook and by explaining to our customers why we are buying this way, we are able to source our fish in a sustainable manner.



In many cases, however, we have found that using smaller suppliers, far from meaning inflated prices actually gives you better value for money. We found this out early on in Harbour & Jones when we switched from the big dairy company who seems to monopolise much of London to Allen Reeder, a small, local, family run company and our prices went down across the board. So not only are we now paying less, but the service levels have shot up and we are able to get involved and make suggestions that would have been unthinkable when we were buying from the larger dairy. This may range from something as basic as requesting a particular type of yoghurt that we would like to use, to visiting the creamery or checking the food miles involved in bringing us our daily pint.

Another huge advantage of buying from small companies is that a) they know exactly what is going on in all areas of their business and b) so do we! It is much easier to build relationships with key people – often the owners of the company – and to develop bonds based on trust, integrity and respect. This was recently confirmed to us when the reports came out about some egg suppliers unknowingly selling imported battery eggs as free-range. It is just not possible to know from looking at them. Even cracking them open will not help, as some producers feed their battery hens with a supplement to brighten the colour of the yolk. This is why it is imperative to know your supplier's business. We know that our dairy buys their free-range eggs from small flocks in England because we have seen details of the farms and photos of the hens. The flocks are certified and the boxes labelled accordingly.



Labelling of food is a huge issue in itself and needs clarification if the consumer is to know the origin of the food that they are buying. The fact that bacon from a pig raised and slaughtered abroad where welfare standards are lower than ours, but packed in this country, can be described as British is a disgrace and again illustrates why it is so important to know and trust your supplier.

For our part we understand that smaller suppliers tend to have more restricted cash-flow and therefore need to have bills paid promptly. We pay our monthly accounts in 14 to 30 days where some of our competitors will not settle in less than 90. In fact, in our early days we had an unusual complaint from our greengrocer that we were paying too promptly which threw their accounting system into confusion! Generally though good payment of bills helps us to ensure that the companies we buy from feel that they are valued, looked after and part of the H&J family.

*Connecting our chefs with the food producers:*

It is all very well for us to build relationships with suppliers and then to give our chefs and managers phone numbers and product lists, but if we really want to connect pasture to plate, then the experience of meeting those producers and seeing what they do at ground level is unbeatable. For many city-based chefs there is little opportunity to visit farms and market gardens so we arrange regular farm trips to inspire them and to introduce them to our knowledgeable, passionate producers. We have found that these visits revitalise our staff and give them more understanding of the ingredients that they cook with.



This year in late summer we spent a day in Kent, first visiting Marsh Farm where the fields were full of chard, cabbage and broccoli being grown for our greengrocer and then going to meet Sandy Dawes, a 7<sup>th</sup> generation strawberry and cherry grower who had forgotten more about growing fruit than any of us had ever known.



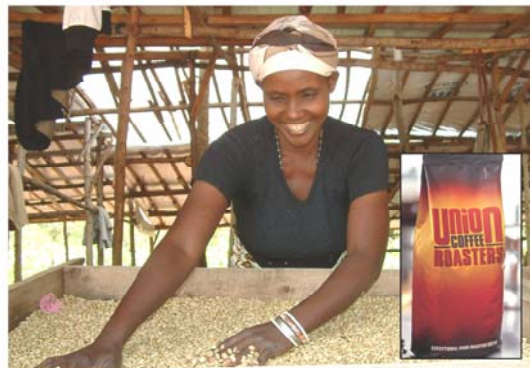
We also took a pre-Christmas trip to a free-range turkey farm in Norfolk to see and taste for ourselves how high standards of care combined with interesting and slow-growing breeds make for the most delicious birds. On the same trip we stopped in at a wonderful pig farm in Suffolk where all the animals are bred and raised outdoors, fed natural cereals from the local area and generally allowed to live a decent life before slaughter. I'm happy to report that the excellent animal husbandry of farmer Jimmy Butler is recognised and last year won him "Pig Farmer of the Year".

In other years, we have made excursions to the Wakefield Triangle to see and hear the forced rhubarb growing by candlelight and to the ancient cider orchards of Somerset which are being threatened by changes to the Common Agricultural Policy.

***Ethical sourcing:***

One of the most obvious ways for companies and people to help with sustainability and ethical sourcing is to look for the Fairtrade mark and we have found that the demand for these branded products is shooting up fast. However, a word of caution; it is all too easy to be lazy about accepting that if there is one Fair Trade product being sold, that the ethics of that company are unimpeachable. This is certainly not always the case! I also believe that Fair Trade, whilst very important, represents the minimum standards for ethical sourcing and we need to look beyond the mark at companies who are working hard to promote care and welfare of workers and environmental stewardship.

One such company that we work closely with is Union Coffee Roasters, who by building long-term relationships with their growers and committing to buy at the best prices for a number of years, enable farmers to invest both in their workforce and in the local area by building schools and housing. Union Coffee is regulated by the Ethical Trading Initiative and although only some of its coffees are labelled Fairtrade, due to the organisation only covering products made by cooperatives and not by individual farmers, I have yet to come across a more impressive company in terms of responsible sourcing, fairness and sustainability. All this and they also make sure that quality is paramount. Let's face it, if the coffee tastes disgusting you're not going to keep on buying are you?



***Environmental issues:***

This is something that we all need to address in the catering sector as with the large numbers of chemicals and disposables that are used it is difficult to be seen as “green”. We are currently looking at a company in Cornwall that sells bio-degradable, non-toxic cleaning products to see if we can move away from the hazardous chemicals and solvents that our industry uses. The disposables companies are also becoming more aware of demand for compostable and bio-degradable materials and it is gradually becoming easier and more affordable to switch away from traditional plastics toward cellulose and paper-based products.



Of course, we need to look further than this to help protect the environment and so we try to support organic producers where we can and we also buy many of our vegetables from farmers who are part of the LEAF (Linking Food And Environment) organisation. This is an initiative that was set up to promote integrated farm management, environmental responsibility and to ensure the supply of wholesome, affordable food whilst conserving and enhancing the British countryside. A truly sustainable approach and one that we wholeheartedly endorse.

***Conclusion:***

So what benefits have we gained by choosing to do business in this way? From a pure business point of view, we get the very best from our suppliers, allowing us to give the very best to our customers which makes them happy and ensures that we retain our contracts. But this is only scratching the surface. By committing to our suppliers, we get a level of personal service that a lot of companies could only dream about. We have had instances where when a last minute request was made to us, we have been able to call our butcher at home and he has pulled out all the stops to get a delivery to us in time. We rarely suffer from late or non-existent deliveries, but if there are problems, we know that because our suppliers care about us, they will move heaven and earth to put things right.

Our staff retention rate is also excellent and is another consequence of our attitude to business. The excellent relationships that we build up with our producers filter down through the company making life easier for our chefs and managers. Chefs also find that our view on purchasing, seasonality and sustainability is a refreshing change from many of the large contract caterers who will go for the cheapest deal and will often restrict their staff to a few large suppliers who cannot possibly offer the variety and quality of food that they need.

Possibly the greatest benefit for me though is that this is something I personally believe in and it gives me enormous satisfaction to be able to put these values into practice.

