

Who grew my dinner?

Celebrity chefs may be hot in the media, but who produces the ingredients in those glamorous dishes? **Jane Milburn** sets out to reconnect foodies with the land. Artwork by **Rocco Fazzari**

When I mention agriculture to city friends they often look blank and confused because that happens “out there” in the back paddock – out of sight and out of mind.

Growing up on farms in New Zealand and south-east Queensland, I enjoyed the simple pleasure of harvesting fruit and vegetables from the garden and gained insight into the necessary process that turns livestock into meat.

My children have grown up in cities, largely removed from the sources of food. Growing up like most other Australian children, hunting and gathering at the fruit shop, the butcher or the supermarket for a fee.

But the huge dust clouds rolling into capital cities last year, the wipe-out of the banana crop by Cyclone Larry in 2006, and the retraction of farming along the drying Murray-Darling river system during the past decade are signposts of a changing future.

In a nation that has never experienced food shortages, and takes for granted a ready supply of cheap food, there is a cloudy new dawn just over the horizon.

Food will be in the spotlight as the looming global food crisis bites harder than the other GFC, with the world’s population forecast to grow from 6.8 billion now to more than 9 billion by 2050. And the quantum of arable land is static, if not shrinking.

At the National Press Club recently, Australia’s Minister for Agriculture, Tony Burke, reported Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) projections that, by 2030, Australian agricultural production will be reduced about 10 per cent due to climate change, compared with a 2-6 per cent hit in other countries.

“The challenges that we face match the rest of the world. They’re just harder, they’re more severe, they’re most serious,” Burke said.

This is the century of the environment and, in coming decades, food – where and how it is produced, marketed, transported and consumed – will be a major global issue. One billion people eat too much food and one billion can’t get enough. We know that we are what we eat, so eating well is a form of affordable, preventive medicine.

Although there is a valuable resurgent interest in kitchen gardens and free-range chickens, most Australians outsource the growing of food to farmers and know little about where or how they produce it.

Our changing demographic sees 90 per cent of Australians now living in cities and large towns. There are fewer families on the land as farm businesses consolidate into larger, more economically viable units, although most are still run by farming families rather than corporations.

Research shows only 22 per cent of Australians have a family member or close friend who is a farmer – in Sydney it is as low as 14 per cent – and these percentages continue to fall.

Being distant from the farm gate and ignorant of the food supply chain is risky because it assumes farmers will always be there to get the job done. Rural and urban communities are interdependent. We need to remain as one whole and to know more about each other. Local farmers markets are a great way for consumers to connect with sources of fresh food, and reduce long and energy-intensive supply chains.

If you eat, you are interested in agriculture. That is why learning more about

the realities of modern-day agriculture warrants fresh priority and more journalistic effort to foster understanding of the nation’s food-producing sector.

Although the local food movement is gaining momentum, most column centimetres and razzle-dazzle around food in Australia are about cooking and eating, recipes and restaurants, with less attention paid to the origins of the key ingredients. There is a need for more writing about the farming side of food – stories of the people who grow it, how they live, where they live, and how food is produced, processed and marketed.

Until recently we all took our water supplies for granted. Then the Murray-Darling dried up and drought arrived in major cities forcing urban behavioural change via stringent water restrictions.

Could the food supply dry up too? Australia has long been a net food exporter and it is a stretch to suggest we would go hungry. But from a global perspective there are big problems ahead.

In 2008, there were riots in developing countries because of shortages of staple foods and rising prices. These supply-demand squeezes are certain to occur again in future, threatening global food security.

While Australian farmers face an array of environmental challenges, the stewardship role they undertake in managing 54 per cent of the landscape is not well understood. Burke says this work is critically important and its value under recognised.

Farmland is being encroached by housing, lifestyle acreage, mining, forestry and conservation – adding to the urgency to cultivate a greater urban understanding of food sources and supply issues.

There is a place for more writing about these challenges, and about why we should celebrate and enjoy the seasonality of foods, about harnessing new technologies, and about innovative conservation farming methods.

While visiting Washington DC recently, I noticed the US Department of Agriculture’s new “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative, which aims to create fresh economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local producers. This initiative is starting “a national conversation about the importance of understanding where your food comes from and how it gets to your plate”. Its objectives include supporting local farmers, strengthening rural communities, promoting healthy eating and protecting natural resources. The kitchen garden established by First Lady Michelle Obama in the south garden at the White House exemplifies this local-food focus.

Closer to home, Stephanie Alexander – cook and champion of the quality and diversity of Australian food – is improving understanding about food sources by educating and engaging children through the Kitchen Garden Foundation.

In a similar way, stories that inform consumers about where food comes from and the modern, sustainable ways in which Australian farmers produce it are stories worth telling. All is not perfect down on the farm, but sharing positive and informed perspectives can support learning across communities.

Food is hot. A healthy future depends on improved understanding and recognition of the link between farm and fork.

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