

Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig | Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee
Ailfeddwl am fwyd yng Nghymru: brandio a phrosesu bwyd | Rethinking food in Wales: food branding and food processing

Danteithion Wright's | Wright's Food Emporium

Simon Wright is a restaurateur, a former editor of the AA Restaurant Guide, broadcaster and restaurant consultant on all UK episodes of Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares. He was previously a partner in the award winning Y Polyn restaurant and currently runs Wright's Food Emporium in Llanarthne which attracts 75,000 customers a year and employs 15 full time staff. He is also a former Food Ambassador for Wales.

In advance of the opportunity to give evidence to the committee I submit the following comments which are a reflection of my experience of thirty years of working in the food industry in Wales and the context of my broader experience of the food industry in the UK, Europe and beyond.

Food Branding and Production in Wales

It's my belief that we need to be ever conscious that whilst the way we brand Welsh food and drink to the consumer is of great importance its success will always depend on the quality of the offering. In my view if we are to strengthen the brand we need to translate clearly stated policy aims (most notable embodied in the Health and Wellbeing Act)) into the "overarching, post-Brexit food strategy representing a whole-system approach" advocated by this committee in the conclusions of Rethinking Food in Wales.

As we are all aware, there is a titanic battle going on worldwide about the way we farm and produce our food and that battle is set to become ever more fierce as we confront the causes and effects of climate change, the acute crisis in biodiversity as a result of widespread modern farming practices, population growth, food sovereignty and security, and the public health implications of increasing obesity and other diet related diseases.

Of increasing relevance in the latter respect are the rapid advances being made in our understanding of the microbiome and the revolution that this is all ready beginning to engender in medical science. What we already know is that changes in the modern diet have led to ruptures in the human ecosystem that account for increases in a host of diet

related diseases including allergies, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, a string of cancers and research is starting to suggest, some forms of dementia.

The choice for us in Wales is whether we head in the direction of increasing industrialisation of farming where I believe we will find it impossible to compete and we will be destined to continue spending billions of pounds of public money on trying to mitigate the worst effects of a system that masquerades as providing cheap food whilst ignoring the consequent unseen costs.

I feel strongly that we have in Wales the opportunity to build a new robust food system in Wales that is fit to meet these challenges and places the nation at the forefront in developing a modern sustainable food system. These are some of the key policy areas that I think we need to address as part of an overarching strategy in Wales which would I believe revolutionise the way we eat in Wales with enormous benefits for us as a nation in terms of health, economy, and the environment. They also have the added advantage of establishing Wales as a leader in quality food production which will have enormous benefit to the perception of Welsh food through innovative, imaginative policies that demand attention and form a strong foundation on which to build the brand.

Here are 5 areas which I think should form the architecture for a an overarching food strategy in Wales.

1. Adopt a public plate procurement policy that underpins change in food and farming in Wales in accordance with wider objectives on sustainability, biodiversity, health and the revival of the rural economy. A carrot approach, underwriting the move to forms of agriculture that work with rather than against nature. Channelling support to farming and food production through contracts rather than subsidy and putting food grown and produced in Wales in the kitchens of our schools and hospitals.

2. Take the opportunity to make food education central in the translation of the Donaldson report into the school curriculum in Wales. Cooking is a perfect vehicle for the kind of cross-curriculum, learning through living approach that the Donaldson report champions. We need to see Wales leading the way in the UK by ensuring all children leave secondary education in Wales with a range of basic cooking skills and good knowledge of where their food comes from with an emphasis on the Welsh context. The benefits of this in respect of

long term health outcomes, individual self-reliance and self-esteem and long term consumer habits (in buying and cooking with fresh Welsh produce for instance) are firmly established.

3. Apply foundation economy principles to food production in Wales, encouraging grassroots creativity, new forms of entrepreneurship, bolstering rural communities and shortening the food chain through new routes to local markets.

4. Ensure the regulatory framework in Wales is tailored to the food and farming strategy we wish to pursue. It's my view that the current food safety regime is not fit for purpose, much of it is based on increasingly outdated thinking, it is not sufficiently flexible or well-informed to deal either with changes in food trends or in the most recent research and most fundamentally it fails to balance risk and benefits to the extent that it is a deterrent from producing the kind of natural, non-processed foods that we know are the best for our health and well-being. Any "whole-system" approach to a Welsh food and farming strategy has to encompass this. On a UK level our interpretation and application of EU law in this respect diverges from that of many countries in mainland Europe. We need a bespoke approach to this area in Wales that reflects our food culture and our policy ambitions.

5. Sell to the world yes, but prioritise Wales. The most important thing we can do in our branding in my view is use the flag. I don't believe that we need to spend huge amounts of money on establishing a distinct food brand for Wales as we did during the "True Taste" period. A lot of this will come naturally anyway, increasingly innovative small food businesses benefit from the talents of media-savvy young people who have a much better understanding of their market and how to reach it than has previously been the case. It's also my view that we have devoted too much in the way of public money to this in the past and the result to me appear to have been mixed at best. My assessment would be that we need to be very clear where our priorities are in branding and the effectiveness of some of the spending in these areas in respect of overseas markets in particular. It is an essential part of the overall strategy that we build the market for Welsh grown and reared food within Wales. We cannot achieve this without the kind of policies for education, procurement and business outlined above to simultaneously increase the variety and quality of our food offering and the Welsh public's demand for it. However, even in the short term, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the people of Wales want to support the Welsh food

economy as a point of principle and every effort needs to be made to help them realise that desire.

Simon Wright - March 2019