Farming methods and meat

When you look down at your plate of roast beef or fried chicken do you have any idea when, where or how it was produced? Do you really want to know? Most people have very little notion of how their food was grown and processed. This is a cause of concern for the government and for those interested in public health. They feel that if consumers understood more about farming and production, they would be able to make more informed choices about the food they buy. This, however, is not always straightforward and can pose real challenges for consumers, retailers, manufacturers and the government.

Squeamishness

For instance, people don’t necessarily want to be reminded, as they bite off a chunk of hamburger or wolf down a chicken sandwich, that what they’re eating was once alive. Some people feel ‘squeamish’ or slightly revolted by touching raw meat, even though they may be committed carnivores. ‘Squeamishness’ is a physical and emotional feeling that is impossible to ignore. People often find it difficult to explain why they feel squeamish, but it can be related to an unconscious anxiety about raw meat being unsafe, and also a resistance to connecting a piece of meat or poultry with the live animal it once was. The development of portioned meat and poultry, prepared food and ovenable plastic packaging means that, increasingly, consumers can avoid touching raw food. Some believe this is an unhealthy trend and that if people eat meat they ought to be realistic about the processes that produced it. Recent food scares such as BSE, Foot and Mouth and Bird Flu have caused many to question the modern food system. However, very often information about the do’s and don’ts of food production can be contradictory and confused.

Chemicals

Take the example of pesticides and fertilizers. In conventional farming, chemicals are used to increase the amount of food produced on farms. Pesticides can help to guard crops against pests and disease, whilst fertilizers can increase crop yields. However, many people worry that these chemicals build up in the environment, polluting water systems and killing wildlife such as insects and birds. It is feared they can also have a negative effect on human health. As a result, today there are rules limiting the amount of chemicals farmers can use when producing food.

Organic

But some people don’t think the rules go far enough. Some farmers choose to avoid using chemicals as much as possible, and reassure their customers by having their farms independently inspected and certified for chemical restriction, animal welfare and environmental protection. The strictest certification rules are for organic farming, and organic farmers are especially interested in promoting
human health and protecting wildlife. Organic farmers use mainly non-chemical means to build natural resistance to pests.

The argument

Supporters of conventional farming methods argue that good farmers use chemicals carefully, that economically organic farming is very difficult to sustain in the modern world, and that organic food is no ‘safer’ or ‘healthier’ than their produce. Supporters of organic food argue that the added cost associated with their products guarantees an all-round healthier food and farming system. Consumers are left with many difficult choices when trying to decide what to eat.

Meat

Cereals such as rice, maize and wheat are the staple foods for two thirds of the world’s population. In many low-income countries such as Nepal and North Africa foods derived from animals, sugars and fats hardly feature in the everyday diet. In contrast, food in industrialised countries is characterised by variety and convenience. As countries become wealthier, their populations tend to eat increasing quantities of fats, sugars and foods derived from animals such as meat and dairy products.

The environmental impact of meat

All our food and drink has an effect on the environment, but some products have a much greater effect than others. Products from animals – particularly meat - have the biggest impact of all. In fact, animal farming globally causes more greenhouse gas emissions than all of the cars, lorries and planes in the world put together. It also causes significant water pollution and damage to land. And the problem is growing. As countries get wealthier, people tend to eat more and more meat, often abandoning traditional grain and vegetable-based diets.

Feeding animals

Animals have to be fed a large amount of food to produce a relatively small amount of meat or dairy. To produce 1kg meat requires around 6kg plant protein. Feeding animals is a very inefficient way of converting plants into human food. There would be much less impact on the environment if the land used to grow animal feed was used to grow vegetable or grain crops for human consumption. Delicious and nutritious foods like rice, pasta, bread, fruit and vegetables can all be produced with less impact on the environment than equivalent quantities of meat or dairy.

Forests and farts

Every year, large amounts of forest are cut down to grow the soya that is used to feed the world’s billions of cows and chickens. This destruction of the forest causes great environmental damage, as forests suck greenhouse gases out of the air. Moreover, because meat has to be stored carefully to ensure that it doesn’t
attract bacteria and cause food poisoning, a lot of energy has to be used to refrigerate and transport it. And cows also fart a lot. The gas they let out - called methane - is a very powerful greenhouse gas. All in all, expecting to be able to eat meat every day turns out to be a sure way to hurt the environment and contribute to global warming!