

Art is always food for thought, not least when it's art about food

Ellie O'Byrne

You could argue that a preoccupation with food underpins all human culture, not only in the obvious places like the voluptuous plenty of Dutch still lifes. Even the Palaeolithic cave paintings of Lascaux, when you get right down to it, are about hunting, about how we feed ourselves.

Even the earliest known form of writing, the Sumerian cuneiform script, began as a system for merchants to tally grain, oil and livestock.

But with food, as with art, context is everything.

When I was invited to help put together a programme of events for Meat and Potatoes, I started by thinking about some of the most pressing and current contexts: food and environment, food and labour rights, food and deprivation, food and health, food and farming, food and colonialism, food and inequality, food and waste, food and globalisation.

There has never been as important a time as now to explore some of these serious issues.

A few years ago, I was interviewing one of the board members of food waste redistribution app FoodCloud during a visit to their Cork depot.

FoodCloud aren't a walk-in food bank, but a high-tech solution that matches donors in the form of manufacturers and supermarket chains with charities that feed people. Their 10,000 square foot Little Island warehouse was, on the day of my visit, home to six tonnes of butter whose packaging had been printed in the wrong language, that would have been destined for the bin if not for FoodCloud.

Having listened to tales of manufacturers offloading 60,000 portions of unevenly breaded and therefore unsaleable chicken breasts, of retailers ending the day with heaps of unsold baked goods to dispose of, I asked my interviewee a purposefully naive question: "Is there something a bit wrong with our food system?"

"Well, there are two billion obese people in the world and two billion starving people in the world, so it's probably fair to say that our food system is a bit broken, isn't it?" came the answer.

That was 2018, and if our food system was broken then, in the intervening years, it's been thrown even more into disarray by a sequence of global market disruptors that are profiting some and disadvantaging most.

Brexit has disrupted a lot of the Irish supply of seed for growers and farmers and forced us to examine how and why Ireland became a net importer of things like potatoes from our nearest neighbour.

At home, Covid closures gutted small food businesses throughout 2020 and 2021. Globally, the economic fallout of Covid restrictions has doubled the number of people on the brink of starvation, which is now 276 million people, according to the World Food Programme.

Food shortages and continued price hikes for staples are on the horizon, in part due to Ukraine's position as an important grain-growing region and the world's largest producer of sunflower oil. In May, the world's press reported that Ukraine had 22 million metric tonnes of wheat, sunflower seeds and other food staples that it was unable to export.

Russia, meanwhile, is a source of much of the world's Nitrogen and Phosphate based fertiliser. The EU has just included restrictions on fertilisers in their latest round of sanctions and the impacts of this for Irish farmers, who for generations have been incentivised to intensify food production with the aid of these chemicals, will be making themselves felt throughout the duration that Meat and Potatoes is on display.

In the meantime, for those who can afford it, casual consumption as part of the trappings of late capitalism is all around us. "This Cork Restaurant Is Serving Half Pound Burgers! This New Cork Ice-cream Parlour Will Blow Your Mind! The Top Ten Best Places For A Decaf Caramel Latté Experience In Cork!" our phones scream.

There's a show on Netflix now called *Is It Cake?* constructed entirely around each episode's finale, where the host cuts into seemingly realistic objects – beach balls, shoes, suitcases – and reveals them to be extremely well-decorated cakes. "Ooooh," the audience and judges go.

"That's cake!" the host confirms. Everyone applauds wildly, there is a cursory tasting and moments later, a revolving stage whirls the devastated objects away. Its thoughtless decadence, its lack of concern for food as food, is perhaps harmless, or perhaps unsettlingly reminiscent of the court of Louis XVI.

In a supermarket society where we are divorced from agriculture and the day-to-day work of growing, processing, and storing foods, people are no longer active agents in their food culture but mere consumers of food. As a consequence, food devoid of context becomes gluttony, a wearisome stuffing of already overfed faces, a succession of acts of consumption, a quest for novelty for jaded palates.

But serious stuff aside, food is also necessarily fun, pleasure, love, connections to childhood. We're mammals; we're orally fixated. Our earliest experiences of maternal love, comfort and the appeasement of anxiety and loneliness come at us with a mouthful of warm, sweet milk. It's only natural that food becomes the object of our desires, our fantasies, our creativity.

So the great thing about the ambitious and exciting programme of events that will be taking place upstairs at Meat and Potatoes is that it combines all of these things, the serious and the fun, by inviting gallery goers to again become not mere consumers, but active participants, to roll their sleeves up, to learn by doing. To think about where their food is coming from and where it's going.

A seed-saving workshop invites the public to bring seed they have saved themselves, to become part of the constant gene-flow that underpins how our food is grown.

A bread-baking workshop brings the tantalising smell of baking to the gallery.

A living crop of heirloom potatoes simultaneously invites discussion on famine, plenty, disease resistance and the future of food, but also offers people the opportunity to experience for themselves what it's like to dig and eat their own spuds when we make up a monster batch of gallery-grown Colcannon come Halloween.

An exciting succession of experts, growers, panellists, artists and more will bring conversations about food poverty, ancient grains, the art of cake decoration, and the future of food.

To embed the conversation around food waste and circularity in the entire programme, we've partnered with Cork Urban Soil Project (CUSP), and we will be using only compostable materials for the duration of the exhibition: not only are our spuds being grown with a top-dressing of some of CUSP's compost, but any food waste produced in the gallery during tastings, workshops and more will be returned to CUSP to make sure that the very events themselves become part of Cork's urban soil.

It's a very tasty programme.

Bon Appetit.

Ellie O'Byrne is a freelance journalist and media educator from Cork. She writes about arts, environment, local government and community amongst other areas. She's the presenter and producer of Green Bites, the Irish Food Sustainability Podcast.