

# Food on the Edge: The future of food is a sustainable future

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This article is a review of “Food on the Edge (FOTE)”, a symposium which ran in Galway, Ireland in October 2015 on the theme of “the future of food”. The aim of FOTE is to create a benchmark for best practice, in terms of food, its culture, and the people who produce it. According to the Symposium’s founder and organiser, J. P. McMahon, “chefs everywhere have a responsibility to be the avant-garde of food education, whether in the context of fine-dining or street food”. The focus of FOTE seemed more on fine dining than street food, however, from a cursory glance at the panel, three-quarters of whom had been awarded Michelin stars at some time, and one quarter of whom currently feature in the 2015 world’s top 100 restaurants. Only five of the speakers were women, the majority being white males. There was a real international flavour to this gathering, however, with representatives of 17 different countries speaking. This article provides an overview of the 39 presentations where the key themes emerging include sustainability, education, creativity, the need to know about your history, the links between chefs and producers, food and health, family dining, and the shortage of chefs.

**Keywords:** chefs, Ireland, sustainability, education, creativity, Michelin

## Introduction

Take one theme, forty top international chefs, three hundred and fifty symposiasts, and put them together in a large tent in the middle of Eyre Square in Galway City in the West of Ireland for two days and what do you get? Answer: One of the most exhilarating, dynamic, provocative and enjoyable events I have attended in quite a while. Food on the Edge (FOTE) is the brainchild of J. P. McMahon, chef, restaurateur, and food columnist, who was so exasperated by not being able to secure a ticket to the MAD Symposium in Copenhagen he decided to set up his own event and invite a host of international chefs to come and talk in his own backyard on the theme of “the future of food”. He was completely overwhelmed by the response he received and, as a result, the Food on the Edge Irish food symposium is planned to continue annually for at least two more years. The event ran on the 19th and 20th October 2015.

The aim of FOTE is to create a benchmark for best practice, in terms of food, its culture, and the people who produce it. According to McMahon, chefs everywhere have a responsibility to be the avant-garde of food education, whether in the context of fine dining or street food. We all need to eat better and in order to do this we need to debate this on an open platform. We need to create an international community that can rely on each other to feed our own future development (<http://www.foodontheedge.ie/>). But the focus seems more on fine dining than street food, from the panel of speakers, three-quarters of whom either have or had been awarded Michelin stars at some time, and one quarter of whom currently feature in the 2015 world’s top 100 restaurants. Only five of the speakers (12.5%) were women, the majority being white males. Indeed, Daniel Patterson, one of

the white male speakers, points out that in America, despite only being 31% of the overall population, white males hold 95% of the top chef positions. There was a real international flavour to this gathering, however, with representatives of 17 different countries speaking. McMahon extended invitations to over 200 of the world’s leading chefs, of which 41 agreed to attend. Only one chef named on the programme (Mads Refslund from Denmark) actually failed to arrive, and it is believed that at least 20 chefs have already committed to speak at next year’s symposium. One of the themes to emerge from the two-day event was the democratisation of fine dining and the death of the stuffy old fine-dining paradigm. Indeed many of these award-winning chefs are now getting involved in food trucks and trying to make fast street food tastier, healthier, and more accessible to marginalised communities.

This article provides an overview of the 39 presentations made over the two days where key themes have been identified using content analysis. The main themes discussed were sustainability, education, creativity, the need to know about your history, the links between chefs and producers (farmers, fishermen, butchers, etc.), food and health, family dining, and the shortage of chefs. A number of these themes are cross-cutting and will be discussed below. A list of speakers, their nationality and country of current employment, and the themes that emerged in their talks is shown in Table 1.

## Food/Chefs symposiums

There has been a growth in recent years in the number of food symposiums around the world, with events happening in Oxford, Leeds, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Dublin, New York, Toronto, Adelaide and Lima, to name a few. The



draw their inspiration from producers and suppliers. Niko Romito, a self-taught three-Michelin-starred chef from Italy, suggested that the complete removal of the ego of the chef is the future of food. He notes that simplicity is the key to truly sustainable food, not by being banal or lacking complexity, but by lacking complication. His video of a simple dish of *capellini* (thin spaghetti) with bacon, white wine, juice of chargrilled leek, and a pinch of chilli flakes had the whole audience drooling. Food is the ideal way to transfer the message between the producer and the customer, and the chef is a link in the message. Niko's philosophy of respect for local tradition and truthfulness underpins his original creations.

Poland's only Michelin starred chef, Wojciech Modest Amaro, gave the most impassioned talk about biodiversity. He argued that unification is killing the industry and argued for diversity. He pointed out how fifty years ago there were 600 types of apples and now only around 200. He serves an *amuse bouche* using 12 varieties of apples. He argued for the need to bring back the history and tradition of our food.

### **Sustainable fishing**

The tradition of fishermen in Cornwall was one of the issues discussed by Nathan Outlaw, who runs a number of seafood restaurants in the West Country as well as in London. He asked if it was going to be sustainable in the future to have a fish restaurant. He spoke about the importance of fishing and hospitality to the Cornish economy now that the old traditional mining industries had long disappeared. He championed small fishermen using day boats, and lamented the EU quota system that sees the majority of the fish catch go overseas, mostly to France and Spain. Albert Adria, the award-winning Catalan chef, noted that the Spanish purchase fish from all over the world as they eat squid nearly every day. He identified how in Spanish culture they like their fish either very small or very large and that frying fish was an art form. He showed a video by Oceana.org on overfishing and discussed a number of fishing methods that are destroying the oceans including trawling, by-catch, cyanide fishing, blast fishing and ghost fishing (where discarded nets left in the ocean continue to catch and kill fish). He emphasised the importance of teaching the next generation that the sea is an invaluable resource that can supply the future needs of the world if managed sustainably, but that currently, ten nations control the world's fisheries.

One man who is very familiar with the oceans is Roderick Sloan, a sea urchin diver based in Norway who supplies 32 of the world's best restaurants. Given his experience underwater, it was interesting to hear him champion aquaculture as the future of fishing, with the proviso that it needs to be done well. He acknowledged issues of sea lice in the past but noted that lumpfish were now farmed alongside the salmon in Norway, who symbiotically eat the sea lice. He informed that fish are now vaccinated and therefore don't need antibiotics and agreed that fish farming is not a perfect industry. He also championed day boats that use sustainable methods such as jigging, long lines, and standing nets. He argues that chefs can change how fish are caught by demanding certain criteria from suppliers. Ross Lewis, chef/proprietor of Chapter One Restaurant in Dublin also pointed out that the sea was the cheapest way to produce protein but highlighted that we had to protect

the sea by adhering to quotas, watching the by-catch, and protecting the spawning grounds.

### **Sustainable food supply-chains**

One of the more controversial and impassioned speakers was Mark Best, an Australian chef. He painted a disparaging picture of the lack of diversity in the food supply chain in Australia which is dominated by two major players (Woolworths and Wesfarmers), which between them account for 70% of the market. In Tasmania, the only grocery distributor is owned by Woolworths. Not dissimilar with what is happening elsewhere in the world, these big companies use techniques such as green-field acquisition and below cost selling to kill competition and dominate the supply chain. This strangles diversity and leaves food producers at the mercy of big business. He notes that some places in the Outback only receive deliveries once a fortnight, pointing out that supermarkets have no interest in nutrition but prefer long-life produce. He discussed how big food companies engage in greenwashing – making the company appear more environmentally friendly than it actually is. He also discussed the "halo" effect that top chefs such as Jamie Oliver and Heston Blumenthal can give these multinationals when they endorse their products. He reminded the audience that every chef has a social responsibility and should be custodians of ethics.

### **Waste**

One of the big issues mentioned repeatedly was the issue of waste. Sasu Laukkunen is a proponent of nose-to-tail eating with a no-waste policy in his Chef & Sommelier restaurant outside Helsinki. He started farming and subsequently began serving less and less meat and fish and began to focus on vegetables. He highlighted the importance of preserving food, in a climate where "your winter lasts eight months". He says that the more you understand ingredients, the less you focus on technique. Matt Orlando, chef/owner of Amass in Copenhagen, argued that the restaurant of the future would pay tax on its waste, incentivising restaurateurs who are sustainable. He notes that transportation is the biggest source of waste, based on carbon emissions, and promotes growing your own food and using local, sustainable and ethical food. This is the crux of the New Nordic philosophy that he follows, championing food in its prime. By using all parts of the animal or vegetable, he suggests that there will be no safety net for lack of creativity, with chefs pushed to work more spontaneously. In a non-verbal dramatic presentation, Kevin Thornton (Ireland's first ever two-Michelin starred chef) prepared local Irish sea-urchins and edible seaweeds, and skinned, butchered and tasted an Irish hare – ensuring to use the offal, continuing the no-waste local theme. However, one of the dichotomies of the New Nordic movement is that diners are traveling long distances, clocking up air miles to eat this local sustainable food.

### **Education**

The second most dominant theme among the speakers was that of education. This ranged from improving our own education concerning the major food issues of the world, to the potential power of the edible schoolyard movement. Early

food education starts at home and there was much debate about the importance of dining as a family and offering diversity of flavours and textures to children as opposed to the bland baby food that is mass marketed. James Petrie suggested diverting the billions spent on baby food back to the farmers. Food was, maybe naively, seen as a potential panacea for a number of societal issues from obesity to disadvantage. Yet, on more than one occasion we were told that naivety is creativity – and had J.P. McMahon not been naive enough to contact some of the leading chefs in the world and invite them to the West of Ireland, the FOTE Symposium would never have happened. Sasu Laukkonen noted that “young chefs are like white sheets of paper” and proposed putting them on farms. Ross Lewis argued that the chef of the future cannot remain “politically agnostic”. Ben Reade, formally of Nordic Food Labs, argued for a better understanding of our senses, particularly the chemistry of flavour and how it’s perceived, noting that we have olfactory receptors all through our bodies. Gunner Karl Gíslan advocated that his fellow Icelandic citizens educate themselves about the food traditions of their forefathers and suggested that if they invested a bit more time in preserving foods and preparing for the long cold winters, they might not be as depressed. Mark Moriarty, the final speaker of the event, noted that restaurants are universities for chefs. When asked by a member of the audience for the one thing chefs could do to make a change in the world, Ross Lewis answered “to go into a school once a year and talk to young people”. Education, it seems, is key.

Another one of the cross-cutting themes briefly mentioned above in the Icelandic example, is the need for better education about our food history. Many young chefs seem unaware of the fact that most of our ancestors were involved in nose to tail eating, not out of issues of sustainability but out of necessity. Clare Smyth lamented the British public’s attitude to veal, which ironically means that many young male calves are killed and dumped at birth. This is real waste. Male calves, and therefore veal, are a by-product of the dairy industry. She serves veal in her restaurant and wishes others would do likewise. David Kinch promotes education in his California restaurant Manresa, and gives his chefs little research projects to do regularly. He was recently shocked that one of his young chefs had no idea who Paul Bocuse was. He values understanding our history and how it has shaped what and how we eat today. Another element of historical education was discussed by Roberto Solis who has taken inspiration from his Mayan ancestors to develop the “New Yucatan Cuisine”.

Quique Docosta, from Spain, questioned how much the government invests in food education. This question ties in to a number of the themes discussed including food and health and also the shortage of chefs. The prominent speaker on health issues was Davide Scabin from Italy, who discussed his “Food Cleanic” initiative which looks at the link between food and health. He acknowledges that not everyone can enjoy the Mediterranean diet, but points out that if a child eats well growing up, they can reduce the risk of cancer by 35%. He discussed the effect one of his best customers getting cancer had on him and points out that chemotherapy can influence how patients taste meat – it becoming akin to eating a dead rat. He highlighted how tryptophan, an essential amino acid

found in rack of lamb, can cure irritable bowel syndrome, and that anchovies, parmesan and eggs can have a good effect on spastic colon.

A food of the future, “soylent”, which breaks down nutrition into the base elements but is the antithesis of dining, was discussed by Phil Wood of Sydney’s Rockpool restaurant. Developed by a young engineer in San Francisco, this product provides all nutrients required for living by drinking sludge. He asks whether in the future we will have an underclass sustained on “soylent” while the over-class retain the pleasure of eating real food. He draws an analogy with saving money on education but losing the culture markers that provide our personalities. He once again highlights the social benefits of sharing food around a table and talking. Dining is so much more than just sustaining our body – we are nourishing our souls.

Appreciating the real cost of producing good food was the message behind Clare Smyth’s talk. One of only seven female chefs to hold three Michelin stars, Smyth notes that if you add up all the hours put in by chefs and farmers to produce a really good meal, you may find that they don’t even make minimum wage or fair trade rates. Yet she notes that the British Prime Minister David Cameron once said he would prefer to bring a visiting dignitary to Nando’s than to Gordon Ramsay’s pub Harvester, suggesting it was better value for money. This lack of understanding of what it takes to produce good food and fine dining exasperated her.

A number of speakers asked why there was a shortage of chefs. One self-taught chef/restaurateur, Mikael Jonnson, predicts that fine-dining is doomed because you “can’t get staff who will work 80–90 hours a week for shit salaries”. He had more than 130 chefs work with him over a four-year period in his 25-seat restaurant. He was the victim of his own success, as a very favourable review by influential British critic A. A. Gill resulted in his London restaurant being full of customers wanting well-done steak. He has changed his model to having no menu and cooking only the food he wants to cook, only opening for six services, so that now he has created a dream place for chefs to work, where taking a break is encouraged. He has a devoted following, one customer has eaten in his restaurant 242 times in four years and now has his name on a chair.

Not all kitchens have historically been demanding crazy hours from their chefs. Roderick Sloan saluted Margaret Duffy, who was his enlightened employer in the mid-1990s in her Dublin restaurant 101 Talbot, noting that she produced organic food with two teams of chefs (one for lunch, one for dinner) where everyone worked eight hours a day and had two days off. He also noted that there was a 50/50 ratio of male and female chefs in the kitchen.

A number of potential solutions to the chef shortage problem were discussed. Nathan Outlaw has developed an academy and apprenticeship system for his young chefs to combat the staffing shortage. Mark Moriarty, who at 23 years old was the youngest speaker at the symposium, acknowledged that he worked 100 hours a week, ate irregularly, missed out on playing sport and attending many important social occasions with his friends, and was poorly paid in his journey to become the World Young Chef 2015. He spoke eloquently about a culture of fear and intimidation in kitchens and proposed a solution which involved both rights and responsibilities. Employers need to reduce working hours,

and employ more chefs to ease the burden. It should be a four-and-a-half day week, with time off to rest and enjoy life. In return, young chefs need to commit for a minimum of two years with their employer, show up on time each day and buy into the ethos of the restaurant. This could lead to a sustainable future.

## Creativity

The third most popular theme emerging from analysis of the talks was that of creativity. Albert Adria suggests that creativity is changing your mind every day. James Petrie, who is development chef for the Gordon Ramsay group, noted that for the last eleven years his job has been to ask questions. He asserts that naivety is creativity, and that education is questioning. Mark Moriarty envisions Ireland's potential to be the next culinary destination like Copenhagen or San Sebastian if the talented young chefs who commit to working in Irish restaurants for at least two years, then commit to other restaurants around the world for similar periods before returning home and taking control of their own kitchen. He warns that these returning chefs need to be innovative and creative and not merely replicate what they have witnessed abroad.

The movement towards seasonal no-waste food demands creativity. Fermentation is one of the ways in which chefs are becoming creative with new flavours. One very creative example of fermentation came from André Chiang, a Taiwanese chef working in Singapore. His restaurant specialises in producing fermented fruit juice beverages that complement the food he serves. He argues that juices are the weakest link in gastronomy and harnessing Asia's ancient history of fermentation, he uses the technique to create different layers of depth and flavour. He tries to create a dish in liquid form, focusing on body, taste and aroma. He deconstructs components of a dish and uses juices to fill the gap. Why should his guests who don't drink wine miss out on a memorable food and beverage pairing experience?

Another speaker who is creative with beverages is Kevin Patricio, an American living in the Basque country. He is behind the Basqueland Brewing Project and producing craft beers that work with Basque cuisine. Creativity is at the heart of Elena Arzak, who told the symposium that it was time to rethink everything, the way we work and the way we think. Along with her father Juan-Marie, the Arzaks have a creative lab in the San Sebastian restaurant where they develop future dishes. One such dish is jellied beer served on a crushed beer can, to remind the customers about recycling. She champions how chefs can become economic drivers for their country by building awareness, employment and a future through using local producers. One of the obligations that Elena Arzak spoke about was to share our knowledge and experiences. This is something that both Connie Desousa and John Jackson did when they moved back to Calgary, Canada. They invited all the chefs and food suppliers in the city to a Potlatch where they got to meet and exchange ideas with likeminded people,

which has helped shape the culinary future of Canada. There are now over 40 food trucks in Calgary producing farm to table fast food. Kobe Desramaults, from In de Wulf, in Belgium is not only creative with food, but with social media. By asking online about traditional wood bakery techniques, he attracted an American baker Sara Lemke to come to Belgium and teach him. Along with an Irish chef Rose Green, they have recently opened an authentic bakery in Gent called De Superette. He feels like a member of a rock and roll band, since he plays rather than works. Amanda Cohen is creative in her use of vegetables in the New York City restaurant Dirt Candy. She differentiates her vegetable restaurant from a vegetarian restaurant, noting that vegans and vegetarians are often saying no to meat rather than yes to vegetables. Yet she finds that the American dining public have an aversion to paying over a set price for a vegetable dish, whereas meat dishes are expected to be expensive. Meat, as Roland Barthes noted, has always been a signifier of status, or as Homer Simpson famously said, "you don't make friends with salad".

## Conclusion

Food on the Edge 2015 had the advantage of most first-time events, in that both the symposiasts and the organisers did not know what exactly to expect and were pleasantly surprised. For two cold, windy October days, Galway City became the home of debate, talk, networking between Irish chefs and foodies and a truly international panel of speakers and visitors. From an Irish perspective, it was a unique opportunity to bring together so many individuals from the restaurant and hospitality industry in one place, so that they could talk, network and exchange ideas "without the bullshit", as Kevin Thornton eloquently put it. Matt Orlando commented that one of the reasons that Copenhagen has become such a major food destination is that the chefs there talk to each other and collaborate. There was a macho, testosterone-fuelled feel to the event with quite a few more expletives used on the stage than at your average symposium, yet the feeling of goodwill and openness among all attendees was palpable. There was also a more equal gender balance in the audience than on the stage. Embracing social media, the attendees ensured that Food on the Edge was trending on Twitter in Ireland for those two days – thus raising awareness about the event and the important issues and themes discussed. Each of the 39 performances (Canada was a joint presentation) were different, and with the fifteen-minute timeslot to present your message, there was never time to get bored. Despite the varied nature of their talks, the majority of speakers hit on the three main emerging themes of sustainability, education and creativity, with many of the other cross-cutting themes also evident (see Table 1). One minor quibble was that when bringing people half way around the world it might be more sustainable to give them a little more time to talk! One thing is certain: I will book my ticket early for the 2016 event and I predict that the future of Food on the Edge remains bright.

