

Behaviours and attitudes towards sustainable food provision on the part of Dutch restaurateurs

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Though there is some evidence that consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about the effects of their own “unsustainable” behaviour, this is not widely reflected in changes to such behaviour. This article reports a small-scale study into the “supply side” of this issue, focusing on the attitudes and behaviour of Dutch chefs with regard to their perceptions, understanding and potential role in encouraging sustainable public eating behaviours. A qualitative investigative approach was employed in which primary data was collected via semi-structured interviews with chefs of nine independent restaurants in a Dutch city. The issues explored pertained to chefs’ understanding of general sustainability issues, their views of the opportunities and constraints for changing their current business practices towards more sustainable behaviours, and the actions already taken (or intended to be taken) to implement these behaviours. In such a small-scale study, the findings are limited but suggestive. All respondents paid at least lip-service to the importance of sustainability and all had at least a vague knowledge of what this might imply for their provision of food. However, this was not reflected in their menus, in part because it was not perceived to be an issue with consumers, and in part because respondents were uncertain as to how they might successfully effect change (i.e. translate beliefs pro-actively into sustainable business practices).

Keywords: food, independent restaurant sector, sustainability

Introduction

Famously defined by the Brundtland Commission as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), sustainable development includes attention to matters pertaining to food production and consumption; it being suggested that the food system accounts for a large proportion of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (for example, estimated at 20% in the UK) and could thus be interpreted as one of the largest contributors to climate change (Macdiarmid et al., 2012). Food consumption behaviours also contribute to farmland erosion and excess waste (Tobler et al., 2011), and soil and water pollution (Hoek et al., 2004). The Netherlands has one of the highest carbon emissions per capita in the European Union (EU) and is falling well short of Kyoto Protocol targets to reduce emissions (United Nations, 1997). Almost half of Dutch people consider claims made for the seriousness of climate change to be an exaggeration (Coates, 2015). This contrasts with their attitudes to animal welfare, with a recent EU survey (Hakkenes, 2016) suggesting that 85% of respondents would be willing to spend more on animal-friendly products (the Dutch Party for the Animals has five seats in the lower house of parliament). Assertions have been made as to the desirability of a switch to organic farming to reduce food system emissions (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting [NOS], 2015). In October 2015, Friends of the Earth Netherlands claimed that the Dutch government seemed

reluctant to initiate changes to the national food system by, for example, introducing a meat tax (Schupp, 2015).

The objective of the research reported in this article was to explore behaviours and attitudes towards sustainable food provision on the part of Dutch chefs in independent restaurants. It is unclear as to the scale of the contribution to food system emissions made by the restaurant and foodservice sectors, but limited research on the “hospitality” industry acknowledges the potential for substantial contributions to sustainable behaviours in hotels (Melissen, 2013) and restaurants (Moskwa et al., 2015). Some commentators have gone so far as to suggest that if restaurants would operate more sustainably, this would positively influence the buying behaviour of consumers in the direction of sustainable behaviours (e.g. Withiam, 2013), perhaps ultimately leading to radical change in the system of public food provision in the hospitality sector (Hall, 2013).

Theoretical and evidential background to the study

The theoretical background to the study reported in this article acknowledges that many of those who engage in sustainability advocacy work from a position of ethical idealism (Dunham et al., 2011), qualified to varying degrees by elements of both moral consequentialism (Holbrook, 2009; Hiller et al., 2014) and pragmatism (Bacon, 2013). In essence this means that behaving sustainably is seen as morally desirable and, it is argued, if the reasons for such behaviour can be effectively explained to those at present unpersuaded by such values, it may lead to behavioural change and alignment. As an example,

Campbell-Arvai et al. (2014) argue that people want to do what is good and what is right and only require information as to how to achieve pro-environmental behaviour. "Doing what is right" targets people's intrinsic values, and if people act in accordance with these values, it gives a good feeling about their pro-environmental behaviour (see also Melissen & Koens, 2016).

Consumer behaviour with respect to questions of sustainability is undoubtedly complex (Verain et al., 2015), but there is certainly *some* evidence that the possession of knowledge of pro-environmental and sustainable behaviours leads to the practice of the same. This has been noted in respect of sustainable food choices when eating out (Curry et al., 2015). Withiam (2013) found that the behaviour of drive-through customers changed towards eating less and/or more healthily once they were informed that the restaurant was using sustainable packaging. The suspicion remains, however, that for many restaurant goers, dining represents a largely hedonic experience that equates in attitudinal terms to expressing variable degrees of personal freedom from conventional consumption behaviour (Ashley et al., 2004). In this respect, beliefs pertaining to the environmental systems of restaurants, and the desire to conform to these (hedonistic) beliefs, work against the practice of alternative behaviours on the part of consumers (Finkelstein, 1989).

The actual and potential roles of purveyors and suppliers in encouraging sustainable food choices in dining out is arguably critical (Belasco, 2006; 2008). In the sphere of public dining, there are certain barriers to effecting such change, beginning with chefs' culinary training which in the commercial hospitality industry – almost globally – remains largely predicated on a late nineteenth and early twentieth century "aristocratic" model of food preparation and consumption that emphasises quantity, quality and hedonistic excess in both (Mennell, 1985). Sustainability is thus not often seen by chefs as a key business concern, one reason being that "being sustainable" is not a particular draw for customers, another that sustainability practices are often perceived as inimical to cost control and revenue generation, because of the perceived lack of availability/reliability of supply of sustainable products (Revell & Blackburn, 2007; Ricaurte, 2012). Previous research has also demonstrated that restaurant business owner/managers have low levels of knowledge in terms of sustainable development or sustainable business practices, and consider their environmental impact to be negligible, often feeling that there is little scope to reduce this impact (Revell & Blackburn, 2007).

All this said, there are a small number of reports that suggest some restaurants are creating new menus for so-called Generation Y consumers who *are* presumed to be more disposed to values of sustainability (Jang et al., 2011). In addition, in the US, the Green Restaurants Association (<http://www.dinegreen.com/>) is encouraging restaurants to engage in green practices, including the promotion of sustainable food products. In the UK, the Sustainable Restaurant Association (<http://www.thesra.org/>) is providing similar advice and support. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Ministerie van Economische Zaken, 2015) has made agreements with the catering industry to make it easier for customers to make both green and healthier food choices. Restaurants are also able to communicate their commitment to sustainability

through use of the commercial review website www.iens.nl, a TripAdvisor company (iens.nl, 2016a). Restaurateurs can opt to fill out a sustainability profile according to fourteen criteria classified in three streams (iens.nl, 2016b, see [Table 1](#)). There is no official check on these criteria; it is all self-regulated, but iens.nl established its criteria in collaboration with a Dutch environmental NGO and a consultancy company for sustainable development (de Vre, 2012).

Methodology

The investigation reported here was designed to explore the understanding, attitudes and behaviours towards the sustainable food provision of Dutch chefs in independent restaurants. More specifically, the investigative approach was framed in such a way as to explore subjects' (a) understanding, perceptions of, and attitudes towards the phenomenon of sustainability in general; (b) beliefs about the possibilities of change in their businesses towards more sustainable behaviours; and (c) actions already taken in respect of such change and/or behavioural intent with respect to future actions.

Methodological reflexivity was an important element in both constructing and executing the research. The principal investigator has a strong academic interest in sustainability as a research area, particularly as it applies in service businesses. This interest is complemented by (a) a passion for food and preparing food, as well as dining out; (b) substantial early-life experience of working in restaurants in the Netherlands and other countries; and (c) a strong personal commitment to advancing the causes of sustainability from a position of pragmatic consequentialism as described in the previous section of this article.

A qualitative research approach employing semi-structured interviews was chosen as a flexible and expeditious means of obtaining "rich" data. The content and structure of the interview schedule comprised a series of headings designed to explore the issues listed at the beginning of this section. The schedule was developed and "tested" on a colleague (a former chef-restaurateur) and then refined, re-tested and adjusted, and finalised before being used in the field. Interviewing permitted a clear planning of conversations with respondents

Table 1: Restaurant sustainability criteria according to iens.nl (2016b)

Criteria		
<i>Menu</i>		
100% vegetarian	Offers multiple vegetarian options	Takes animal welfare into account
Tap water is served as an alternative for mineral water	Makes use of organic products	Makes use of fair trade products
Makes use of fair trade products	Makes use of seasonal products	Makes use of local products
<i>Buying sustainable fish</i>		
<i>Avoiding food waste</i>		
Guest determines number of side dishes	Different portion sizes available	Doggy bag available
<i>Communication</i>		
Guests are actively informed about sustainable choices	Menu contains information on aforementioned criteria	

while facilitating flexibility in the detection of any nuance in conversations with respondents, and its further investigation in situ. The main researcher's own experience of the industry could also be leveraged to advantage. Thus, for example, in interview encounters the opening approach to questioning was deliberately oblique in an effort to gain and secure respondents' confidence and achieve empathy through demonstration of the principal researcher's own knowledge and experience of the industry, an application of what has become known as "participant comprehension" (Collins, 1984).

The population chosen for the research consisted of all restaurants, some 300 in all, located in or around Breda, a city of 200 000 people in the south of the Netherlands (City of Breda, 2011). The restaurant industry is, like other industries, often highly segmented, in this case by such variables as price level, style of cookery and ease of accessibility. However, the sample selected for this study was not so stratified. For reasons of expedience, a convenience sampling approach was adopted in which the principal researcher employed her own knowledge as well as that of three past and present "informants" (i.e. personal contacts in the restaurant profession) to identify possible subjects. In this way, it was hoped to reduce negative responses to interview requests by explaining, in an initial contact, that subjects were being approached on the basis of someone else's recommendation. The means of this initial contact was an introductory email followed by a telephone call to schedule the interview, while simultaneously verifying that the interviewee was the organisational decision maker. All potential respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

It almost goes without saying that a small sample such as that described here has limitations in terms of the inferences that might be drawn from the data gathered. There is considerable discussion in the social scientific research literature on what constitutes an appropriate sample size for qualitative research of the kind described here (see for example Guest et al., 2006; Baker & Edwards, 2013). In approaching this question, consideration was given to the likely point at which "saturation" of the data would occur (i.e. the point where after "x" interviews, the likelihood of additional information being gleaned would diminish or end). This was set against the resource and time constraints imposed upon the researcher. Though there is no golden rule in this respect, given the locus of the fieldwork it was decided to aim for an initial twelve respondents, a number which has been indicated as the potential saturation point for this style of investigation (Guest et al., 2006). If this did not appear to achieve the required outcomes, further interviews would have been conducted.

In the event, it proved more difficult than anticipated to secure the agreement of putative participants for interview. In the end, nine willing subjects, all male and aged between 30 and 50 years old, were identified and interviewed. Interviews lasted from around 45 to 90 minutes, were conducted in Dutch, and audio-recorded in agreement with the participants. These were subsequently translated and transcribed into English by the principal researcher. All recorded interviews and transcripts were audit trailed in the order in which the interviews were conducted and allocated simple identifiers (e.g. I2 for interview 2). Two-stage analysis and coding of interview transcripts was undertaken. Initial coding started with a careful reading of transcripts, highlighting significant phrases and passages in each relative to the questions posed

during interviews. Subsequently, transcripts were compared and contrasted in terms of both content elicited as a result of posing the interview questions (which were intended to operationalise the three main themes identified in this section's opening paragraph), and in terms of identifying commonalities in the frequency and content of remarks by interviewees that had been unanticipated.

Results

As indicated at the beginning of the previous section, in the light of the limited previous research into the role of those involved in providing public dining with respect to sustainability, the present investigation was designed to explore three areas. The outcomes are considered here.

Subjects' understanding, perceptions of, and attitudes towards the phenomenon of sustainability in general

When defining sustainability, most chefs acknowledged the environmental dimension by using terms such as "healthy earth" (I1), "thinking about the environment" (I8) and "greenhouse gas effect" (I4). Others employed a more literal definition, as in to sustain things for a longer period of time. All of the interviewees professed to have respect (and desire a better quality of life) for future generations, but beyond this, even general knowledge of the outline of debates about sustainability was vague. This was reflected in the fact that when asked about the implications of sustainability for their business, while all chefs mentioned that guests are more aware of sustainability issues, further probing suggested that respondents labelled three distinct – and not in themselves necessarily related to sustainability issues – types of consumer disposition as evidence of this, namely (a) a manifested desire to eat healthily; (b) an interest in the origin of foodstuffs (consistent with the findings of Revell & Blackburn, 2007); and (c) some "knowledgeability" of food production-related practices rendered in the media as desirable. With respect to the last, respondents particularly cited television cookery shows as influential on customer behaviour, and one explicitly commented that the popular media had a negative influence on restaurant customers because it made them anxious over their food choices as a result of offering only partial insights into questions of food production.

Interestingly, discussion revealed that for many of the interviewees, sustainability did not play a role in their personal lives, with very few owning to exercising care in the selection of sustainable products or engaging in activities like domestic recycling of waste. What has been termed an anthropocentric view of sustainability (for example, Reynolds, 2009) was very evident and moreover carried into respondents' public lives. All interviewees suggested that they were willing to consider a more sustainable focus for their restaurants, but only four had actively done so.

Beliefs about the possibilities of change in subjects' businesses towards more sustainable behaviours

All but one of the interviewees said that customer desires were extremely important in determining restaurant operation and menu choices, and that guests were not really demanding more sustainable foods (despite, as noted above, equating certain facets of consumer behaviour with heightened

awareness of sustainability issues). Indeed, there was a perceived unwillingness on the part of consumers to pay more for sustainable dining experiences. One chef who had clearly made the effort, with mixed results, to act differently averred that a move towards sustainable behaviours was not difficult to choose and implement as a business strategy. However, he did acknowledge that there were certain circumstances in which such a strategy could be easier. Like most business people, he said:

I always listen to the guest. It depends also on the location, because here they think more about sustainability than in other neighbourhoods...It was a conscious choice for me to open the restaurant here. If I had done so in another area, I would have cooked differently. However, this is what I prefer (I8).

The majority of interviewees were of the view that if demand did increase, the price of sustainable foods would decrease, making respondents more likely to buy, cook and serve such foods. It was interesting to hear respondents articulate this classic perspective on supply and demand. Not only was it consistent with the general tone of contributions that if only society would change, then so would restaurateurs change their behaviour, but it also further revealed limitations of knowledge concerning sustainability in this field. Interviewees had not considered that “being sustainable” does not have to cost more – for example, dishes containing meat or fish can be reduced in size and replaced by larger portions of vegetables. Indeed, within the culinary field more generally there has been a long-standing, frequently satirised, trend in areas such as nouvelle cuisine and molecular gastronomy towards small(er) portions.

Actions already taken by subjects and/or behavioural intent with respect to future actions, in enacting changes towards sustainability behaviours

Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) define sustainable products as products that contribute – through their attributes and consequences – to one or a combination of people, planet and profit. In line with the above definition, most interviewees demonstrated some theoretical awareness of what might be regarded as potential sustainable food choices (though, as noted earlier, were less “sound” on matters of portion economy), for example the purchase and service of organic and fair trade foods, the use of locally sourced and seasonal foods to support the local economy and reduce the carbon footprint associated with food transportation, responsible cultivation (this covered a range of issues from avoidance of overfishing to animal rearing and welfare including the avoidance of foie gras), and the minimisation and/or recycling of food waste. Indeed, five of the nine respondents had self-audited themselves on iens.nl, the website referred to earlier (see Table 2 for their scores).

Beyond this, however, there was little evidence that this theoretical knowledge was practically and systematically converted to behaviour in terms of business practices, despite the confidence of those who completed an iens.nl self-audit. Further probing suggested that respondents’ theoretical knowledge tended to be gleaned from general and/or comparatively distant sources – for example the internet, news and social media, the Dutch trade association for the hotel and catering industry, and, to a lesser degree, suppliers (considering

Table 2: Self-evaluated scores on iens.nl of sample restaurants

1 = n	Score
11	95% sustainable
12	85% sustainable
13	No score
14	77% sustainable
15	No score
16	No score
17	No score
18	46% sustainable
19	62% sustainable

that, as indicated earlier, media sources were seen to be confusing consumers, there is a small irony here). Knowledge of how to develop this awareness in their business context was less in evidence, and nearly all respondents articulated at least some displacement of personal responsibility for pursuing sustainability strategies. Suppliers were particularly singled out in this regard, typical comments included: “I think my suppliers have to inform me about it” (I3); and “It would be helpful to see options on how to make your menu more sustainable” (I4). Only one respondent saw the application of knowledge as a personal responsibility:

I think that there is quite some information and I believe it is up to the chef to follow through...you will automatically end up at sustainability. It is up to the chef to develop himself in that (I4).

Just as few respondents appeared to have a coherent strategy for developing sustainable behaviours, in current practice there was also room for doubt as to whether what knowledge they did possess was being applied beyond minor adaptations to their menus, adaptations that can be found in many public eating places, for example, the provision of seasonal items of fish, meat, vegetables and fruit, and of vegetarian dishes, care with the sourcing of tuna, the avoidance of such products as foie gras. In one restaurant, guests could opt for smaller portions (I8), and in another vegetables were the main component in meat and fish dishes (I1). One restaurateur claimed, somewhat implausibly by dint of observation, that his whole menu was sustainable (I6). All menus included dishes with beef coming from continents such as Australia or South America, because, as one respondent noted, “quality cannot be found locally for the amount we use” (I2).

Conclusions

The findings of the research reported in this article are limited by the small size of the sample employed, but the results are suggestive and offer qualitative insights that can be explored further in future investigations. A general observation to flow from the research is that interviewees attached a positive, but vague and general, commitment to the idea of culinary sustainability. However, this rarely, if ever, translated into systematic and extensive action to improve the sustainability of their restaurant operations, including changes to menus. Despite this, many interviewees felt that they were to some degree “sustainable” and several claimed the same on the national website iens.nl. Perceptions of consumer wants was a major inhibitor to change. Another inhibitor of change was the

absence of systematic knowledge on how to engage with and implement sustainability strategies, including a fairly limited and limiting reflection on the economics of supply and demand in respondents' businesses. There was some small evidence of chefs displacing the responsibility for personal action, justified on the basis of perceived customer resistance to change, the expense of introducing sustainable cuisines and on the grounds that change was not simply the responsibility of chefs alone. Within this broad envelope, however, one theme – that of the wider supply chain in aiding sustainable development – was appreciated by respondents who identified the role of their suppliers as being of present and future importance in any likely decisions to engage with sustainability issues.

In the main, the study reported here confirms many of the tropes identified in related literature, not least a growing, if abstract, awareness of the dimensions to sustainability. Further research in this and perhaps other industries could usefully examine the attachment of operators to their existing business models and explore further whether "resistance" to changing these models is largely owing to a lack of knowledge and awareness of the business and wider benefits of sustainable behaviours, or to wider ideologies regarding business and enterprise. While it is undoubtedly reassuring that sustainability appears to be on the agenda of the restaurant sector, considerably more understanding of this business sector is required if further progress is to be made.

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