



Written by
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Brace yourself for more expensive veg



The late Sir Fredy Fisher, the editor of the *FT* from 1973 to 1980, would, I believe, have been spinning in his grave if he had seen the second editorial in last Saturday's paper, entitled 'Savouring Britain's globalised gastronomics'.

I can only assume this from our one and only social encounter. After Jancis had been introduced to him at the *FT*'s then annual Christmas party in the early 1990s, it was my turn. When he heard that I was the paper's new restaurant correspondent, he looked away and muttered *sotto voce* but audibly, 'Have we come to this?'

Food and drink are now commonplace throughout the pink'un, with a special emphasis on the full-page Lunch with the *FT* feature every Saturday, an idea that came out of my Lunch for a Fiver promotion back in January 1993.

Last Saturday's editorial focused on a particularly misjudged article in the *New York Times* (whose CEO is the British-born Mark Thompson); the appropriation, or not, of the term 'jerk' by chef Jamie Oliver and how this has angered Jamaican purists; and ended with a paean of praise to the influx of the many who have come from overseas and changed, and improved, British ways of eating and cooking. This is a process that, the editorial concluded, could come to a sad ending with Brexit.

And yet surprisingly this editorial, while making mention of rising prices of imported wine and food due to a lower pound, made no mention of a more imminent threat to the prices we all may face on restaurant menus as we make our way back from the holidays. I am referring to the huge spike in price in all types of British produce that chefs and restaurateurs working throughout the UK face as a result of the drastic climatic changes the UK has experienced over the past nine months.

It was time to contact the man I would refer to as my Deep Throat on all such matters. Vernon Mascarenhas is an old acquaintance, a former restaurateur and someone who today works with Nature's Choice, a leading fruit, vegetable and flower wholesaler in New Covent Garden.

In particular, Mascarenhas acts as an interface between about 15 growers and farmers, principally in the southern half of the UK, and many of London's top chefs and restaurateurs, trying to ensure that the flow of produce from the former to the latter is made as smoothly as possible by the transfer of as much inside information as possible. This is information that is crucial to the chefs being able to plan and execute their menus with as much certainty as possible.

'The rot began', Mascarenhas explained, 'in April when the crucial spring sowing takes place. Then there was so much rain that the ground quickly became too soft and the tractors sank into the ground. This was followed by very hot weather that made the ground suddenly very hard. There are two methods of planting seeds, either by drilling the seeds directly into the ground, but the ground was too hard, or by plugging, a process that is used for brassicas mainly which involves starting the process in a plant house and then inserting the plug into the ground. But the continuing sunshine effectively just 'cooked' the plug and did not allow the plants to form. And when the rains finally arrived the ground was so hard that a lot of the water just evaporated!'



Sprouts, an integral part of so many restaurants' forthcoming Christmas menus, have suffered as a consequence and the plants are barely 1 ft (30 cm) tall today (see above) as opposed to the 3 ft Mascarenhas would be expecting to see. This is not the only disappointing crop. Salads have been terrible, with many gem lettuces growing but without forming a heart, their sweet centre; all brassicas; while British peas (a puny example above right) and broad beans have been in very short supply.

Vernon's core business revolves around five principal ingredients: avocados, of which more later; gem lettuce; cherry tomatoes, most of which are imported; cucumbers, which have gone up from £5 to £8 for a box of a dozen over the past week alone; and rocket, most of which comes from Italy. And because the fleet of vans is delivering produce to so many restaurants' back doors early in the morning, they also carry one other essential volume ingredient: boxes of McCain frozen chips.

These potato chips (French fries) are in huge demand from busy restaurants today. One West End restaurant will go through 15 boxes each day over the weekend, but here again Vernon has concerns. On 5 September the price of this essential item, and all others in the McCain range, goes up 20% and McCain's only competitor is the Dutch-based Lamb Weston. He thinks that McCain's may be pushing this price increase through a little early because general coverage of the dreadful growing season may have prepared the public for it. But Vernon believes this price hike is going to have a serious effect on the profitability of those chains that change their menus only every quarter. It is the first time that Vernon's firm has sought to source potatoes from overseas but droughts in Australia and Russia have pushed up potato prices there too.

And yet, while Vernon has to remain calm to ensure that he can guarantee prices for a month in advance at least, he is left wondering whether what the UK has witnessed this spring and summer is not the beginning of a much more long-term, sustained change in UK weather patterns.

'Nobody who has lived through the past nine months in the UK could deny that climate change is happening or not worry about the implications. For the farming industry one has to wonder whether the era of the temperate British growing seasons is finally over and the UK will have to change, with farmers and growers having to adapt to conditions similar to those that currently face their counterparts in northern Scandinavia', Vernon concluded with an uncharacteristic grimace.

But despite gloom over the future cost of avocados, as all of them are imported, Vernon ended on an optimistic note for all those who love smashed avocado on toast for their breakfast.

Most avocados imported into the UK today come from South Africa or South America, generally grown on land suitable for growing grapes. After arriving in Dover they are transported to a ripening house in Kent where they finish their ripening. Thanks to technology, and in particular lasers, the interior of each avocado can be matched to each chef's requirements. Those that will be served smashed on toast need not be of the highest quality, for instance.

So whether it is for imported food and wine, where prices could be affected by the decline in sterling, or for British produce, affected by climate change, it seems impossible to deny that restaurant menu prices can only increase.

But Mascarenhas argues that British menu prices are currently below those in much of the rest of Europe, and he remains optimistic. Optimism is an essential ingredient for anyone involved in the fascinating business of restaurants.