

Out of the Box

This column is meant to combine news, views and ideas on nutrition and public health. I now live and work in Brazil, after knocking around the food and nutrition policy scene in the UK. I hope the column will become interactive.

My mango

The day I began to write this piece, I walked out of my apartment building in Brasília and bought a copy of *Correio Brasiliense*, the city's daily paper. With a soft thud a mango landed in the grass, fallen from the tree whose shade makes the paper kiosk a pleasant place to pass the time of day. I ate it for breakfast. The scent and taste of a mango fresh from the tree is an epiphany.

The mango gave me an idea. Why not a world in which fruit trees grow in all possible public places, as in Brasília? The mangueira below my apartment is not there by chance. Fifty years ago, what is now Brazil's capital city was almost uninhabited cerrado, the Brazilian savannah. The city was designed by three men, Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Burle Marx, who organised the planting of countless thousands of trees, including Brazilian native and established fruit trees bearing pitanga, jamelão, cacao (cocoa), limão (lime) – and manga (mango), and protected native cerrado fruit or nut trees like the jaboticaba and buriti, and the goiaba (guava) and pequi, whose fruits are far richer in vitamin C and A, respectively, than any you will find in supermarkets^{1,2}.

Burle Marx has recreated a common within a modern city. Nobody owns the mango tree. It bears fruit for everybody who walks by.

Imagine parks, streets and public gardens in cities, towns and villages full of fruit-bearing trees such as – in Britain – apples, pears, plums, damsons, cherries, and walnuts, hazelnuts, cobnuts... Why not? Why are the most common British fruits, the conker and the acorn, inedible?

This is deliberate. But it was not always so. One vanished pleasure in English daily life was to pluck an apple from a roadside tree, and savour it on the way to school or work. But now, if you asked the manager of a park why no fruit trees, after saying that it is not, um, policy, he or she might answer that fruit makes a mess – true, but not more than half-devoured discarded burgers and shakes. I think the underlying reason is if we did that, people would be tempted to pick and eat them. Indeed they would! Gosh, what then? Well, we know what happened in Genesis. Or do we?³

In Britain, fruit trees and bushes are grown behind the walls and fences of private dwellings. My vision is of fruit grown everywhere and, allowing for the price of seeds and the time caring for saplings, not for profit, not for sale,

but for free. And seeds also should be a common good, and that is another story.

The front-page news in *Correio Brasiliense* that day was of the new Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, universally known here as 'Lula' (Portuguese for 'squid'), addressing the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and then flying to address the World Economic Forum, saying 'I am going to Davos to show that another world is possible'⁴. Lula believes in the social as well as the economic dimension of politics. He should have taken a mango with him.

Sorry, it's not on

Those of you who have eaten in cheap cafés will have had the experience of locating the one appetising item on the menu, only to be told 'Sorry love, it's off'.

Patti Rundall, the indefatigable policy director of Baby Milk Action, had a comparable experience the very same day as I was eating my mango, at the January meeting of the WHO Executive Board in Geneva. Speaking on behalf of Save the Children, Medact (Physicians Against Nuclear War) and INFACT (the tobacco control civil society organisation), she asked if WHO had thought about the public health including nutritional consequences of the projected second war against Iraq. 'Sorry', she was told, 'it's off the agenda', as indeed it was. 'Could we have it back on again please?' she asked, in common with a number of nation states, and a day or two later so it was. But the chairman of the meeting regretted that civil society organisations could speak only on subjects on which WHO recognised that they had competence⁵.

There was a background. Careful readers of WHO's *The World Health Report 2002*, launched in London last October⁶, may have noticed that in its chapter on 'Major risks to health', the round-up section on 'Other risks' mentions 'collective violence', technospeak for war, which – it says – caused 310 000 deaths in the world in 2000. 'Today it is often characterised by... state collapse or dysfunctional government and a multiplicity of armed actors, often including child soldiers', with increases in malnutrition, infection and also chronic diseases as consequences. 'Risk factors... include the generalised availability of small arms... and abuse of human rights'. Funny use of the term 'risk factor', but let it pass.

Yes well... but in the year after 11 September, wasn't this overlooking something? Like the generalised use of what might be described as 'big arms', if not 'weapons of mass destruction', by adult armed actors – in Iraq in 1991, then in former Yugoslavia, and then in Afghanistan? Or didn't this count as 'collective violence'?

A few days after the Executive Board meeting, *The Guardian* ran a story apparently leaked by frustrated

UN officials to the UK-based Campaign Against Sanctions in Iraq, of a secret inter-agency UN report – on the effect of a war on Iraqi public health, including nutritional status^{7,8}. WHO reckons that 400 000 Iraqi civilians would suffer dysentery, cholera and other diseases after the anticipated bombing had disrupted food supplies as well as destroyed electricity, water and sewage systems, and UNICEF estimates that over 3 million civilians, almost all infants, young children and pregnant and lactating women, would need emergency feeding. I write ‘would’, but at the time of reading it seems likely that the word is ‘will’.

Capital GAIN

One way in which US industrial tycoons fight trustbusters is by means of charitable charm offensives, with the added attraction of tax breaks. Thus Bill Gates, the John D. Rockefeller of our times, has the philanthropic ambition to vaccinate the world, and now also to nourish the world, by means of a US\$50 million donation to the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)⁹. This is a ‘public–private partnership’ advocated now that nation states – such as the USA – prefer to avoid paying their full dues for UN agencies and other public goods¹⁰. Launched by Mr Gates at a special session of the UN General Assembly, GAIN joins governments with food and drug manufacturers, to market foods and drinks fortified with vitamins and minerals to impoverished urban populations.

There is a deal. The companies will expect governments to tell their regulatory bodies not to be fusspots and to let these new products into their markets without hindrance⁹.

As told to the *Wall Street Journal*, Roger Deromedi, chief of Kraft Foods International, owned by Philip Morris, believes partnership in GAIN will ‘complement our own focus on health and wellness as a key growth platform’. Already Kraft products Cheez Whiz and Singles cheese slices are fortified with calcium, and Kool-Aid and Tang with vitamins A and C⁹. Products for sale in any supermarkets left standing in Afghanistan and Iraq may need some extra pep. Special-grade galvanised Uncle Sam Uranio Tips, with added zinc?

The folks from GAIN will be at the 30th meeting of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) in Chennai, due to take place just after this column is written¹¹. They may well explain that foods fortified with iron and vitamin A are the way to prevent epidemic deficiency diseases¹². I will also be at Chennai, advertising the local mangoes and other fruits that grow abundantly in un-devastated tropical countries. Watch this space.

Who sings of food?

In his poem ‘The Table’, Carlos Drummond de Andrade celebrates *comida mineira*, the everyday cuisine of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, including the thick, dark bean dish *tutu*, and *farofa*, toasted manioc flour sprinkled

over meals¹³. And an anthem of Chico Buarque, one of the four Brazilian popular male composers and singers in the Bob Dylan league, is to *feijoada*, a stew of beans and meat enjoyed at weekends and on feast-days, the Brazilian *cassoulet*.

In adapting recipes for these traditional dishes¹⁴, use about one-eighth of the amount of salt specified: one of the major problems with Brazilian food is its Portuguese inheritance of foods preserved with salt to survive vast ocean and inland journeys, and thus the now very high rates of hypertension, stroke and stomach cancer¹⁵.

Food and its place in life are constant themes for Latin writers and singers. But I cannot think of any modern poems or songs written in English about food and how it nourishes us. The first reader of *Public Health Nutrition* who cites two such major poems and two major songs, written since 1950, will earn immortality in a later ‘Out of the Box’ column.

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