

# Gordon Ramsay's worst recipes

Celebrity chefs should think more carefully before demanding that their preferences are imposed upon others, writes **Louise Staley**.

## The problem with Gordon Ramsay isn't his swearing. It's his hypocrisy.

Gordon Ramsay, Britain's most notorious celebrity chef has demanded 'stringent laws—licensing laws—to make sure produce is only used in season.' In a BBC interview in early May, Ramsay argued that 'fruit and veg should be seasonal. Chefs should be fined if they don't have ingredients in season on their menu.' Ramsay then became yet another prominent chef happy to hypocritically import truffles for their own restaurant yet simultaneously seek to ban the importation of cheap food. Apparently comfortable with this hypocrisy, Ramsay has taken his concerns to the UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

UK chefs are not alone in plating politics; the launch of the most recent Greenpeace campaign co-opts Australian chefs against genetically modified food. The list of movements which make statements about the relative moral worth of types of food is long: 'fair trade', organic, food miles, anti-GM and slow food are merely the best known of a growing list. What they all share is a demonization of modern farming practices.

Of all the modern food movements, slow food is arguably the most seductive. It is also the least well understood. The slow food movement stands in opposition to fast food, to the values of efficiency, mass production, uniformity and speed embedded in fast food corporations such as McDonalds and Starbucks. Indeed, the term 'slow food' was coined in 1989 during protests in Italy against McDonalds opening in Rome. Slow food's slogan is 'good, clean and fair', a global food movement based on what it calls 'eco-gastronomy'; food should taste good, be produced in an environmentally friendly way and food producers should be fairly compensated for their work. The slow food movement emphasises conviviality, the shared table, regional cooking and produce, diversity and taste. Slow food is not, as some assume, simply about cooking food slowly.

In Australia the slow food movement has tapped into that affluent group of consumers always looking for 'authentic' experiences. They are more likely to read *Gourmet Traveller* than *Donna Hay*; *Wallpaper!* than *Home Beautiful*. These are the same people who shun the package holiday, deride McMansions (and their occupants) and reject the four-wheel drive vehicles that often accompany those houses.

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In short, the typical slow food consumer is a marketer's dream: time-poor, snobbish, a bit green, and very affluent. Increasingly, the unending need to choose the more environmentally sensitive option wracks them with guilt: Is overseas travel unacceptable? What about food miles or ethanol? The personal decisions demanded by the environmental movement are tiring. At the same time, these consumers are time poor because they work hard. Australians work some of the longest hours in the world. For many dual-income professional households time is the great dream missing from their lives. Slow food offers the idea that eating in a certain way, eating certain types of food can slow us down, can create a space outside the rat race. No wonder slow food events are so popular. Similarly, the elevation of food production from work undertaken by poorly educated peasants to a suitable—even enviable—occupation for a tertiary educated 'tree-change' generation makes the slow food movement attractive to the small business proprietors creating gourmet food start-ups all over the developed world.

But slow food is not just an epicurean delight—it is a political and ideological movement that rejects modernity and preaches radical environmentalism. The movement is adamant it is much more than a food and wine club. The origins of slow food, in Italy, are political and the movement has never shied away from its goal of claiming good food for the left. The movement's founder, Carlo Petrini summarises slow food as 'a place at the table for the left.' However, it is unlikely that most of the 80,000 global members affiliated with the slow food movement are aware they have joined an organisation formed by Italian communists. Nor would they be aware of the long links between Italy's daily communist newspaper, *Il Manifesto* and slow food. The original slow food manifesto was published in a food and wine insert in *Il Manifesto* on November 3 1987. The slow food organisation, supported by memberships and

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its highly profitable publishing arm is now a large and influential organisation with official NGO status at the European Commission.

The divergence in aims of the controllers of slow food and the bulk of its membership—small gourmet food producers and highly affluent consumers—is often missed. Some of the movement's activities, such as supporting artisanal producers of regional specialities against the heavy hand of EU food regulations accord with the ongoing battles many small businesses have against rampant bureaucracy. Similarly, slow food's campaigns to save heirloom varieties of fruit, grains, vegetables and livestock by encouraging their consumption is akin to the economist Tyler Cowen's calls for the globalisation of folk and indigenous art and music as the best way to broaden their markets and thereby ensure their continuation.

However, slow food is also deeply anti-modern and is increasingly aligning itself with the coalition of interests seeking to idealise inefficient and outmoded agricultural practices. The original slow food manifesto explicitly rejected modern agricultural methods and seeks to idealise a medieval lifestyle:

This implies eating slowly and reinstating the *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum* (the Salernitan Regimen of Health, composed at the famous medieval medical school of Salerno in the twelfth or thirteenth century) which is unjustly considered to be obsolete, setting aside time for its highest purpose, namely, pleasure (and not intensive production as the owners of machines and the proponents of things fast would have us believe).

The absurdity of this position is evident. The medieval lifestyle being idealised had a life expectancy of 35, horrific infant and child mortality rates and chronic ill-

ness for most of the population. The medieval diet for most of Europe consisted of vegetables such as turnips or cabbage, bread and ale with an occasional treat of meat on high days. Winter was particularly grim with little variety and insufficient nutrients. Given this reality, it is perhaps unsurprising the *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum* preaches moderation in spring, summer and autumn but recommends eating as much as possible in winter.

There are many who would immediately reject the glorification of *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum* yet still find the idyllic rural imagery of slow seductive. The attraction of doing good while eating well is undeniable. But it is not that simple. Modern agriculture has been the saviour of millions of very poor people and instrumental to the development of the highly urbanised lives many slow food supporters choose to live. The phenomenal increases in Asian and Indian food intake, at a time of rapid population increase are directly attributable to modern agricultural inputs and technology. Even in rich countries, modern agriculture has delivered nutritious, cheap food with the result that the proportion of income spent on food has dropped from 25 per cent to 10 per cent over the past fifty years. Moreover, the intensification of agricultural production has allowed the proportion of Australians working on farms to fall from over 9 per cent in the 1960s to 3.5 per cent today. Despite the glorification of a lost pastoral arcadia, today's urban service economy workers rationally reject the idea of having to personally till their own land for food.

For although many people value the handcrafted product or the organically grown tomato or the undeniable pleasures of eating a carefully prepared 8-hour slow-cooked lamb leg around a table with friends and family, there are equally those people who value the time they gain in not cooking, or shopping or

gardening. Throughout history, women have done most of the cooking, growing vegetables, keeping the chooks and milking the house cow. As each part of that lifestyle has been superseded by the convenience of urban living, the lifestyle options of women have expanded. Yet slow food, with its emphasis on food as pleasure, food as environmental statement and food as social justice—'good, clean, and fair'—makes a moral judgement that those values are superior to other values such as freedom, self-actualisation, and progress.

Nevertheless, slow succeeds because it can take on a number of meanings. For the middle-class 'foodie' it provides a moral overlay for exempting some kinds of food from the growing environmental asceticism. For example eating expensive French Roquefort cheese, white Italian truffles and jamón Ibérico gain the slow food tick. But cheap Peruvian asparagus, GM canola oil and—of course—McDonalds are to be shunned. As Ramsay argued, 'I don't want to see asparagus in the middle of December. I don't want to see strawberries from Kenya in the middle of March. I want to see it home-grown.' It is entirely acceptable not to eat at McDonalds or to choose organic or gourmet food based on one's own tastes and beliefs. It is at best illogical, and at worst hypocritical, to evaluate food with similar characteristics (imported cheese or imported asparagus) with diametrically opposed criteria.

## Local does not mean 'better'

This ideological imposition of moral criteria onto food is increasingly widespread. Many foodies now describe themselves as 'locavores'—a new word coined in addition to the more usual herbivores or carnivores. Locavores consume only locally produced food. In their mind, to demonstrate true food awareness they need to know where food comes from, and preferably grow it themselves or at least buy it from a farmers market, not



a supermarket. Traded food, even ‘fair’-traded food, now carries the opprobrium in some quarters as a second best option. Similarly, there is increasing suspicion of ‘industrialised’ organic food as major growers and distributors increase production to meet the heightened consumer demand for food labelled as organic.

The benefits of the locavore regime are touted as environmental, social and taste; the same benefits slow food claims for its recipe of regional specialities, heirloom varieties and eco-gastronomy. However, the rejection of trade, in addition to mass production, makes living the locavore lifestyle appreciably more difficult than enjoying a slow food one. This ratcheting-up of righteousness is largely a function of the perceived mainstream nature of other political food choices and highlights the rejection of modernity inherent in the continuum. Food has always been tied up in taboos (often religious) now in a secular age of plenty, the taboos are political and becoming ever more extreme.

Why is knowing where food comes from important? If food is about nutrition, taste, smell and pleasure what is the link with where it comes from? Why does knowing (or imagining) food is local, or organic matter? Why do we want to believe in an agrarian fantasy of the small farmer, toiling away in our service? Our standard of living depends for its very existence on not having cottage industries or subsistence farming

yet increasingly the imagery used to sell food and to inform us of what is ‘good’ food are bucolic images of rustic and pastoral scenes. Locavore is but the latest extreme in this powerful feeling that modernity must be rejected.

Certainly, many people are uneasy about many agricultural practices, particularly in relation to animal welfare and, to a growing extent, the increasing calorie denseness of much processed food.

And many more people, who have never heard of slow food or locavore make deliberate choices to restrict their own consumption of processed and fast food in favour of a diet largely based on fresh fruit and vegetables, meat from the butcher and basic staples from the supermarket. Considerable evidence exists to show that lower calorie diets high in fresh vegetables are better for your health.

But too often, the multiple food messages are mixed. As Richard Wilk of Indiana University has noted ‘consumers want food produced by hand which also meets industrial standards of quality, has no additives, and comes from happy animals and farmers.’

What is wrong with the locavore movement (or the ‘food miles’ movement as it is also often known) evades analysis even as it causes unease. Every day consumers are bombarded with bad food stories—*e.coli* poisoning, agricultural herbicides in the water supply, obesity, trans-fats and type II diabetes—and it is easy to blame a

monolithic industrialised agricultural and fast food industry. There is great comfort in retreating to the nostalgia of happy cows eating lush grass on a small family farm. The story continues that if only we could all personally know the farmer who grows the food we eat, then none of these terrible practices would occur. Moreover, ecological degradation caused by transporting food will be eliminated if we all eat locally produced food. But as Tim Wilson explained in the July 2007 edition of the *IPA Review*, adopting a food miles approach to agriculture will increase CO<sub>2</sub> production, not decrease it.

It is unromantic, yet nevertheless true, to note agricultural specialisation, increased farm size and modern farming methods have succeeded precisely because they are more efficient and use less resources than small holdings and labour intensive production. It is also true that food production is more important to poor nations, that have limited export alternatives.

When Gordon Ramsay called for legislation to mandate local, seasonal produce, Oxfam’s Duncan Green summarised exactly what is wrong with the slow food and locavore movements: ‘I’m sure the million farmers in East Africa who rely on exporting their goods to scrape a living would see Gordon Ramsay’s assertions as a recipe for disaster.’

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