‘GROW YOUR OWN’ is everywhere at the moment. We are exhorted to grow for flavour, for relaxation and for the good of the planet. If we are unable to grow it ourselves then we should at least, so the argument goes, try and source it locally. We must aspire to be locavores, using farmers’ markets, local butchers and to stroll through the woods, foraging for titbits such as wild garlic and (safe) mushrooms. Time and time again modern food commentators insinuate that eating seasonally is the ‘right’ thing to do. Frequently they call upon the example of the past, when we lived, supposedly, in a rose-tinted harmony with our surroundings. We ate, apparently, according to what was in season, sourced everything locally and were largely self-sufficient. After all, just look at all those big country houses, producing everything they needed within the estate.

This represents a deeply simplified view of the past, especially of the last 350 years. Just as we are finally reassessing British cuisine and finding it contains forgotten delights, which deserve to be celebrated, so, too, do we need to promote a better understanding of the ways in which households obtained food in the past. Commentators need to stop generalising about provenance across the broad sweep of history, ignoring class differences and changing technology. Rather, we should challenge the gentrification of ‘foraging’, of seeking out and consuming wild foods, which for many people, for most of history, has not been a choice but a necessity. There are no easy options when it comes to the morality of food sourcing. Britain over the next 20 years faces food shortages, including of meat and chocolate, an ever-widening gap between the diets of the rich and poor and growing concerns around malnutrition – which includes obesity – the debates around which an understanding of the past can actively contribute to.

Seasonal eating
Most people had to eat seasonally in the past, which was all the more reason for those who were able to, to beat nature. In doing so they showed their wealth, taste and the skill of their gardeners. By the 17th century, technological change was gathering pace. The kitchen garden became a focal point, newly separated from the main house, in order to be in the best possible position for productive gardening. Gardeners already used carefully positioned walls and beds and selective breeding to encourage or retard growth, but now improved methods of glass production meant that plants
could be grown in greenhouses. Weeks, if not months, could be added to either end of the season. Further advances came in the 18th century, as coal became cheaper and more widely available. Many large landowners installed giant boilers in their walled gardens, pumping heat into their greenhouses, as well as around their walls, through hollow horizontal chimneys that ran around the garden. By the 19th century almost anything could be produced throughout the year and, with the advent of the railways, the rich could ship produce from their country estates to their townhouses on a weekly basis.

Advances in gardening were not confined to super-rich estate owners. Market gardeners often led the way, fuelled by the profits it was possible to make feeding urban populations without access to their own plots. A craze for new-season peas swept the nation in the late 17th century, predating the Delia Smith effect by centuries. For those without heated walled gardens, manure was a saviour and was readily available. One commentator suggested that a man in possession of four horses could provide himself with enough manure to heat hotbeds to produce two pineapples every month of the year.

As well as advancing the season, careful positioning of crops could retard growth. Today’s dessert apple varieties usually require full sun to ripen. Older varieties, which often pre-date the peculiarly British and British-influenced division into cooking and dessert, grow happily in shade. Contemporary books advise on the best plants for walls facing in every direction to extend the fruiting season in both directions. A comparison of seasonality lists for 2015 and 1815 makes for a stark contrast, both in terms of the range of produce consumed and the months in which it was available.

**Self-sufficiency**

Kitchen gardens did supply most fresh produce for country estates. Even middle-class villas had productive spaces. But the idea that big houses were self-sufficient, or that British households were not reliant on imports, is as fallacious as the myth of seasonality. There were fruits, such as lemons, which could be produced with work but were more often imported. Some of the markers of Britishness, such as tea, cake and curry, all as current now as in the past, show that imported goods were a daily part of life, reliant on spices imported from afar. And finally, sugar. Consumption rose steadily from the start of production in the first British-owned plantations in the 17th century until the 1950s. Despite the current hysteria over sugar, per capita consumption has been declining since then, though we now consume it in different ways and as part of a much less active lifestyle.

Eating was not seasonal, nor were all ingredients locally sourced and methods were not always sustainable

Even where foodstuffs, such as meat, could be sourced locally, it was not always a simple process. For big estates, accounts indicate that home farms supplied selected products – eggs, boiling fowl, sometimes pigs and dairy products – but meat was also bought from a local butcher. It might well have been produced on the estate, but farms were under no obligation to supply their produce to their landlord (game, of course, was a different matter). Additionally, relying on local suppliers would have left households then, as now, unable to eat brie or parmesan, or procure more specialist items such as asses’ milk. Even small houses did not rely completely on local shops and letters between friends testify to the informal network of exchange, which existed long before ready access to Internet shopping.

The majority of households, even at a working-class level, were linked into networks far beyond the local community. Servants were recruited from across the country and migration within Britain was a significant factor in eroding regional culinary traditions. Rural homes within the orbit of a country estate benefited from the tradition of edible almsgiving, introducing them to tastes and ingredients outside the usually documented norm. In the 18th century, tea drinking spread from the rich to the working classes directly, as servants re-used tea leaves from upstairs and cooks then sold them on to back-door buyers to be ‘upcycled’ into cheap and adulterated tea for the urban poor. By the 19th century, tea with sugar had become a ubiquitous part of the British diet.

**Human desire**

From published books and household accounts it is clear that a great variety of food was eaten in the past and that it was sourced from just as wide a variety of sources as today. Technological advances allowed commercial and private gardeners to retard and advance the seasons as they wished, harnessing nature to human desire: as long as money, horse manure and cheap fossil fuels were plentiful. Eating was not seasonal, nor were all ingredients locally sourced and methods were not always sustainable, as a number of species of bird were eaten to the edge of extinction and beyond. Procuring food in the past was as complex and varied as food itself and facile arguments, intended to back up current concerns to draw in history without fully understanding it, should be avoided. Modern food is complicated, modern issues are complex and realising that they were just as nuanced in the past can surely only be beneficial as we look for solutions for the future.

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