

UNICORN

manchester's co-operative grocery

Foodzine, summer 2008

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Welcome to the summer that brings us our best range yet of UK produce, here's hoping the weather favours the farmers and the crops prosper.

We want to thank all of you who voted for us as the Best Independent Shop in the Observer Food Awards. It was great to win, we are very proud of our shop; simply a good honest grocery providing wholesome foods at a decent price. We would like to say well done to all the other independents working hard to provide their communities with the good stuff.

It's been a time of reflection in the wonderful world of groceries. Concerns over food security, the cost of living and energy use have been in the mainstream media on a daily basis. It seems we have spent decades putting the oil in our food - transporting it around the world, using energy intensive farming systems and developing highly

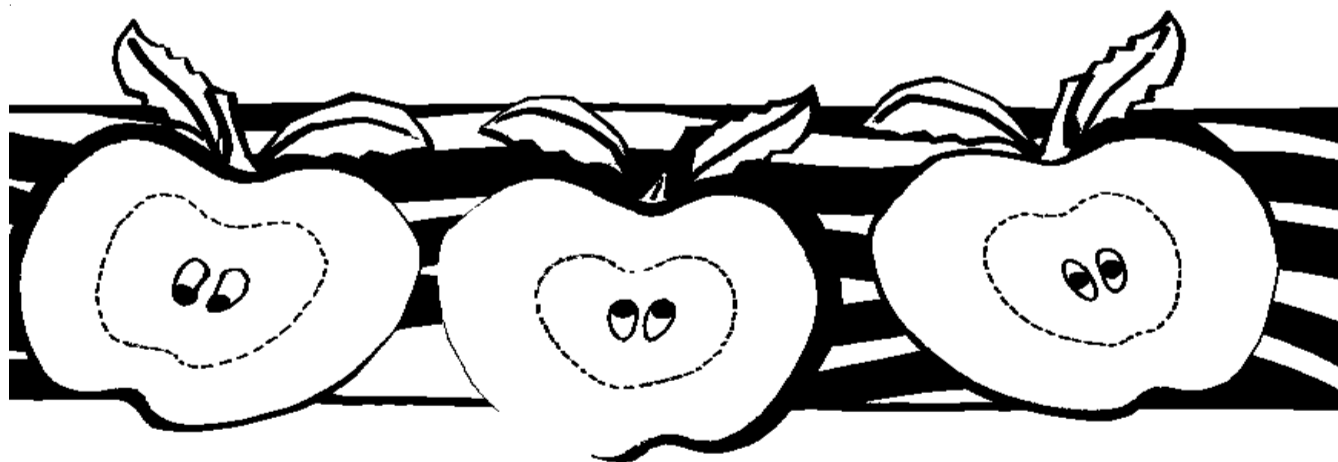


processed packages of stuff to eat. Well, now it's time to get the oil out of our food; to count our carbon calories.

And as the economy slows and people's budgets get tighter, it's time to get the best out of our food. Quality not quantity. It is quite possible to get a trolley full of packaged food, devoid of any meaningful nutritional content for what seems like a good price but what are you paying for? Mainly water and cardboard and industry by products. Far more energy will have gone into that shopping trolley than your body will ever get out of it.

Grow some veg, cook with good basic foodstuffs, eat with the seasons and you're always going to get the freshest, cheapest food around and your carbon calories will be reduced. Make a big pan of stew - cook one night get another night's tea for free - might not be as catchy as a bogof but it will be a whole lot tastier.

Veg outlook



Demand for organic produce remains strong - and rightly so. As pressure on land resources drives food prices slowly upwards, it makes us all look much more closely at our till receipts and food expenditure. The thing to remember is 'nutrition per pound'.

Growing conditions so far this year have been pretty good, so we're hoping for a strong UK harvest to help our growers make up for the disastrous 'summer of flood' last year. It's worth saying that UK horticulture is still barely profitable, such are the continuing price pressures and other constraints on veg-growing businesses (see our 'Voice from the Field'). We believe the longer-term outlook is good for UK farmers, but in the meantime they still need as much consumer support as possible...

...which hopefully won't be too hard as these are the exciting months of the year when it comes to home-grown produce, with so many

crops coming into season. Look out for sweetcorn (from July), apples (from mid-August), squashes (from August), as well as new season roots, salads, broccoli and fruity treats like currants, berries, plums etc.

From abroad there's plenty to look forward to, including 'heritage' tomatoes, rainbow peppers, and figs.

All seasonal and good value, with an emphasis on great tastes and high nutrients. For the 'nutrient per £pound' value, you just can't beat raw organic ingredients...

We continue to buy direct from UK farms - still very unique for any supermarket or greengrocer - as we feel it's the best way to increase freshness and value, ensure a fair return to farmers, and also lower energy use.

Unicorn Grocery, 89 Albany Road, Chorlton, Manchester, M21 0BN.
www.unicorn-grocery.co.uk

Voice From the Field

This time last year, during poor summer harvests, some farming commentators were exclaiming ‘the end of the era of cheap food’, and expected an immediate upturn in the farming industry.

Well, yes, food prices have gradually gone up but the era of supermarket power is nowhere near over and, for the time being at least, farmers continue to be price-takers rather than price-setters.

Farmgate prices (as they’re known) haven’t moved a great deal, and are way out of sync with spiralling production costs – which means that, despite all the attention on rising food prices,



many farmers are actually finding it tougher than ever.

Struggling through all this (seemingly furthest away from media attention) is the horticultural industry. Growing fruit and vegetables continues

to be a marginal activity, held together by migrant labour on minimum wage.

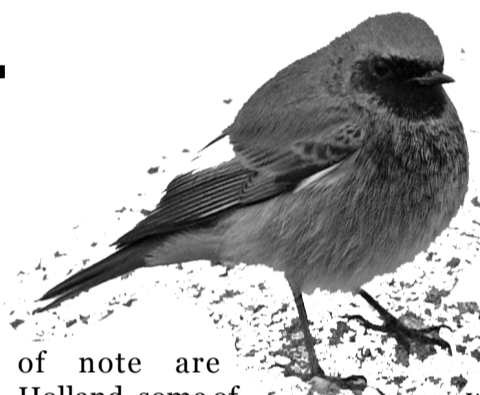
However, looking further ahead there’s some hope for growers – and organic growers in particular. A weakening pound and rising fuel costs will favour more local UK production. Rising land prices afford a certain confidence in investment (for those who own land).

Perhaps most important of all is the dependence of conventional agriculture on oil. As oil becomes scarcer, we expect to see conventional and organic prices converge. Add to this forthcoming EU legislation clamping down on nitrate and pesticide use, and it seems in the future the advantage will be with those growers who know how to look after their soils; who understand rotations and natural fertility building; who work with nature, rather than against it.

Seed Suppliers and Organic Seed

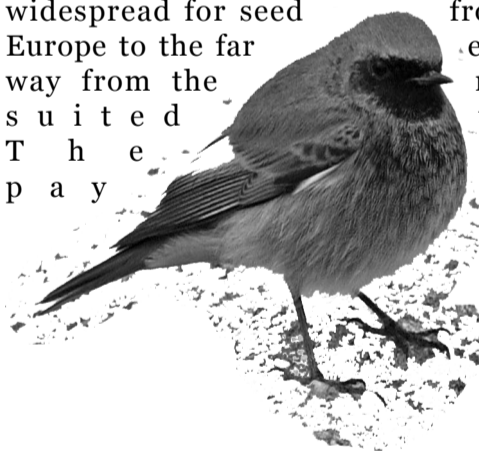
Ideally Unicorn would be selling exclusively organically certified seed, produced in traceable and sustainable systems. However the situation for seed production is less than ideal with companies often based primarily on economies of scale, increasingly globally of late. Most seed is bred for large scale commercial agriculture with mechanisation and requirements very different from domestic users e.g. garden peas cropping steadily on an allotment V peas for combining in one pass where all pods must stand up and be ready simultaneously. Much organic seed is unfortunately a version of the main seed programme grown on separate ground for certification but not necessarily bred for characteristics organic growers might favour e.g. deeper rooting. Countries of origin can be widespread for seed from eastern Europe to the far east and a long way from the suited varieties. The requirement to pay registration

fees to be able to sell commercial seed has also driven a narrower focus on profitable larger scale production. The majority of seed production is for farmscale use and domestic seed packets are unfortunately sometimes mere leftovers with poor germination percentages. In the UK only Kings in Suffolk appear to have any serious domestic seed production so we were enthusiastic about Seeds of Italy who produce 93% of their own seed and from a country with quite a sophisticated vegetable heritage and some similar climatic zones. While much of their production is not organically certified the quality and vigour of their varieties is impressive. Seed breeding is slow difficult work requiring years of expertise or local knowledge. Other



seed producers of note are Vitalis from Holland, some of whose seed appear through our Tamar range and the Demeter European breeding programme. The Heritage Seed Library and similar schemes are also very important using membership to circumvent registration fees for varieties and therefore enable diversity to flourish cheaply. Maintaining a broad DNA genetic reservoir can be looked on as a global investment. Seed saving for reuse will become important in coming years. Any organic grower will tell you how difficult it is to get a variety that suits local conditions and soil, if you find one that reliably works it is always a breakthrough. E.g. Barba Dei Frati Lettuce in Manchester, particularly in cooler months or Kamalia Batavian Lettuce. This type of knowledge is fortunately returning as veg growing increases.

Try also <http://www.cosi.org.uk/> for seed references and trial results. Good growing!



“The Unicorn Land Project”

As we have mentioned before, we are planning to buy some local land and help start a new organic growing business, in order to supply us with more local veg. So far we have been raising funds and scouring the local area for good horticultural land.

Big thanks to those who have invested loanstock. Just under £150,000 has been raised, mainly from previous loanstock holders who helped us buy the shop building five years ago. Your support is really appreciated.

We are now looking for land with the confidence of having sufficient funds. The best local horticultural land is to the west of Manchester –



around Ormskirk and, closer in, the moss lands around Irlam, Barton, Astley and Warrington. There appears to be a decent enough supply of land, but demand is very high (especially from city investors, people from overseas, and people wanting horse paddocks).

We’ll keep you posted of developments as they happen. It’s still early days, but amid uncertainty over future fuel costs and land availability, it feels like the right time to be looking. For us, it’s a long-term commitment to providing local organic veg for south Manchester; hopefully for you, there’ll be fresher food, with less food miles, and a local identity.

As part of our 1% & 4% funds (see our Principles of Purpose available in the shop) we support a variety of groups locally and globally. Here we look at one of the projects, Permaculture Institute of El Salvador. www.permacultura.com.sv

Set out in our 'Principles of Purpose' is our commitment to supporting like-minded organisations and projects around the world. This February we were really proud to make our first donation to the Permaculture Institute of El Salvador (IPES), Central America, which co-op member, Debbie visited late last year.

IPES was founded in September of 2002 by small farmers who wanted to stop the progress of destruction to their environment and way of life. Environmental and social problems are reaching a crisis point in El Salvador, and life in rural areas becoming harder and harder, with 49% of the country's rural population living below the poverty line. Much of the land on which small farmers subsist is poisoned and eroded, and deforestation is a major problem country-wide. Every week a child dies in El Salvador due to poisoning from agro-chemicals.

Permaculture is a design system for creating sustainable human environments, systems that are ecologically sound and economically viable, which do not pollute or exploit and are sustainable long-term. Over the past five years, IPES has built a network of subsistence farmers who work with ecological farming methods. In some of El Salvador's most

impoverished communities, IPES teaches community leaders how to protect and rebuild their soil, ensure food security and sovereignty, protect genetic biodiversity, build with local materials, improve drinking water and sanitation facilities, prepare for climate change, and empower women. Their objective is to strengthen organization and knowledge within rural communities so that they can identify their own needs and develop practical ecological solutions with minimal use of external resources.

Debbie explained that, "one of the most impressive things for me was that communities are not 'sold' the permaculture ideology. Instead, communities approach IPES, having seen and heard about their work and the social and environmental benefits it has brought to their friends and neighbours. They don't get hand outs, just training on how to farm in a way that benefits them and their environment. All of the staff members are farmers who participated in the training early on, and their passion for ecologically sound farming is totally inspiring". The Institute has a queue of communities waiting to get involved.

We have helped to fund IPES's new Centre for Permaculture and Sustainable Development, by 'buying' 2 acres of forest to diversify with

native trees, which will be used for ecological observation in their Permaculture Design Courses.



Deli Packaging

Developments

We have been really disappointed with the corn starch tubs we use at the deli counter. Compostable packaging sounded like a no-brainer, of course the best solution! But as with lots of eco issues, the reality is a lot more complicated than that. Not only have the tubs proved a lot less compost-able than was claimed (after nearly 2 years in a domestic compost pile they don't seem to have made much progress), their true sustainability is looking dubious, to say the least.

Bio-plastics of this kind actually use a huge amount of energy to make (much more than regular plastics). Like biofuels, they also take up valuable land that could be used to grow crops for food. Finally, there is a high risk that they will confuse consumers, and end up in the recycling stream, where they can contaminate finished plastic products.

These are things that we should have thought about at the time. Our enthusiasm to 'do the right thing' overtook our enquiring minds! We are researching various types of replacement tubs, but right now, while we still have stocks of the corn starch tubs, we are starting a returns system. We all know that re-use is the best way to go with reducing packaging, so please bring back your clean deli tubs to be refilled. Waste not, want not...

Please note, we can't accept tubs for general reuse, only for refilling there and then.

Recommended

Watch Chewbroccoli, Princess Lettuce and Ham Solo search their peelings to fight Darth Tater who is now 'more chemical than vegetable'. Made by Free Range Studios, it can be viewed on You Tube - Grocery Store Wars, there's also a link from the Unicorn website.

'These are dark times young cuke.....the old ways of the farm are now nearly forgotten.'



Booze news

There have been several new arrivals in the alcohol department over the last couple of months. Firstly the exciting arrival of English Fruit wines from Broughton Pastures, we have tried all 6 and they get a big thumbs up. Christoph, from Hartsfelder, has also produced a Black Beer, which is a popular German malty beer. Closer to home Sam Smiths have expanded their fruit beer range to include Strawberry beer which we think works really well. At Unicorn we continually try to offer all our products at good value even the luxuries, such as alcohol, although recently the price increases seem to be bigger than in the past. This is due to several reasons that, like buses, have all come at the same time. As many of you know the pound is not faring well against the euro at present which means that anything bought in the rest of Europe is more expensive in pounds - as most of our wines are from Europe (to save on food miles) this will cause increases. On top of this, last year's grape harvest suffered with the unpredictable weather so vineyards are increasing their prices to account for lower yields. The cost of glass has also increased, the on going battle over oil is seeing fuel prices rise (and rise and rise) and our ex chancellor and new prime minister has increased duty and plans to increase it more soon. It's enough to make you want a drink (if you need a recommendation just ask).

What's biofuel got to do with food?

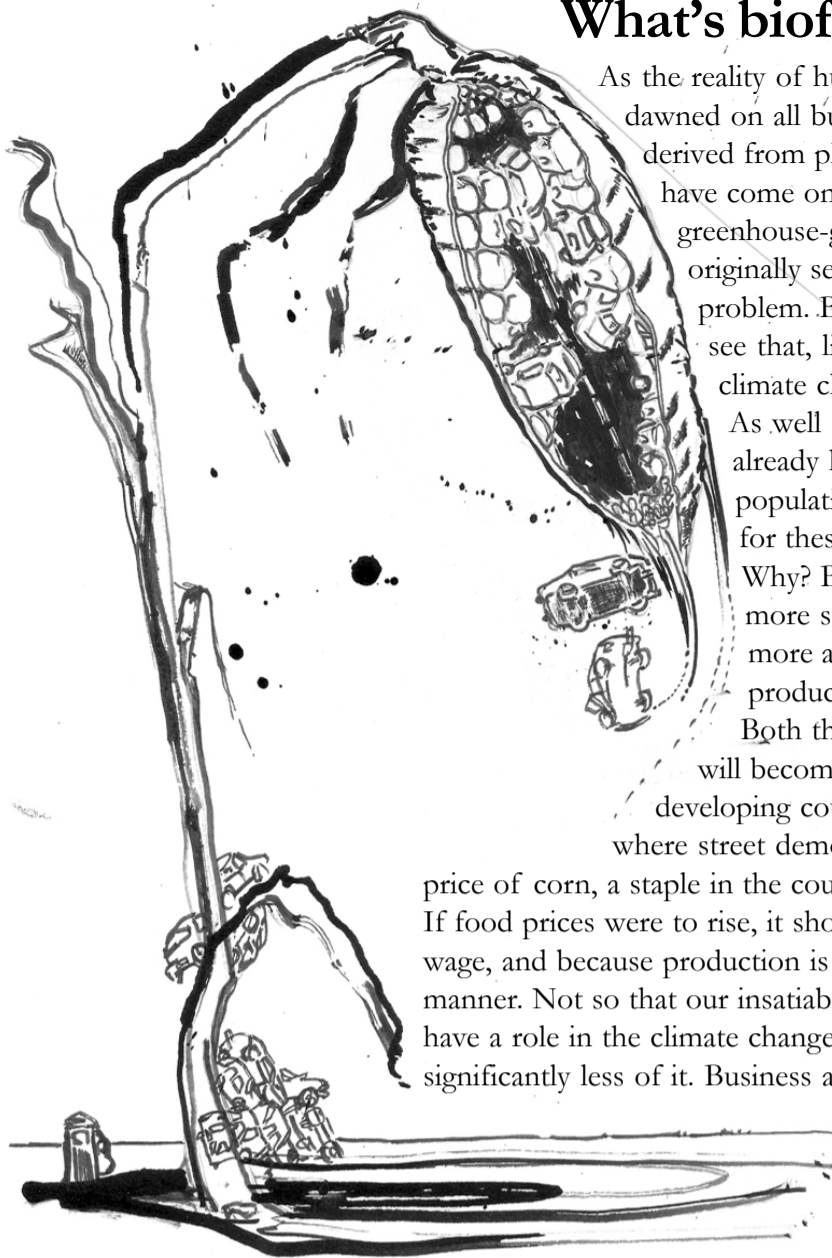
As the reality of human-made climate change has finally dawned on all but the most ostrich-like, biofuels (fuels derived from plant products such as corn, and palm oil) have come onto the agenda in a big way. With far lower greenhouse-gas emissions than petroleum, they were originally seen as a magic fix for the global warming problem. But it hasn't taken much time or digging to see that, like most 'business as usual' remedies to climate change, they are far from it.

As well as the devastating effect their production is already having on environments and local populations in the global South, the massive demand for these crops is also having an effect on food. Why? Because as these crops become more and more sought after, their value increases. And as more and more ground is turned over to their production, land also becomes more expensive.

Both these factors will mean that food, in general, will become much more costly, both here and in developing countries. It's already happening in Mexico, where street demonstrations have called attention to the rising price of corn, a staple in the country's diet.

If food prices were to rise, it should be so that producers can receive a living wage, and because production is being carried out in a more sustainable manner. Not so that our insatiable demand for fuel can be fed. Biofuel may have a role in the climate change struggle, but only if we are prepared to use significantly less of it. Business as usual is no longer an option!

Feed people, not cars.....
For more information see
www.biofuelwatch.org



The cost of \$ood, the meaning of value....

Amidst all the low-price ad campaigns being run by supermarkets, we felt it was worth saying a few words on the subject of food prices. There's no doubt that food costs are rising. As a result, supermarkets want to be seen to have the lowest prices. What's less well publicised, however, is the effect this is having within the food supply chain. Already there are stories of food producers refusing to supply supermarkets because of the unreasonable terms being forced on them.

Mainstream supermarkets exist to make a profit for their shareholders. They want consumers to think they're the cheapest, so they get their custom. They want to pay less to their suppliers. All to make more profit.

Make no mistake, we continue to price competitively: on a like-for-like basis we consider ourselves the cheapest shop around. Affordable food is one of our core ethics - but we also have beliefs that concern the quality of food (e.g. organic or wholefoods, rather than low-nutrient low-taste 'value' items) and the quality of trade (i.e. paying suppliers fairly and promptly, not forcing terms).

If Tesco have 9,000 lines on offer, how many of those offers have been forced on their suppliers? Multipliers often make the supplier pay for the discounts they offer, usually on a non negotiable basis.

We don't have hundreds of buy-one-get-one-free offers and we stick by the offer that runs throughout Unicorn: that you won't get better 'nutrient-per-£pound' value anywhere else. You can be happy you have bought the good stuff without anyone getting stitched up along the way.



KEEP CHORLTON INTERESTING!

What will become of Chorlton Precinct? The owners of the precinct are about to sign an agreement with 'Ask Developments' for a large-scale redevelopment of the precinct, and possibly the surrounding area as well.

Although nothing formal has as yet been submitted, according to those in the know, the developers are certain to include in their plans a large (possibly very large) new supermarket. There are also rumours of several other high street 'chain' stores being approached.

A large new superstore and a bunch of clone town chains could spell big trouble for Chorlton's character and our local traders, and the Keep Chorlton Interesting group, who have been campaigning against the Tesco store on Manchester Road, are



beginning a new campaign attempting to influence the developers towards a different and more sustainable future for the precinct and for Chorlton as a whole.

KCI need your help! We want to show the developers that Chorlton is different, and doesn't need or want the 'One Size Fits All' clone town shopping centre that exists in every other town in the UK. Rather than just saying 'no', we want to present viable, sustainable alternatives that will strengthen Chorlton's position as a unique, diverse and forward-thinking part of the city. If you'd like to get involved, or have ideas you'd like to share, KCI would love to hear from you. Email keepchorltoninteresting@gmail.com

As far as the Tesco application goes, a date in early July has been set for the informal hearing, where a planning inspector will decide our fate! We'll let you know the result as soon as it's happened.