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Young Butchers' Choice Cuts – 4

How do we help people feel good about their food choices?

Well, the sun is shining, her Majesty's Jubilee is only weeks away, and barbecue season is almost upon us. Given the PR devoted to plant-based foods, we could assume that everybody will forgo hot dogs for pea and feta kebabs this summer; yet a quick glance at my local supermarket chilled section reveals that meat accounts for >90% of the offering. So, what do people really want? I've been recently grilling (pun intended) friends who work outside food and farming, asking what they'd like to know about meat production. It's not a random sample (primary school parents and rugby fans feature heavily), but they overwhelmingly want to be reassured that they're making the right choices – for their health, for animal health and welfare, and for the planet.

While none of us has the time or energy for long conversations with every consumer, there are strategies that can help. We need to be science-based, to be able to provide facts and figures that may ease the guilt that 25% of people feel when they eat meat and dairy products, but to do so in an open manner, sharing our values. "*People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care*" is a terrible cliché, yet like all clichés, it's based on truth. Storming into a conversation with all guns blazing is far less effective than explaining how, as a butcher, farmer, meat-eater, parent, friend or fellow sports fan, you care deeply about this topic... and just happen to have a few facts up your sleeve that may put the anti-meat rhetoric into context. We are all more likely to believe information from people that we trust and share values with – that's why it's crucial to understand not just what somebody asks, but why? Are they concerned about climate change? Have they read that red meat will shorten their life? Are they confused as to whether it's better to have an electric car or to become vegetarian? We don't have all the answers, but here's a few to take to your next barbecue:

Does meat have a huge carbon footprint? All foods have a carbon footprint, with fruit and vegetables generally being lower than meat. However, beef produced in the UK has a carbon footprint 64% lower than the global average¹ and everyone within the industry is working hard to identify ways to reduce it even further. Ironically, sugars and syrups have the lowest carbon footprint – great for climate change, but a nutritional disaster!

I read that livestock has a higher carbon footprint than transport – is this true? No. That study was published by the FAO in 2006 and has been thoroughly debunked. Interestingly, a 2019 study² showed that the four biggest things we can all do to cut our individual carbon footprints are to give up our petrol/diesel cars, buy electric vehicles, take one less long-haul flight per year, and use renewable energy.

Is British meat causing Amazon deforestation? No. The real issue here relates to land ownership³. Historically, a claim could be made on Amazonian land could be owned if it was "improved", i.e. trees cut down and the land used for agriculture. The easiest and cheapest form of agriculture in that region? Cattle farming, followed, a couple of years later, by a soya crop. If quinoa was easier to grow, it would be the scapegoat instead! It's worth noting that many UK retailers and processors have implemented "no soya/responsible soya" policies recently.

Will bacon give me cancer? As a double cancer survivor, this one resonates with me. However, a WHO study⁴ reported that people who ate 20 g (~2 slices) of bacon each day had an 18% increased risk of bowel cancer. To put this into context, only 5% of people in the UK are unlucky enough to be diagnosed with bowel cancer – an 18% increase in the risk, raises this number to 6%, or a 94% likelihood of not getting bowel cancer, even if you're eating bacon every day, and without other mitigating factors (fibre consumption, exercise, etc).

Hopefully, these points give some food for thought – or at least topics to throw into the next conversation at a family barbecue. For the online discussion, please give some thought to other questions or topics that you'd like us to address, both on the webinar and in future editions.

¹ Gerber et al. 2013. Tackling climate change through livestock. <https://www.fao.org/3/i3437e/i3437e.pdf>

² Ivanova et al., 2019. *Environmental Research Letters*. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab8589>

³ Fearnside. 2017. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Environmental Science <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389414.013.102>

⁴ WHO. 2015. https://www.iarc.who.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pr240_E.pdf