

The consumer's view of baking in the UK

Speaker: Maeve Robertson

78th Conference - Hinkley Island Hotel, 31st October 1994

It gives me great pleasure to open this the formal part of your conference; and to be allowed to put in some words for the consumer view. I hope also to hear a few words coming back from you in due course.

My qualification for doing this is mainly perhaps a lifetime of lurking in bakers shops: but also considerable experience in the consumer field.

Back in the 60s when 'consumerism' was a new, exciting, and not a dirty word. I moved North with my family to live in Edinburgh and made some immediate discoveries. I found that mysteriously, Scotch beef was more expensive in Scotland; and that the well known Scottish addiction to the products of the bakers shop, was well founded on a deliciously tempting array of cakes and bread that had not previously been available to me.

As no doubt you all know, contented customers keep quiet and disgruntled ones make a noise. I therefore wrote a piece - which they published - to a national paper expressing surprise that only the tail of the beast became dearer as it made its way from Aberdeen to London. The local consumer group sought me out; I became their press officer and that was the start of a long career in associated subjects which, over the years, led to starting the first consumer advice centre in Edinburgh, 12 years as a volunteer in the Citizens Advice Bureau, training at the Consumers Association in consumer law, and regular radio and TV programmes, many of which I wrote.

Subsequently there have been a series of appointments to various quangos. A quango is a 'quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation' - but in my experience, government funded.

I stand before you, still a quango. At present I'm a member of the Consumer Panel of the Ministry of Agriculture. We meet the minister of food four times a year and we bend his (or her) ear on any subject we choose. We learn quite a lot and they learn a bit; and while not perfect for a number of reasons, the MAFF consumer panel is unique. No other ministry has yet been persuaded to have one and MAFF deserves - and gets - credit for starting it, and sticking to it in spite of the bother we cause them.

Very recently, I have agreed to join the Nutritional Task Force Product Promotion Team. Part of our remit is to determine a basis for the promotion of increased consumption of bread and other cereal products. You may have ideas about this; I hope so. Obviously our interests in this are mutual as indeed they must always be.

My general impression is that bakers advertise less than most. You can tell me if I'm right. You seem to aim to get the product right, drive us mad with desire, and then - let it sell itself. Of course I do remember 'Don't say brown, say Hovis' and maybe other ads, but when you consider the efforts of most manufacturers, from chocs to washing powder, not a lot of advertising space seems to be used to extoll the important joys of health-giving bread. I think we should be looking at that.

The Task Force has just had its first meeting. I won't say more about it here but if you would like to ask any questions about it, please do.

I happen to believe passionately that consumers have a right to know what they are eating. Openness and availability of information is of prime importance. Consumer representatives have the recurring worry that MAFF's obligation to the food industry may inhibit the free publication of information that might lead consumers away from processed foods when there are economical and healthier alternatives.

It's probably only fair to say (although you already know it) that while bread is now officially a real goodie, cakes and confectionery do not share the same glow of universal approval. Ideally, we should be able to work together towards the aim of consumers getting the healthiest possible product and the bakery trade maintaining both its market share and the lofty position it has traditionally occupied.

We know what is thought of as the oldest profession: but surely baking is as old and more honourable.

If we could go back to the Middle Ages for a moment, when secular justice was slowly taking over from the jurisdiction of the Church. The Church was antitrade and regarded usury as a sin but approved bakers perhaps because of the religious associations of daily bread. Gradually there emerged a system of regulation of the basic staples of existence; and the assizes of bread and ale were early examples of a legal approach to the sale of goods.

It's of interest, I think, that the fact that business was conducted in public mostly then in open markets, with everyone around - was considered a safeguard in itself.

In 1372, for example, the sale of goods 'in privy places and in secret' was forbidden in Beverley in Yorkshire (an early form of consumer protection). Also no sales by candlelight were allowed or after the bell had been rung for sunset. There were inspectors of wares in the markets and controls of weights and measures even then. Punishments for breaking the law were colourful. The seller who put a bushel of good grain at the mouth of a sack, when the rest was not so good, was put in the pillory. A dishonest trader might be paraded through the streets or put in the stocks with his offending goods burnt at - or possibly with - his feet.

But note that in legal theory at that time, it was not the individual buyer who was seen as injured, or had redress - it was the community as a whole and such conduct was regarded as 'against the honour and repute of the craft'. Your Society's creed reflects that sentiment still.

It was not until 1893 that the Sale of Goods Act finally codified in civil law the rights of individuals when making a purchase.

Then in the 1970s, the consumer revolution doubled the statute book - and life continues to get more complicated. Today, you have at your disposal, ingredients and technology unimagined by most of us even in the 70s.

Long gone are the outbreaks - in Europe, not I think in Britain - of St Anthony's Fire, when rye, infected with a mould, contaminated bread with terrible results. We have overcome most infections, reduced infant mortality and we do live longer.

What we suffer from these days is infinitely more subtle and harder to pin down. We seem to be very lucky. We have a surfeit of good things: or things that certainly were good when they were an occasional treat and not a daily necessity. Such things as biscuits, pies and cakes I mention not because they are the only problem - or even the main one but because they do come within your orbit.

We are faced with a population that is increasingly overweight, and who all too often die earlier than they should. It has been said that we have an epidemic of preventable disease. That sounds as though the problem is out there: it isn't, it is right here. We are all part of that population with prospects more ominous than for almost any other country in the Western world.

UK figures for heart attack and stroke are horrifying. Scotland is a world leader. Of course I know that there are hereditary and other factors involved, but all the experts agree that diet plays an important role in health. And you play at least a part in that. One of the dietary targets in Health of the Nation is a reduction in the percentage of energy derived from fat. Trans-fats have hit the headlines. Hydrogenated vegetable oil, once considered a good alternative to animal fat, may carry an increased risk of heart disease.

In the average British diet, the main sources of trans-fats are margarine, spreads and meat pies and - wait for it biscuits, cakes, buns and pastries. (Could bakers change over to a healthier fat?) Then there is the invisible, uncharted cocktail of chemicals we all consume and I wouldn't blame bakers for that.

The peanut tragedies have recently come to the fore and may be an example of a particularly sensitive body's natural defences being undermined by a constant barrage of unacceptable chemicals. The complications mount up. Novel foods are reported almost daily: they may be a boon and a blessing to men but for most people, they are simply incomprehensible and add to confusion.

One minute we read that genetically engineered corn is going to be the best thing since sliced bread: then there is word that something called hemicellulase - from another sort of mould - may be the next great breakthrough. We are not against progress but is it any wonder that many consumers hanker after a return to just a bit of simplicity?

I hear that Prince Charles has done it. Yes, in his spare time he bakes biscuits. I'm convinced he does it all himself with flour up to his elbows. Organic flour too. (Since we have so many surpluses, it would make sense for the government to subsidise established organic growers and save us from some of those chemicals. Especially as we are supposed to eat more cereals and vegetables. So far, they don't do much about that.)

Back to Charlie. The label on the royal biccies is a winner. Organic oatmeal and wheat; sunflower oil, raw cane sugar, a pinch of salt and bicarb as a raising agent. A label-conscious consumer's dream ticket!

I joke about Charlie and his biscuits, but I am very serious when I tell you that consumers are increasingly looking for something they can understand and trust. And you have the ability to give it to them.

Perhaps you could try not to make it too expensive but don't make cost the reason for not trying. If everything else is right, price will not be the main consideration for many consumers although low income consumers should not be forgotten. Ideally - this product will be at least as healthy as the Duchy of Cornwall jobs: but it will look downright wicked, and therefore be good news in school lunch boxes.

Many people now feel that they know what is good for them but they don't think that they can get it from producers - and by producers, I don't mean bakers. A current survey here in Leicester, shows that 80% of men and 85% of women are confident about what is healthy eating. Around 97% think they should eat less fat and 98% less fried food. So the fat message has got through in Leicester. Not the starch one though: over half were confused about whether or not they should eat more bread, potatoes and rice. (Something for the task force to think about.)

Only a third of the people questioned believe they can rely on farmers to produce safe food. Even fewer, 20%, say they can rely on food companies; and a tiny 14% are prepared to trust government to make sure that food is safe. (Work to be done at MAFF!)

With all this distrust about, you can see the point - if you will pardon the phrase - of getting back to basics. No one sector can pull things round single handed. Not MAFF, not medicine, not you and certainly not me. As bakers you could make healthy alternatives a priority and many consumers would be grateful (not all of course). But I can think of no convincing argument to say you have any duty to do this.

You may very reasonably argue that you only make what people want to buy and after all, it doesn't immediately harm them and you don't flout the law. It's one way to go. And when I tried to conjure up some example that might persuade you not to follow this route too far, I thought again of the oldest profession. It is hard to think of you as ladies of the night. But you do keep some funny hours. And you do peddle temptation... I won't go on, it's not fair.

But if your only interest turned out to be providing what customers lust after and will pay for, you might have had to fudge the idea - and I quote your creed that you 'represent one of the oldest and most honourable of crafts and are dedicated to the highest possible standards of service and quality'. Be of good cheer! The latest National Food Survey shows that bread consumption is fairly steady. Cakes and biscuit consumption is unchanged or rising. You are certainly holding your ground - and that's without the help of any task force. And you're in the happy position of knowing that each and every one of the consumer interests wants everyone to eat half as much bread again.

Consumers themselves have very little individual baker loyalty. Their devotion to baked goods could never be doubted; but a lifetime with the same baker? No. We are notoriously reluctant to change our butcher but are hopelessly promiscuous when it comes to bakers.

The best I can think of to explain this is that, unlike our attitude to the farmerlinked butcher (better the devil you know) we still universally trust bakers. We think of them as wholesome and so we happily follow the alluring smell of freshly baked goodies - wherever it might lead. We know, you see, that baking is an ancient and honourable calling.

I can only end by saying that consumers today will be well served if bakers continue to look - as in days of yore to the honour of the guild and the honest consideration for the community

they serve. Your Society's creed enshrines these aims; and, as consumers, we couldn't ask fairer than that you continue to hold them.

I'm sorry to have strayed so far from bakers shops but the next speaker will take us back to those tempting places and I look forward to that.