

Food and Disruption: Protecting the Next Generation of Irish Craft Butchers

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‘A Butcher is for life not just for Christmas’ is displayed on the Associated Craft Butchers of Ireland webpage (ACBI, 2019). Threats to the future of the Irish Craft Butcher have emerged through contemporary disruptors such as cultured meat, veganism, climate change, discounters and overall supply chain volatility. All of these contribute to a contemporary food movement where consumers’ relationship with food is changing and where consumer sovereignty alternates between food choice and food ethics. Chiles (2016, p.1040) argued that disruption occurs when traditional meat eaters develop ‘negative emotional reactions’ in relation to food ethics. This paper aims to investigate what solutions are required to safeguard the role of the craft butcher, to maintain its relevance, position and its own sustainability, thus protecting its role for future generations.

This paper argues that the butcher as part of Ireland’s agricultural supply chain can assure consumers of provenance and plays a pivotal role in shaping rural communities in a positive sense (Hennessy, et al., 2018). We investigate how the craft butcher can be important in leveraging agri-tourism where visitors witness first-hand the craft of butchery and its place in the community as part of Irish cultural identity.

Finally, this paper presents ideas to protect the future of the craft butcher and to learn from other industries, which have been faced with disruption but used this as a competitive advantage.

Contemporary disruption

The headlines across social media platforms, broadsheets and on TV screens could not be clearer on the issue of the links between beef farming and climate change. The fact that they are ‘headlines’ illustrates that they are promulgating a certain point of view, but the average observer does not necessarily take cognisance of that. Headlines such as ‘Apocalypse Cow’ (Channel 4, 2020) ‘Is red meat bad for you? Climate change sure is’ (Teirstein, 2019) and ‘Avoiding meat and dairy is ‘single biggest way’ to reduce your impact on Earth’ (Carrington, 2018) potentially have a disruptive effect on people’s dietary habits. Headlines become disruptive when they trigger a ‘negative affective reaction’ (Chiles, 2016, p.1023). Hazardous disruption is where consumers’ reaction to headlines is one of fear, notably when the content relates to health in terms of diet and food safety (Chiles, 2016).

Burger King recently announced that its new plant-based burger was not suitable for vegetarians or vegans, as it was cooked on the same char grill as its regular products

(Jones, 2020). The company is directly targeting flexitarians (1) in an attempt to reduce their overall meat consumption. Similarly, in June of 2018 Sainsbury’s announced that its plant based ‘Naturli’ Foods’ would be sold alongside its real meat products (Smithers, 2018).

Various plant-based products are branded as meatless meat. Instead of reducing meat intake and advising consumers to increase their consumption of vegetarian meals, companies like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are producing ‘meatless meat’, which looks, tastes and smells like real meat (Piper, 2019). It is difficult to determine which is the greater disruptor: the ‘plant-based substitute’ or media messages building brand awareness of these products.

The growth of supermarkets striving for economies of scale, increased volumes and low-cost pricing models have resulted in major retailers dominating the market and stealing market share from traditional shops such as bakeries, butchers and vegetable stores. These companies also have the resources and technologies to be present on online platforms winning further on market share. These threats target the core product of the craft butcher which is meat. If people reduce their consumption of meat, this will directly relate to the fall of the craft butcher.

Recognising the importance of craft butchery for the consumer

Craft Butchery involves innovation and craft. Oejo (2014) conducted research on elite butcher shops in New York city. He examined how butchers use ‘skilled performances’ to communicate the taste and quality of their produce. He explored how craft butchers can ‘teach’ ‘good’ taste in meat to customers. Fieldstone (2015) wrote a piece on a butcher/charcuterie shop in Provence, stating: ‘A personal butcher is not a mere *commerçant*, he’s one’s confidant, advisor, culinary guru and friend. Tell him one’s in-laws are coming for dinner and he knows the whole story: they’re Parisian and fussy, they don’t approve of a working daughter-in-law who’s Provençale and a quarter Corsican to boot. Consequently, the roast must be the best there is, exquisitely tied, larded and prepared’. This reminded me of a conversation with craft butcher James Nolan, who reflected upon the fact that his colleague had sold a rib roast to a customer even though he felt a striploin was more in keeping with that customer’s regular preferences. This struck a chord with me because the butcher was truly attempting to personalise the cut for the customer. Do we as consumers reflect on this added value? The butcher takes

the time to cut the meat in accordance to what the consumer desires, fulfilling the ‘inseparability’ characteristic of services, often absent from the larger supermarket experience where the majority of cuts are commonly available pre-packaged.

The role of the craft butcher in agri-tourism

In 2018, Galway was awarded the designation of ‘The European Region of Gastronomy’, which elevated Galway as a top food destination. Two of the producers which contributed in enabling Galway to reach this designation were McGeough’s Air Dried Lamb of Connemara and Castlemine Farm. On the Galway Gastronomy website (Galway Gastronomy, 2018), it is cited that gastronomy is the relationship between culture and food. The region’s strategy was based on the pillar ‘From the Ground Up – Feeding our Future’. The interconnectedness between the farms and restaurants feeding the country and islands’ inhabitants was described as Galway’s epicentre and it is this interconnectedness between the land and the people which needs to be preserved and respected. The craft butcher plays the role of the intermediary between the farmer and the consumer.

This relationship ‘From the Ground Up’ can be seen throughout Ireland, another example being the village of Kilcullen in Co. Kildare. The local craft butcher shop, Nolan’s of Kilcullen, was crowned Champion of Champions in the Countryside Alliance Awards in 2015. Nolan’s was initially selected as the best butcher shop in the UK and Ireland in 2012 and was awarded the higher accolade when all category winners for the decade were voted upon. This particular award not only celebrates retail excellence but more importantly celebrates the business’s place in the rural community and how it promotes community and country living (Farmers Journal, 2015). Nolan’s of Kilcullen is a farm to fork enterprise which employs 24 people and sources its beef and lamb from a dozen local farmers. Since the award, Nolan’s has welcomed Michelin star chefs and agri-tourists from many European countries such as Germany, Poland and Sweden. Nolan’s most recently played host to an international delegation attending the ‘World Steak Challenge’, hosted by Ireland in 2019 (Williams, 2019). These awards are testament to the role these farm shops and craft butchers play in enhancing Ireland’s status as a food destination.

The craft butcher and community cohesion

The butcher shop could be ideally considered a ‘Third Place’ (2) which provides for social interaction, a physical space that promotes village inhabitants’ togetherness and engagement (Murphy, 2019). Nolan’s reflects this on their website: ‘This butcher’s shop has become something of an institution for many people. Dubbed aptly as the “Social Centre of Kilcullen”. There is a vibe in the shop that typifies the nature of the people of the area. People arrive

not only for the meat but also for the “meet”. It is this combination of guaranteed quality and the unique atmosphere that make Nolan’s the butcher’s with a difference’ (Nolan, 2011).

Cabras and Lau (2019) describe the village stores as ACV’s (assets of community value), a concept which has an obvious relevance for the local butcher shop. The butcher shop serves as one of the primary outlets for community members, in particular the older generation, by not only providing their food requirements but often providing the only daily interaction they might have, an interaction that is necessary for their good health and wellbeing.

It is important to recognise how local ‘Assets of Community Value’ including the local craft butcher provide employment, supporting local families and enabling them to contribute to the local economy. Craft butchers serve as independent shops providing retail opportunities for local artisan producers selling produce ranging from free range eggs, cheeses, chutneys, cordials etc. These producers do not have the equipment and financial means to produce large volumes for the supermarkets. These rural suppliers espouse similar values in recognising the value of the land, preserving craft and tradition, complementing the craft butcher’s offering.

Assurance of provenance

One simple way to preserve the next generation of craft butchers could be to ensure that the consumer is informed of the provenance of the animal as part of their marketing strategy. As the craft butcher can authenticate a short carbon hoofprint, it is vital for the butcher to communicate this transparency. They could use in-shop signage illustrating the exact origin of the meat, outlining the ‘food miles’ or they could request customers to remain curious, to question the origin of the meat they purchase.

Communicating the facts: sustainability, innovation in the beef agri-industry

Research undertaken by the FAO (food and agricultural organisation of the UN) and the EU joint research council showed that temperate grass-based systems such as Irish pastures demonstrated the lowest carbon footprint. The agricultural industry has not remained complacent. Since 1990, the carbon footprint of Irish agricultural produce has been reduced by about 15% and the ‘nitrogen footprint’ has been reduced by 25% (Lannigan, 2017).

2012 saw the establishment of Agri-I; Agricultural Greenhouse Gas Initiative Ireland. This joint initiative involves a collaboration between researchers, students and professionals from Ireland and abroad. Agri-I was established with a view of tackling the need to ensure food security, while establishing ways of mitigating climate change. The chosen research projects are targeted at nitrous oxide emissions, carbon sequestration, methane and land

management (Agri-I, 2016) There is an understanding that through regenerative practices, soils can be built to be more resilient and can reverse climate change. Through improving soil biodiversity and sequestering carbon, we can turn farming from our enemy to a thriving industry, which is working very hard at mitigating the negative effects of climate change. Irish farmers are expanding their knowledge of mitigation options and implementation measures.

Cultured meat is a relatively recent phenomenon. The research undertaken to demonstrate how environmentally friendly it is, has to date been rather limited. Where research has been conducted, results have been formulated from predicted results rather than historical or factual results. Lynch and Pierhumbert (2019) concluded based on current scenarios, the long-term impact on the environment by cultured meat is not hugely disparate from cattle farming. Some comparisons have been based exclusively on carbon dioxide emissions whereas with animal farming, carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane need to be analysed separately as different gases lead to different levels of warming in the atmosphere and different durations, persisting in the atmosphere. Cultured meat is an 'emerging technology'. With the passing of time, we will see improvements in energy efficiencies, but we will also see improvements in energy efficiencies in cattle systems. The writers proposed that the company's manufacturing cultured meat have to provide greater transparency to enable greater research on the effects of their products on climate change (Lynch & Pierhumbert, 2019).

Quality programme to confirm the authenticity of the 'real' Craft Butcher

The Associated Craft Butchers of Ireland (2020) website describes the craft butcher as having the 'best, traceable and traditionally prepared meat available' The Escoffier (2020) website refers to the artisan butcher as taking a 'socially conscious approach to butchery' sourcing from local farmers and respecting the animal by using every element from nose to tail.

One potential solution to elevate the status of the craft butcher could be to create a quality designation similar to the PGI/TSG type approach. PGI or Protected Geographical Indication is given to agricultural products linked to a 'geographical area where at least one production step has taken place', for example Connemara Hill Lamb (Digby, 2013). TSG, Traditional Specialities Guaranteed 'emphasises traditional composition and mode of production of products' (Department of Agriculture, 2015). Although the craft butcher is not the producer, they use their craft in preparing beef for the end consumer. A quality designation would need to be based on very clear attributes. Suggested attributes for discussion could be:

- Restricted farm to fork distance, e.g. 20 km, highlighting a short carbon hoofprint
- Designating the direct origin (farmer) of the meat

- Farmers supplying beef; participants of the Bord Bia Quality Assurance Scheme
- Evidence of positive animal welfare practises
- Maturation of the carcass – respecting the animal – considering age, weight etc.
- Clear evidence of sustainability practices from key stakeholders; farmers and butchers.

These consumer quality requirements could assist producer conformance and once again allay the ethical concerns of the customers. There may be an investment requirement on the part of the government to enable farmers to identify and practise the optimum farming methods for mitigating climate change and respecting the animal. It would be in all parties' interests that this would not be a paid quality scheme, which weakens the genuine efforts of food producers to meet an optimum mandate.

Another similar approach would be to investigate the outcomes of Clonakilty in West Cork which was designated as Ireland's first slow city as part of the Slow Food Movement. The Slow Food movement is a proponent of supporting locally produced food as opposed to the homogenous nature of the fast food movement. The Slow Food Movement upholds the sense of 'place' and 'terroir' (3) which can be associated with small towns and integrates positively with the craft butcher (Broadway, 2015).

Adapting to changing times

In a *Sunday Times* article named 'Butcher's shops face the chop', the CEO of the Associated Craft Butchers in Ireland commented on three types of butcher shops; those with 'no succession plans', those in what he christened 'strategic drift' and finally those who understand the customer (McGuinness, 2019).

The craft butcher needs to constantly adapt and reinvent him/herself to remain relevant and to create value for the current consumer. There is an urgent need for the consumer to understand the relevance of the craft butcher before the next generation's children question their parents on the existence of such a profession. There is a need for the consumer to 'disrupt' the contemporary disruptors.

Leveraging contemporary disruption

'When there is disruption of an event, system or process, it is prevented from continuing or operating in a normal way' (Collins Dictionary, 2020).

I would like to reflect on two examples of contemporary disruption that have prevented traditional companies from operating in 'a normal way'. However, those companies which leveraged 'disruption' as an opportunity rather than a threat are continuing to operate successfully.

A good example of how that might be achieved is in the area of wine production. Until the 1970s the Old World i.e. France, Spain, Germany, Italy and other parts of Europe dominated the world of wine. The wines were

based on heavily regulated processes, hierarchy and of course 'old wonderful vines'. The New World then began making wines without a rule book, in soils and climates that should not have worked, using innovative production methods. Problematically for the Old World, the New World began winning International wine competitions. Recently I listened to a podcast debate between Oz Clarke and Jancis Robinson, two of the most renowned wine journalists. The theme was Old World v New World. I then realised that the New World completely 'disrupted' both the Old World's traditional ways and their ways of thinking about wine. At this point the Old World could have stubbornly stuck to tradition carving a more uncertain future. However, after a considerable period of time, they for example the French (the most stringent of all countries in complying with tradition and rules) began to embrace the competition by introducing new world methods into their production processes while respecting the traditions which needed to remain.

Brew Dog

The world of beer has been an oligopolistic market, with a few global companies, dominating the world market. In 2007, two men and a dog started a craft beer company, their mission to disrupt the beverage landscape. Unable to compete against the big companies on price they set out with a differentiating strategy focusing on developing quality beers using aggressive, innovative, marketing strategies to create brand awareness. Its most crazy was launching a 55% alcoholic blond Belgian ale which was infused with Scottish highland nettles and fresh juniper berries. They produced 11 bottles, stuffed each of the prized bottles into deceased wild animals and sold them for between £500 and £700 British pounds. The Internet embraced the story. There were positive and negative reactions. The cost of marketing online was zero (Watt, 2015).

Brew Dog launched at a time when they recognised that there were consumers willing to pay for choice and for value. CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) had been operating since the 1970's reviving traditional processes and finally governments provided tax breaks incentivising new micro – breweries for small volume production. In 2016 they became the fastest growing drinks company in the UK. In 2015, SAB Miller and Anheuser – Busch-In-Bev bought into the UK Craft Beer Market by taking over some of Brew Dog's competitor brands such as Meantime and Camden Town brewery respectively (Henley, 2016).

My thesis is that the craft butcher needs to learn from the wine industry and companies like Brew Dog. It needs to overcome the fear of the supermarkets to leverage 'contemporary disruptors' like the Old World by adapting, innovating and using media to communicate strongly its value proposition for the modern consumer. To ensure the continuation of craft butchery for years to come, we need to analyse the contemporary disruptors and determine

what strategies are required to ensure that we are creating real value for the consumer.

Conclusion

There is a real threat to the continuance of the craft butcher. The statistics of closures speak for themselves. Contemporary disruptions in the form of plant-based 'meatless meats', harmful unbalanced debate about agriculture's role in climate change and the ever-present dominance of the supermarkets. If traditional French vineyards can learn from new world vineyards and if companies like Brew Dog can disrupt the global beer market, there is hope for the craft butcher. The butcher needs to embrace disruption by leveraging the media in communicating the enormous value that butchers can provide to the consumer. The butcher needs to continue to reassure the consumer of the provenance and quality of the meat they source by using traditional craft methods and respecting the animal from farm to fork which is not as evident from the supermarkets. There needs to be more media coverage about how the Irish agricultural industry is working on ways of mitigating climate change.

This paper calls for society to recognise that a real threat exists where the craft butcher could be lost, primarily through unbalanced debate, controversial headlines and lack of communication to the public regarding positive ways to mitigate climate change.

Further research is required to see what viable solutions could be pursued.

Notes

1. A flexitarian or semi-vegetarian diet (SVD) is one that is primarily vegetarian with the occasional inclusion of meat or fish. (Derbyshire, E.J., 2018, p.1).
2. The third place as coined by Ray Oldenburg in his book 'The Great Good Place' referred to public places outside (home and work – 1st and 2nd place) to enjoy the pleasure of good company and good conversation.
3. Terroir refers to an area, usually rather small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products (Martin et al, 2016, p.106)

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