



Serving Up Sustainability: **A Survey of Caterers in London**

London Food Link aims to help producers, consumers and retailers make a positive choice for sustainable, local food. This means better access to affordable, high quality and seasonal food, shorter supply chains and campaigning for policies which promote a thriving local food economy and culture.

London Food Link intends to:

- establish a local food network for London
- foster active partnerships to develop within this network
- support new and existing food projects
- advise local and regional authorities on supporting the growth of a local food sector in London
- administer a grants scheme to assist the development of community-led local food schemes

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1) **Summary**

The survey assessed the current best practice in sustainable contract catering. 30 businesses were contacted during June 2002 and 12 responded. Of those respondents, all demonstrated an interest in sustainability but none met all the criteria specified by the project. The five factors that were met by the majority of caterers were organic, local and Fairtrade sourcing, policy of avoiding GMs and healthy eating (including vegetarian) options. There was a good understanding of these issues amongst some but a wide variation in application of that knowledge. Several respondents were unclear of the connection between food and sustainability or did understand but felt it was difficult to apply effectively in practice.

2) **Methology**

Thirty contract catering operators in the greater London area were selected from local directories and following discussions with local authority contacts, Sustain staff and London Sustainability Exchange. They were chosen on the basis that they may provide some example of best practice. These were contacted by phone and 12 were willing to take part. These were mailed a survey and this was followed up with a phone call. More details of the methodology and survey are given in the Appendices.

3) **Survey results**

Table 1 provides the results of the survey of the 12 London based catering outlets responding to the survey. There were several useful findings: Amongst the key factors affecting decision-making, organic was prominent with sourcing varying between 2 - 100 % of all food purchasing. The average was around 40%. The amount of local produce bought also varied widely from about 10% to almost all: fruit and vegetables were the most frequently sourced locally. Several caterers did not know whether their produce was local or not. Fairtrade products included coffee, tea, chocolate, cocoa and bananas. Vegetarian options were provided by all but one of those surveyed. But mostly these were unspecified. Three caterers were totally meat-free and four had vegan options. All but three had a policy of avoiding GM foods wherever possible.

Amongst other factors, healthy eating options were provided by all but the definition of what constitutes healthy options varied considerably. Several respondents did not specify, two offered low fat, low calorie meals and wheat-free for those with allergies. Two businesses described "everything" as healthy, being based around salads and wholefoods and avoidance of sugar. One said they avoided deep frying and two said it depends what the customer wants.

Their primary motives for operating were assessed and environment and health came top, specified as most important by the greatest number of caterers. Next was cultural, such as promoting and serving ethnic dishes such as Indian and Mexican. Profit was specified as a primary motive by only four businesses and two listed enjoyment of cooking and social motives for their existence; the latter included a learning disabilities provider, offering catering skills training and funding of local environmental events.

Number of Caterers meeting sustainability criteria (out of 12)

Criteria for sourcing and activities	NO of caterers who specified these criteria
Organic	10
Local	9
Fairtrade	9
Vegetarian	12
GM	10
Healthy eating menus	12
Primary motives:	
● health	6
● environmental	5
● profit	4
● cultural	4
● enjoy cooking	2
● social	2
Assurance schemes	0
Order size	6 - 600
Price range per person	£5 - £40

Of the remaining issues, produce from Assurance Schemes such as Red Tractor was not specifically purchased.

Order sizes from customers varied between 6 and several hundred people and price ranges varied from £5 to £15 per head but in 3 cases up to the £30 to £40 range.

4) **Issues raised by caterers**

Sourcing locally

A high level of respondents mentioned that local sources of food are hard to find and the effort involved put them off trying. Organics were widely criticized for being more costly than their conventional equivalents, less easily available, lacking variety and consistency of supply. Some respondents said they tried to avoid sourcing their supplies from supermarkets; instead using community wholefood outlets and local markets but found this wasn't always possible due to lack of time.

Environmental criteria

Some outlets were very aware of environmental issues and supportive of local campaigns and events. But one comment made - that running the outlet with the environment as the main priority meant sacrificing profits - reflects a low commitment to investigating profitable sustainable sourcing.

Assurance schemes

There was a lack of awareness of Assurance Schemes such as the 'red tractor', or RSPCA's 'freedom foods'. Many of the businesses didn't know what these were. There was criticism of them even amongst those who did. One comment was that they are very confusing whilst another emphasized the lack of stringency of schemes like Red Tractor. They considered the standards not very high in terms of sustainability; still too reliant on the use of pesticides for instance.

Non-food items

One caterer complained of the difficulty of finding sustainable catering materials; too much of it being plastic with no outlets for recycling.

5) **Conclusions**

The survey is a useful snapshot of London catering and suggests that it is possible, although not easy, to obtain sufficient sustainable food supplies in London. Accessing supplies matching these criteria requires a lot of knowledge of a particular area. Those with an interest and commitment to environmental issues were best placed to take advantage of the existing alternative supply network.

Some caterers seemed more inclined to vary the availability of food, and consider alternative supplies; incorporating it into the philosophy of their business and making a virtue of seasonally available foods. Others had good intentions but felt frustrated by the difficulty of obtaining suitable alternative supplies. They felt unable to apply any criteria due to the cost and the time and energy required to seek-out such supplies. Others seemed unaware of what the problems are, with the emphasis on making a profit or just providing what the customer wants.

One further conclusion from the survey is that a lot of caterers, such as the non-respondents - do not see sustainable food issues as important and are too involved in the day-to-day running of their business. This was exemplified by the fairly low response rate to the survey and a frequent incomprehension at the nature of the survey and what it intended to achieve.

Inevitably, with such a small sample size and limited resources, it is difficult to present a really accurate picture of the state of sustainable catering. London has comparably more catering businesses than anywhere else in the country for its size and it would be useful to conduct a far larger survey with incentives for respondents and a longer time frame.

6) Further Action

Suggested actions arising from this survey include:

- Business advice (for instance through Business Links) to include information on both sustainability criteria and where to source local, assurance and seasonal ingredients
- A larger survey of London caterers including the larger operators, to get a clearer picture of what caterers are interested in and what they may be prepared to do to promote sustainable food supplies in the capital.
- Learning networks and events to help caterers learn from each other and also from others along the food chain such as farmers (Local Food Links could provide such a service)
- Encouraging caterers to run promotional days or weeks for greener, seasonal, healthy or Fair Trade produce.
- Raising public awareness of the need to ask for more sustainable food supplies from caterers, that there may be slightly higher costs and seasonable variations
- Working with DEFRA, DFID and other Government departments to work with industry on greener catering.

Appendix 1: Methodology

This survey assessed the current best practice in sustainable catering. It will feature in a conference on green housekeeping for voluntary groups this autumn hosted by the London Sustainability Exchange.

The aim was to build up a picture of how far down the road towards sustainability caterers were and what can be learnt from compiling this information. It highlighted what was possible and gave some insight into how more could be achieved.

30 caterers were selected, from entries in Green Pages and Yellow Pages directories and by looking at the listings of web pages such as Ethical Junction. Several outlets were also known to staff at Sustain or recommended by council staff at local authorities in London. All had to have an attitude suggesting a broad approach to food such as advertising an extensive range of vegetarian food or avoidance of GMs or specializing in local or ethnic-based cuisine; the latter suggesting the possibility of food sourcing from specialized suppliers. All the selections had to be based either in or close to the Greater London area.

The survey (see Appendix 2) was carried out during a 2-week period in June. All businesses were contacted by phone. Half chose to fill out the forms themselves and return them by post. The rest answered the questions over the phone. Initially 30 caterers were selected but due to a paucity of suitable ones willing to take part, this was reduced to 12. Most of the businesses that took part are fairly small, employing just a few staff with an average of 5.7. The caterers in the survey were largely independently owned and/or not-for-profit enterprises.

Questions followed a set format. Criteria were selected indicating the degree to which they were environmentally or health conscious and practiced this in their purchasing, cooking, preparation and presentation of food. Criteria included purchasing of organics, fair-trade products, a policy on GMs, and availability of healthy eating options and local sourcing of supplies.

Problems encountered

It became clear quite quickly that few caterers were operating to very high standards for the criteria we had selected. Of those contacted, a significant proportion were not interested and several were difficult to track down or no longer operating. A few of those who did express enthusiasm failed to return their questionnaires, despite considerable efforts by LFL.

The best way to obtain information from people was over the phone. They could be asked in detail about their sourcing. This was necessary as there was often a reluctance to impart information. Due to the nature of their businesses, it was also difficult to reach key personnel and arrange a suitable time to conduct the survey. However this was preferable to sending survey forms by post because they were in general inadequately filled out; lacking detail and little or no stated opinion on food issues.

Inevitably, with such a small sample size and limited resources, it is difficult to present a really accurate picture of the state of sustainable catering. London has comparably more catering businesses than anywhere else in the country for its size and it would be useful to conduct a far larger survey with incentives for respondents and a longer time frame.

Appendix 2: Caterers questionnaire

Company name			
Contact name			
Basis on which business run; co-op			
Independent, franchise etc			
Contact details; address, phone, E-mail, web			
Staff numbers employed			
Area covered by service; local, regional, national, international			
Organic Y/N - % or which products			
Local & regional Y / N % and which products			
Fairtrade - Y / N % and which products			
Vegetarian - Y / N all or options % and which products			
GM policy Y/N			
Menus based on healthy eating or healthy eating options			
Menu example - typical meal - does company produce only a particular kind of food			
Price range min to max (per head)			
Min / max order size			
Primary motives; health, cultural, environmental, profit			
Any assurance schemes e.g. Red Tractor			
Other comments or concerns			

Appendix 3: Caterers survey

Caterer	Organic 83%	Fairtrade 75%	GM 83%	Veg 100%	Local 83%	Healthy 92%
Fresh - The Organic Café, W1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dame Colet House, E1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Glamourmorsels, NW1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Food For Thought, WC2	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Mange Tout, N5	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Gannett's Café, E17	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Leon's Vegetarian Catering, CM1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Applejacks, NW1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Squire's Catering, N1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fiestasofia, N1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Limoncello, E1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Courtyard Café, SE11	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Motives	Assurance Schemes	Order Size	Price Range
Health, Profit	None	10 - 300	£6.50 - £37
Health, Cultural	None	Unknown	£3 - £7
Environmental, Health, Profit	None	15 - 300	£8 - £50
Cultural, Environmental	None	Unknown	£3 - £9.50
Likes cooking	None	6 - 500	£10 - £38
Health, Social, Environmental	None	15 -50	£7
Health, Environmental	None	30 - 350	£6 - £8
Social	None	Unknown	£4.90
Environmental, Profit	None	20 - 400	£8 - £30
Cultural	None	40 - 1000	£7 - £30
Profit, likes cooking	None	2 - 600	£2 - £40
Health, Cultural, Environmental	None	1 - 100	£0.50 - £4



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