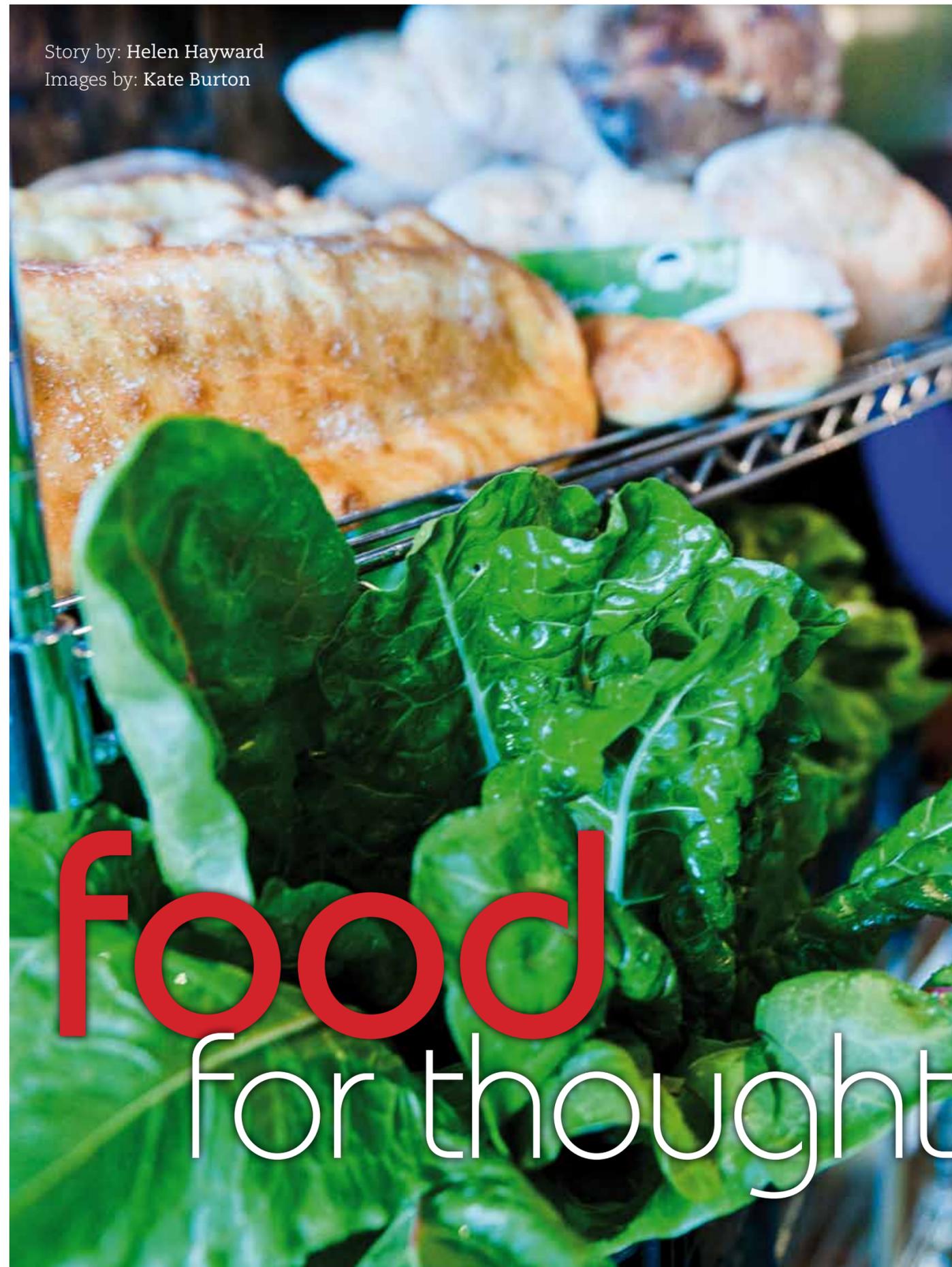


Story by: Helen Hayward  
 Images by: Kate Burton



# food for thought

Recently Tony Kilpatrick, a wholesaler in North Hobart who supplies the Tasmanian luxury resorts that get the biggest gongs, was visiting family in Switzerland. Waking early one morning he decided to take a walk into the town, on the edge of Lake Lucerne, to get a newspaper and some orange juice. Lauscanne, with a population roughly the same as Hobart, has one main supermarket right in the middle of the town. Because of the dense inner-city living space is at a premium and the supermarket, though large, is mainly underground. And yet despite this, and despite it being before 7am, as soon as he was through the door Tony could sense that something was different.

He immediately noticed a woman leaving a named glass bottle behind the door, which was then whisked off, washed, filled with freshly-squeezed juice, and left near the checkout. In the deli section a young man was slicing meat, weighing cheese, and wrapping them separately in greaseproof paper. There was, Tony realised with a start, no packaging in the whole smallgoods section.

This was not, Tony insists, an up-market deli pandering to the planet-conscious middle-classes. This was the only big supermarket in a town the size of Hobart. Tony was struck by three things. Firstly that each section was manned by someone with knowledge of and pride in the meat, dairy or groceries they were selling. Secondly that there was nothing outwardly special about this supermarket. There were other smaller food stores in Lauscanne, however because of the density of living, this supermarket was where most people did their shopping.

The third thing he noticed was subtler, and it took him a few minutes to register what it was. No-one, he realised, was buying a huge amount of anything. They were buying two chops, rather than six, 100 grams of Gruyere and not 300. Instead of big trollies banked up at the checkout, people were carrying baskets with ten or fewer items in them. It struck him that this was somewhere that people picked up food on a near-daily basis. And because they were only buying enough for a couple of meals there was no need for packaging, since they planned to eat it before it could go off.

The other thing that Tony noticed, early that cold morning, was what wasn't in the supermarket. In the middle of winter there were no out-of-season foods - no grapes or green beans or even tomatoes. But the most striking thing about this store, which Tony struggled to convey to me, was how ordinary it was. Taking your own juice bottle to have it filled, having your steak cut to preference, and cutting just enough cheese from a wheel of Brie for a couple of days was completely normal. It was what everyone in Lauscanne did, not just a select few.

Food for Thought, a collection of four stories, has its kernel in my own experience in downtown Hobart. It originates in my realisation, a couple of years ago, that I was finding shopping in big supermarkets increasingly depressing. Pushing a large metal trolley up and down numbered aisles - the shelves stacked with highly-packaged long shelf-life food with little nutritional value, heavily marketed and packed in materials which don't break down in the soil - was getting me down. Stowing my bags in the back of my car afterwards I noticed that I didn't feel satisfied with my purchases. Instead I felt relieved that my big shop was over and hopeful that my booty would last a good few weeks before another hit. Often as not I'd make these trips at night when my kids were in bed, I rarely saw anyone I knew, and never came out feeling closer to my fellow man.

One day I came across Michael Pollan's *In Defence of Food*, heard him speak, and decided that since I wasn't going to be able to change the big supermarkets' approach to selling food, I could change my own approach to buying it. And so I went local. I started buying staples from the local IGA, vegetables and cheese from the farmer's market, meat from the local butcher - and attempted to bake my own bread. Over a year on I'm pretty certain that I spend more time and money on food - this hasn't been a cost- or time-cutting exercise. On the other hand I don't spend a whole lot more and, crucially, I no longer find food shopping depressing. I like the people I shop from, I respect what they're doing, I like feeling in a loop with them, and I don't mind paying a little bit more if it means they can do what they need to do to stay in business.

So here are four stories about food in Hobart, focusing on four people for whom food is central to their conception of a good life. Matt Rao is Hobart's answer to Carluccio, the London champion for quality Italian food, Con Skrepetos is a Tasmanian-born Greek corner store manager who recently lost his fight with the bottom line, Jay Patel is a self-trained chef who is wowing locals and mainlanders alike, serving ambitious seasonal food from a modest kitchen in his shoebox café, and Alban Johnson has been selling good bulk food, more and more of it organic, to a growing band of customers who like buying by the scoopful in a quietly communal atmosphere. All of these stories are based on conversations that I found fascinating, intimate and often unexpected. Bon appetit!

**In this heated conversation, Matt Rao from The Italian Pantry lists the eight key ingredients that will help you to cook better food at home than is available in most restaurants.**

Hearty and passionate, Matt Rao is a champion for quality food cooked simply and eaten with family and friends. He's convinced that investing in just a few quality ingredients would allow us all to transform our kitchen into a hub for good eating. We may pay a little more for these ingredients up front, but over time they will, he insists, do magic with a 'gazillion dishes' – with the addition of little more than a packet of good durum wheat pasta and a few seasonal ingredients. Two hundred dollars may sound like a lot to set up your kitchen for good cooking, but Matt reckons it's a small price to pay for the difference between pleasant food and gorgeous food.

What then, I ask, are these precious ingredients? Matt scratches his head, bangs down his cooking pan on the stove, gives the tuna and olives in it a quick shake, folds his arms akimbo and stares at the top shelf of his kitchen – which is tucked behind the café at The Italian Pantry. 'That's a good question', he says, looking up again at the top shelf before reeling off his list. 'A good olive oil for a start. Then an aged balsamic and a Vincotto, both of which, though quite expensive to buy, are used minutely and last way longer than cheaper versions'. 'What else?' I ask, as he picks up the pan and shuffles it back and forth. 'A good passata and some tomato paste. And when I say good', he says, turning to me, keen to make his point, 'when I say good I mean sauces made with thick-skinned sun-ripened tomatoes with less pulp, like the San Marzano ones from the Naples region, rather than ones made with cheaper thin-skinned tomatoes that have been picked green and processed, making for a pulpy unsatisfying sauce'.

Knowing that my question is likely to provoke, I ask Matt a further question about the cost of good ingredients. 'Look', he says in reply, slapping his palm on the steel bench, 'it's cheaper to feed a family of four good food at home than it is to take them out for a fast-food meal'. Just for that moment he's as heated as the pan on his stove, and I wait for him to calm down. 'I took my family out for a cheap meal recently', he tells me. 'They kept asking, and so I did. There was loud music playing, the food was ordinary, it was slow, and my god the food was so salty', and shakes his head, wiping the back of his hand across his brow. 'And so I said to the guy serving us, "You know, this calamari is really *really* salty". "Yeh", says the guy, "lots of people tell us that". "I mean", Matt continues, exasperated, 'they weren't even taking on board criticisms from customers. They should have been pleased to get feedback. Tasmanians are generally so reluctant to give it, for fear of offending people. Whereas my view is that if you're spending proper money on food that you could have cooked yourself, you've every right to give feedback.'

Then he takes a bottle of balsamic off the top shelf. 'This', he says, offering me the label, 'is an aged balsamic vinegar which you only need the tiniest amount of in a dish. Cheaper balsamic comes from 1000-litre vats whereas this one', he says, hugging the bottle, 'comes from a 5-litre barrel which has been looked after, aged and turned for 25 years. So although you're paying more for it you end up saving money because you need so little of it'. Then he reaches up to put the bottle back on the shelf in an 'I rest my case' sort of way.

Standing back from the stove he leans on a stainless steel bench and folds his arms. 'You wouldn't believe', he says, 'the number of



Matt Rao from The Italian Pantry

**Hearty and passionate,** Matt Rao is a champion for quality food cooked simply and eaten with family and friends. He's convinced that investing in just a few quality ingredients would allow us all to transform our kitchen into a hub for good eating.



people who come in here to show off their just-picked basil, their tomatoes, or their just-caught salmon, only to ask in their next breath, "What's your cheapest pasta?" He frowns and rolls his eyes. 'I mean, you can buy a kilo of Rusticella which has been made from just two ingredients, pushed through bronze extruders, air dried and packaged within two days. And from this kilo of pasta you can cook up to twelve dishes, largely because the sauce sticks to the pasta and results in a more satisfying meal with less pasta. Or,' he says, shuffling his feet, 'you can pay less for a 500gm packet of pasta which has been pushed through Teflon extruders, cooked at a high heat, dried in a machine and packaged within four hours – from which you'll get just four serves of pasta.' The more expensive pasta, he explains, made from top quality semolina, leaves you feeling more satisfied with less because it's denser, it contains more protein, and also because instead of the sauce pooling at the bottom of the plate, as with cheaper slicker pasta, the sauce coats it completely and disappears with the last bite (ie the carrots and tomatoes you wanted little Johnny to eat are slurped up without any coaxing).

'So', I ask, 'is that it for your store cupboard?' And I list them back to him, 'Olive oil, balsamic vinegar, Vincotto, tomato sauce and good pasta?' 'Well maybe', he replies. 'But no. You'll also need Arborio rice for risotto, 00 flour, and semolina. And some good olives and anchovies never go amiss – although these last two', he adds, 'are really a matter of taste'.

Matt Rao could be described as an Australian Carluccio – the UK champion of quality Italian food. Matt isn't on about fine dining. Nor does he want people to impress their dinner guests by waving expensive ingredients under their noses. It's everyday family and friends food that he's passionate about – that and caring about where ingredients come from. 'If you're going to put food inside your body', he says, looking me in the eye, 'you want to know the provenance of what you're eating'. This is the question, above all others, that he'd like us to ask ourselves whenever we buy our food.

Lunch is on the horizon in the café next door and I sense my time is nearly up – although any conversation with Matt Rao could go on as long as his meals. 'Say you're making a dish with eight ingredients', he tells me, starting to wind up, 'and four of these eight are stand out in their field. You only have to use very small amounts of them to create a depth and drama that even your kids will pick up and appreciate' (something which, as a father himself, he knows is saying something). 'Same thing with the Parmesan that you grate into dishes. It makes a huge difference if the Parmesan has been aged for two to three years, as opposed to fourteen months and then shrink-wrapped'. With that he adjusts his apron, slaps his palms across each other a few times, picks up the pan, and starts filling the waiting triangles of Calzone on the bench.

**The next story is an all too familiar one, the demise of the old corner store - a victim of the rise and rise of big supermarkets. Despite this Con Skrepetos, ex-manager of Macquarie Supermarket, is impressively philosophical.**

By some weird coincidence Con Skrepetos will leave the Macquarie Supermarket, an old-style local corner store, exactly five years to the day since he started managing it. Although sad to leave to make way for the owners' return amid rumours of a revamp, Con is philosophical about a good long stint running his own corner store.

Having grown up on top of a corner store in Huonville - the only Greek boy at the local High School - Con is no stranger to the swings, roundabouts and early mornings that is life in a shop. And yet even during these last five years he's noticed huge changes. Take tinned Baked Beans, for example. Five years ago Con stocked five varieties of Baked Beans on his shelf, and all of them walked off within the week. These days he only stocks the plain tomato kind, and sometimes even these will sit there for weeks before being restocked.

Although the rise and rise of supermarkets is the quick explanation for his loss of market share, Con reckons there might be other reasons too. In 2006 a lot of older people would come in regularly with their trolley and list of staples - bread, milk, sliced ham, tinned tomatoes - to last them a good three or four days at home. These days buying patterns have changed right across the board and Con's hunch is that this is permanent. The locals who frequent his shop these days aren't big buyers. They come in for a few things, rarely with a list, and pick up a few extra vegetables if they look tempting. Seedless grapes, even in autumn, seem to bring them in.

Obviously Con realises that he can't compete with the bulk buys of the big supermarkets, with their two loaves of bread for the price of one, and come-and-get-me monthly specials. And yet, he points out, his vegetables have less mark-up on them than in supermarkets - which, as he points out, make up for their specials by transferring their losses on to things like fresh produce. But with goods with a longer shelf life, products that National Foods buy by the container, small shop managers like Con throw up their hands. They just can't compete. Con can't even buy some goods into his shop for the cost that the big supermarkets sell them for.

Even with a steady stream of unpredictable shoppers things have been quiet lately - 'very quiet' he drops in twice during our conversation. In the last two years, since Christmas 2009, sales have been 50% down. And yet fixed costs, about which he says with a smile he's learned a lot, have 'gone through the roof'. And the hours are no shorter - Con regularly works a 70 to 80-hour week. 'Your life is the shop', he says simply.

'Where are all the people?' he asks with a shrug. The community element has gone, he suggests. When new people move into the area they don't have the same loyalty as older residents who value seeing the same friendly face over and over. 'Some part of the community is missing, and it hasn't been replaced by anything', he says, wistful.



Con Skrepetos, ex-manager of Macquarie Supermarket

*'Where are all the people?' he asks with a shrug. The community element has gone, he suggests. When new people move into the area they don't have the same loyalty as older residents who value seeing the same friendly face over and over.*



**For chef Jay Patel from Pigeon Hole, cooking with what's in people's backyards is more satisfying than elaborate fine dining**

Just the right height for his small kitchen, Jay is known both to Hobart locals and visitors for his focaccias, pastries, soups, salads and bread. Most of all he's known for his enthusiasm for food, for sourcing locally and eating seasonally. A self-trained chef with experience Front of House in the hospitality industry, his aim is to keep quality high by keeping things small - as expressed in his keyhole café Pigeon Hole with its loyal following.

Jay starts our conversation by telling me the story of the Mexican fisherman, as a way of conveying his values. A Mexican fisherman spends his life by the sea mending his nets in the morning, eating lunch with his family, before a short siesta and an afternoon fishing on his boat. For years he lives happily, content with his life, partly for knowing no other. Then one day a guy comes over on a big ship from the mainland. The man talks to the Mexican fisherman and persuades him to work on a larger scale. Seduced by ambitions he hadn't known he had, the fisherman invests in a bigger boat, employs a few men and, lo, starts a fishing business. Trade is brisk, business expands, and before he knows it his afternoon siesta is a thing of the past. The only problem is, now that he's successful he has more responsibility, longer hours, taxes to pay and inspectors to please. He sees his family only on weekends and at quickly snatched meals. And, of course, he feels stressed much of the time. The story ends, as it begins, happily. The fisherman retires a successful businessman and is able to do exactly what he did before he elevated fishing in the afternoon into a big business.

Something of Jay's own approach to life lies in this story - if business takes him away from what he loves, it isn't worth it. It's that simple. And yet, just like the Mexican fisherman, Jay is intensely ambitious for his work with food - which is obvious to everyone who sees him in his busy kitchen.

Jay's life has been full of such contrasts. His childhood in a small town in Queensland was, he now thinks, the making of him as a chef. After a long day at school he'd come home starving and make something to eat - crush some peanuts to smear on toast perhaps, climb the mulberry tree in the yard to pick fruit for a cake, pull a mango from a low branch or, in summer, gorge on ripe cherry tomatoes and, using his slingshot, aim the green ones at his siblings.



*Something of Jay's own approach to life lies in this story - if business takes him away from what he loves, it isn't worth it. It's that simple. And yet, just like the Mexican fisherman, Jay is intensely ambitious for his work with food - which is obvious to everyone who sees him in his busy kitchen.*



As a teenager Jay dreamed of becoming a chef. However when he found out that the real money was in Front of House, and not behind the scenes in kitchens, he decided to train as a waiter and to work his way up the hospitality chain until he became a manager at a Hyatt on the Gold Coast.

Apart from getting good with a slingshot Jay developed a taste for good food through, he now thinks, being exposed to lots of different flavours. He'd sit on the kitchen bench and help his mother roll rum balls for Christmas, or rub butter and sugar between his fingers to make a crumble for over rhubarb. He was, he tells me, 'always in the kitchen making things', leaving him with a passion for rustic family food.

As a teenager Jay dreamed of becoming a chef. However when he found out that the real money was in Front of House, and not behind the scenes in kitchens, he decided to train as a waiter and to work his way up the hospitality chain until he became a manager at a Hyatt on the Gold Coast.

After five years of being obsessed by details - noticing cobwebs in the corners of conference suites and blown light bulbs in corridors - his interest in management began to pall. Checking the plates coming out of cavernous commercial kitchens, his hands behind his back, he started to long for a simpler way with food. He longed for the kind of food that he felt like eating, rather than dishes designed to impress, made from flown-in ingredients - complemented by garden salads picked by a machine the week before.

Following a stint managing a restaurant outlet in Tasmania, he decided to strike out on his own. He left the world of fine food with its garnishes and sauces and decided to concentrate on good strong flavours from simple ingredients.

These days his philosophy is all about 'using what's in people's backyards'. He's particularly keen to cook food that's actually good for you - that nourishes the body and soul as well as tasting great. Rather than being frustrated when his favourite goats cheese becomes unavailable, and ringing round for another supplier, Jay embraces the coming and going of seasonal produce. This, he feels, is the way things should be.

A few days ago, after a long winter recess, Jay had the thought that it might be good to start cooking with salad greens again, and perhaps a rhubarb tart with summer coming. Ten minutes later the phone goes and it's his green's supplier, with news that he's just picked some greens and rhubarb and would Jay like some?

Spring and summer is just the time, he reckons, when people - often without knowing it - develop a taste for artichokes, asparagus, beans and tomatoes. Their palettes are ripe for them in the summer months whereas, he explains, they're naturally drawn to things like hearty polenta and oxtail stew in winter. Eat them out of season, he points out, and they don't taste quite right - partly because cold storage causes out-of-season produce to lose much of its flavour through oxidation, especially when it's been picked unripe.

Jay ends our conversation with praise for one of his local farmers who, alongside his peony farm, recently diversified and now grows Mizuna greens, spinach, pumpkins, purple-headed broccoli and eggplant. When Jay unwraps this farmer's Mizuna, the roots are still on, plucked straight from the ground. 'You wouldn't get that in a 5-star hotel', he says, getting up from the table, pulling down his apron, 'it would have arrived in airtight packaging from Victoria five days after being picked'. 'It's not a bad way of cooking', he adds, heading back to his kitchen, 'but it puts blinkers on you and makes you forget what's important'.



Chef Jay Patel from Pigeon Hole



Alban Johnson owner of Eumarrah

**In the business of buying food in bulk for the last 25 years, Alban Johnson has quite a lot to say about the challenges of running a food store with the health of his customers, and the planet, in mind.**

When he started buying food in the 80s, Alban Johnson reckons that social attitudes were different. Although society was more politicised, politics were out there – in rallies for nuclear disarmament and in general social unrest. As a movement, organics had a much lower profile back then. People were interested in buying natural foods, of course, but the concept of what was natural was less well defined. There was less information about the provenance of food, and considerably more trust in big business. There were, Alban notes, fewer moral questions about the origins and handling of food. And the question of food miles never really came up.

When Alban Johnson first opened his food store, buying food prompted practical and economic questions, but not the ethical and environmental ones that it does today. Take buying cashews. 'Do we', he asks, 'buy cashew nuts solely on the basis of price, from whichever company is selling them the cheapest? Or, do we buy them from a company that we know treats their people and workers well, providing them with schools and hospitals – knowing that it will cost a little more?'

'Or', he continues, 'what about dried apricots? Do we, as buyers, source them from a wharf in Turkey and put them on a ship to Hobart, incurring roughly the same carbon footprint as buying them from a factory in Mildura and trucking them down?' It really comes down to the UK tomato problem, he explains. Studies have shown that UK-grown hot-housed tomatoes incur a higher carbon cost than Spanish tomatoes that are picked straight off the vine and shipped across the Channel. 'Greenhouse gases', he adds, 'at least in the UK, have become as much of a concern, to most people, as price'.

Here in Tasmania greenhouse gases and food miles are still, by and large, less in the forefront of people's minds when they reach out for food to put in their shopping basket. Cost at the cash register isn't the only thing they care about, but it's the main consideration. However awareness is slowly changing. Increasingly people want to know where their food has come from, when it was picked or packaged, and how much mark-up is put on various foods. It's now common knowledge that the price of bread and milk, once staples with a fixed price, is now subject to fluctuations - and manipulations - as wild as the Dow Jones Index.



**Is Tasmania well suited to becoming the food bowl for Australia?** No pause this time. 'No way', he replies. 'I believe this is extremely unlikely. Our climate is cold and windy. It's dry through the midlands and east coast. Our soils in general are poor, partly from a history of intensive farming.'

Alban Johnson, quiet and affable, doesn't look like a man with a mission. 'If Australia went organic tomorrow,' he tells me, his soft eyes suddenly steely, 'it would be the equivalent of taking every car and truck off the road, in terms of energy saved'. Of course Alban doesn't mean that taking away our cars and trucks should be our aim. Our aim, as he sees it, is to create an Australia that can provide enough food for everyone without trucking pineapples from Cairns to Hobart in winter, or flying asparagus from Peru, and that rewards farmers for treating their soil in a way that captures carbon within it. Idealistic? Perhaps. Sensible? Probably. Likely? Not yet.

On the one hand are the heavyweight buyers at the big supermarkets, which scout local stores for tips, buy by the container, and make big bucks from unwary shoppers who think they're getting a bargain. The buyers at Eumarrah, on the other hand, buy food at its real price and, instead of offering tantalising specials, encourage customers to buy what they need by the scoopful and to save on packaging by bringing their own containers or bags. Eumarrah also encourages customers to bring in quality excess garden produce which can then be sold to others who want fresh, flavoursome, local product. And they're open to sharing recipes, remedies and generally creating a sense of that elusive thing, community. As a result they're not always the cheapest shop in town, but for vibes, friendliness and caring they rate pretty high.

'Studies show that people will buy organic carrots or rice', Alban points out, 'when offered the choice and provided the product is not more than 5 to 10% more expensive than conventional carrots or rice'. The challenge for him, then, is to keep the mark-ups low to keep customers happy, while also treating staff and the overall business well. They don't fly asparagus in from Peru in the colder months, for example, but they will hold out for Australian peanuts.

And, I ask, are our misgivings about buying Chinese food based on fact or prejudice? Alban nods. 'A bit of both', he says. 'Chinese peanuts can be higher in aflatoxins, and that's bad. But a lot of Chinese organic production is every bit as good as what you find from elsewhere. Not all of China is super-polluted, and awareness and accountability are both progressing fast. Often Chinese food is found where you don't expect it: most organic rice milk in Australia is now made with Chinese organic rice. It's chosen because the quality is good, Australian production is insufficient, and the price is right. Equally, ever since Franklin Evaporators stopped dehydrating apples in Tasmania, most dried apples eaten in Australia are from China.

And what about the next fifteen years? What, I ask, will the market for food look like? Alban pauses. In fifteen years time the market will, he reckons, be divided three ways: Woolworths, Coles, and a third new contender which will be an amalgam of stores like the IGAs and larger wholefoods stores of today. Similar to the emergence in the US market of Wholefoods Markets, which began in Austin Texas and is now a third force in the food market in America.

My last question is more pointed. Is Tasmania well suited to becoming the food bowl for Australia? No pause this time. 'No way', he replies. 'I believe this is extremely unlikely. Our climate is cold and windy. It's dry through the midlands and east coast. Our soils in general are poor, partly from a history of intensive farming.' Standing up and stretching, he ends, 'Tasmania is always looking for a saviour - whether it's Hydro-industrialisation in the 60s, wood chips in the 80s and 90s, or the Food Bowl in the 2010s. But there is no saviour, no magic get-rich-quick scheme. The reality is that we have to look after ourselves, and each other. Our food choices are one area where we can all play our part in making a better Tasmania.'