



Food Unwrapped

Airfield Estate recently ran an event entitled ‘Food Unwrapped’ as part of its biannual Food Series.

Aiming to encourage discussion and dialogue around food packaging and examine how consumers are influenced by current trends, the speakers explored a number of topics such as how food packaging affects consumer health, what the future of packaging might look like, and its environmental impact.

Chicken and egg

Airfield Estate’s mission as an educational charity is to provoke curiosity about food and trigger more conscious food choices. Grainne Kelliher, CEO of Airfield Estate, set the scene by demonstrating the diversity and complexity of food packaging. Using the example of an egg, a food that has its own natural packaging, she showed the need for responsible packaging in order to reduce breakages and therefore the wastage not just of the egg, but of all the resources that went into creating it (212L of water and 159kcal of food per egg, not to mention the production of 264g of CO₂ equivalent – roughly equal to driving 1km). She also highlighted that she was able to purchase apples from one retailer in four different types of packaging, making it almost impossible for the consumer to navigate how to successfully either reduce their packaging waste or dispose of it correctly.

Navigating food packaging

Journalists Rose Costello (*The Irish Times*) and Niall Toner (*The Sunday Times*) articulated how the consumer is bombarded with information from food packaging. Rose outlined what to look for

on packaging material, and what you can learn from it. She highlighted that packaging contains a lot of useful information for the consumer; however, it can be hard to decipher, and she went on to question the producers’ and retailers’ role in the information on packaging and their responsibility to the consumer to be honest and open about their product. Niall spoke from a personal standpoint on the amount of packaging waste we produce in our homes and workplaces, how it is impacting on us all, and how we can attempt to do something about it.

European regulation

Anne-Marie Boland, a Senior Technical Executive in Regulatory Affairs with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, has an expertise in European and Irish food labelling legislation, and brought attention to the fact that one of the biggest challenges the consumer currently faces is the conflict that exists between our food regulators and the provision of mandatory information on the label, and the producer who wants to promote information that allows for effective marketing of the product. This relationship has become openly strained in recent months, especially with regard to country of origin (which is not compulsory to denote on packaging) and how companies have chosen to colour and promote their product. However, the regulations are constantly being updated; for example, all health claims on packaging must now be backed up by research, which should be available to the consumer.



Enda O'Dowd, NCAD, speaking at Food Unwrapped at Airfield Estate on the future of food packaging.



Grainne Kelliher, CEO of Airfield Estate, discussed the diversity and complexity of food packaging.

Packaging trends and recycling

The second session of the day focused on looking past current food packaging to the packaging of the future. Colm Munnely from Repak spoke about how current packaging trends present a challenge to waste management companies. He outlined how all packaging is recyclable, but at a cost, and currently no one is willing to explore the cost fully to create facilities and technology to deal with the wide diversity of packaging that is produced. He also emphasised that no matter how recyclable and compostable the packaging is, it is ultimately up to the consumer to successfully deposit the packaging into the correct recycling stream. If the consumer chooses the wrong one, the packaging is likely to end up in landfill.

Barcodes and fTrace

Alan Gormley from GS1 spoke on how barcodes can help deliver information to the consumer. GS1 is a not-for-profit standards organisation that wants to bring traceability and transparency to consumers through a simple barcode scan. Alan spoke about 'fTrace', which is a solution that can enable the consumer to trace their food from farm to fork, from producer to packager and from distributor to retailer, meaning that the consumer will be able to make a more informed decision about the food they choose to buy and eat by simply scanning the product barcode.

Future of packaging

Enda O'Dowd, a lecturer in product design at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), talked about the future of food packaging. He stressed the importance of allocating responsibility with regard to waste generation and promoted the 'polluter pays' idea, as well as the notion that producers of packaging should begin designing packaging with end of life in mind as well as food preservation and marketing. He also spoke about how increasing automation is driving producers' choice of packaging towards less recyclable constituents and also stressed that the shorter the

supply chain, the less packaging is needed (i.e., eating seasonally and locally will encourage less food packaging and waste).

Complex issue

The final, overriding outcomes from the day were the observations that food packaging is a complex issue with many stakeholders within its conception, construction, use and removal, and that the consumer holds a pivotal role in the system. Consumers must begin to demand packaging that has improved food preservation abilities while being easy to compost or recycle. They should have easy access to as much information as possible about the product while not being distracted by the marketing and, finally, they need to have the confidence and education to successfully separate and allocate packaging into the correct streams for successful end-of-life recycling.

Airfield Estate is a 38-acre working farm, gardens, kitchen, education and food destination, open daily to the public and educational institutions for the purpose of education and recreation. For more information on the speakers from the Food Unwrapped series, to view their talks and learn more about past conferences, please go to www.airfield.ie/food-series.

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