

Avocado Anxiety: how to choose what to eat

Published 2 September 2024, with Louise Gray.

Louise Gray's new book is *Avocado Anxiety*, winner of the Guild of Food Writers award for investigative work in 2024.

She's looking not only at avocados but all sorts of fruit and veg — from apples to zucchini — to talk about all the different trade-offs that have to be made when you decide what to get: home grown or imported, in season or out, convenient or more laborious.

Each chapter starts with a figure for the carbon dioxide equivalent per kilogram of the food in question. Is that really the best metric to choose what to eat?

Louise: It's one of the ways to choose what to eat. And I did it because I thought it would interest people, and I think we are moving towards more awareness of this. You know, in the past, people would walk into the supermarket and perhaps wouldn't have any idea of calorie count. But now a lot of people will have a vague idea because of concern about health and weight. And in the same way, because of concern about climate change, people are having a general idea. So I think it's useful. But a lot of the point of the book is, carbon isn't the only measurement. And a really good example of that is food miles and green beans. So that has a higher carbon footprint, but it might be quite good relatively for development in another country and good for health. But it's maybe not so good for carbon if you compare it to green beans grown in the UK.

Jeremy: Right. I want to come back — actually, I made a note about green beans myself, so I want to come back to that. But, it is actually very difficult to calculate carbon footprint. I mean, you go into that yourself. How much do you include in the calculation

Louise: Absolutely. It's quite interesting. They call it like a toe print. So, you know, do you include the maintenance of the tractor or just

the petrol in the tractor used to harvest the vegetable? We shouldn't get held up on carbon because there are so many other factors we need to look at like pollution and fair trade, local economy, community, that kind of thing. And actually with fruit and vegetables, if you're looking at carbon, basically if you just imagine a graph, there's beef really high, the carbon emissions from beef. And then it goes down a bit for like chicken, pork, other meats. And then it's really down for vegetables. So vegetables are always going to be good for carbon. And so really carbon footprints are between you know ... Most vegetables are like around one or up to five. And then really there's just a peak if you're air freighting things like asparagus from Peru. But it's still worth considering when we are trying to get to net zero.

Jeremy: Yeah. Okay. And of course, all those other things do complicate matters, and we're going to come back to them. But do you see a time when carbon footprints might even be on package labels?

Louise: I'm glad you asked that because we have already done it. So Pepsi did it in 2008, and I remember it because I was a journalist at the time. They were very pleased with themselves. They put it on Walkers crisps and nobody really paid any attention. You know, there's already a lot to look at when you're in the supermarket, like calories, like, welfare of animals, environmental, other environmental factors like organic and other labels that you're looking for. So I think to ask the consumer or the food citizen to then also look at carbon footprint is probably a little bit too much to ask.

But as I said at the beginning, I think we are going to have an awareness and start shopping in a different way. And I'd argue a lot of people already are. You know, they're thinking, do I really need asparagus from Peru or can I eat kale from the UK this week? People are already thinking like that. So I think I'm not sure it's going to be on the front of a label. Maybe a simple traffic light system. But it's certainly something that the retailers should be aware of. So those complicated measurements, which is too much for the consumer, should be considered by the retailer. That should be their job. That should be their responsibility

Jeremy: Is the label still on Walkers crisps?

Louise: No, they took it off. They took it off and it was quite sweet, like they had a little footprint and what the carbon footprint was, but it just didn't take off. It might be tried again, but I think that the conclusion was that carbon footprint is really, really important for the supply chain and the food system. And we'll probably come back to this. How much is the responsibility of us as individuals and how much is the responsibility of the food system? And I talk about an omni label. If you imagine a flower, each petal of the flower could be a different factor. Like you could have a petal for health, a petal for carbon footprint, a petal for labour rights. And say, it might be a Fairtrade banana. So it's got really good labour rights. And actually they're quite low carbon and good for health. But then it might have ... It might be bad for something else. It might be bad for chemical use.

Jeremy: You mentioned green beans in Kenya early on, and I want to come back to that now because I think green beans got a really bad — air freighted green beans — got a really bad reputation after the publication of Food Miles. But agricultural development is often the first steps that a country can take on the road to more general economic development. So if Kenya is not growing green beans and flowers in order to earn hard currency, how are they supposed to pull themselves up?

Louise: Yeah. I mean, certainly development in this country, or the government's arm of development, International Development in the UK, wants to encourage countries to use trade, not aid. So we as taxpayers are giving money to farmers in Kenya through charities like Farm Africa in order to increase their exports. And it's actually quite ... It earns millions of pounds for countries like that, but it's quite a small proportion of the food produced, so it shouldn't be taking away from food for people who live there, which is the most important thing in countries like that.

And there are issues. You mentioned flowers, there are issues with labour rights. You know, there's been abuses of people because of the flowers and the green beans that we get. And that happens all through the food system, I think. And so I think ... I mean, trade isn't a bad thing, you know. I mean, I'm not a free marketeer but I don't think it's the worst thing in the world to buy green beans from Kenya. But I do think we've got to encourage more local supply here in order to to increase our own food security and to make sure we have the farmers and the food, the local food networks that we need for our

nutrition, our health and our food community, about how we feel about ourselves.

Jeremy: But that also means that consumers need to go back to having an idea about seasonality, that you can't have green beans in the middle of winter. Now, maybe you can buy a packet of green beans from Kenya, even though the carbon emissions are 100 times greater than they are if you get UK beans during the season. But do you see any hint that consumers in — well, let's talk about the UK — that consumers in the UK are going back to embracing seasonality?

Louise: Well, I guess it's going in the opposite direction when you look at the statistics, because things like strawberries are exploding. We're eating a lot more strawberries. And the traditional season, if one was growing strawberries outside in the UK, it would be, if you were lucky, late June, July. And of course, we've expanded that all the way till now. And under glass all the way from March to November. And I argue in the book that that's not necessarily a bad thing, because I've been to strawberry farms and they're mostly ... When you've got them under glass, that is a bigger carbon footprint because of the heating. But when they're under polytunnels, they're basically under there all year round. They're on tables planted in substrates. The plants come from the Netherlands, the pickers come from Eastern Europe, or they used to. This is an international technological farming supply, and it gives us these beautiful fruits. And one of the reasons people are eating more is kids really love them. So I don't think we should get too hung up on seasonality. It's lovely having strawberries. And it's a good nutritious food supply. But you said right at the beginning that connection with seasonality is so important for our understanding of our environment. And if we don't understand our environment, we're not going to protect it. So I do think seasonality is important psychologically, and I use the example of how good strawberries taste in summer, of having that link to a special time. But you know what? If you're eating strawberries in October, that's fine.

Jeremy: And how about if you're eating tomatoes in January?

Louise: Well, they probably don't taste very nice, you know? I mean, they're definitely improving. I think in my lifetime, certainly I've noticed a difference. And a lot of that is breeding and technology again, because the glasshouses are improving and a lot of them are

coming out of the Netherlands, which isn't exactly a sunny country. It's because ...About their glasshouse technology and their innovation, and they're able to produce them with a lot less carbon. So again, it isn't a ...They're not bad for the environment. And you could even say they were better than getting tomatoes from somewhere like Spain where there's more issues around slave labour and plastic and water use. But I think in January they just don't taste nice. And in a way, yeah, I think they will get better, but you sort of think there needs to be some time of month when they taste better.

Jeremy: So taste does factor into your your idea on how we should choose what to eat and where we should source it?

Louise: I don't think you can get away from it because humans will do a lot for taste and greed. And I remember my last book, *The Ethical Carnivore*, when you look at eating animals and why we eat meat, when you look at it rationally and through the science, it's pretty disgusting what we do. And a lot of the answer of why is taste. It's a big sense. It's a big factor. It's a big motivation. And I think if you deny it, you end up driving things underground. People will deny themselves what they love to taste. And then I think they will binge and they will have problems. It comes back to why the book is called *Avocado Anxiety*. Because, you know, we are quite driven by taste and greed and appetite and you have to work with that, I think. You can't deny it.

Jeremy: So where do you stand on cultured meat?

Louise: I'm not that excited about it. I mean, as far as I'm aware, it's actually quite a long way off. There's a lot of excitement about it and a lot of talk about it, but I think if you dig into it, we're actually quite a long way off doing it efficiently and at a low cost. I think it may have a role in cheap meat. I definitely think it could have a role in replacing processed meat ... I mean, if I'm going to eat chicken nuggets, I'd rather have plant protein chicken nuggets because it's not a very exciting meat and it's not very nice meat. I might as well replace it. I might as well replace it with plant protein. But if I was going to have a steak, I'd rather have one steak a month. I don't even eat that. I think I'd probably have about one a year, two a year, if that. I don't need it. It's a treat, how I see a beef steak. I really like cows. I don't want to eat them that much. And I feel like less and better rather than cultured meat. But I think that the fact that science is developing ... is

a good thing for people for possibly a cheap supply of meat, but I think a cheap supply of cultured meat isn't necessarily better than changing how we see and how we cook food, which might be easier and better for us on the planet.

Jeremy: But your plant based chicken nugget. My problem with that is, well, why not have a falafel?

Louise: Yeah, sure. I think it's just ease. I think it's just ease, and I think it's just convenience. I sometimes run home from taking a kid swimming and want to put something in the oven that's really quick. I think we do have busy lives, and we do use convenience and to acknowledge it. Falafel, you can put falafels in the oven as well. I mean, it's just a question of preference, you know, and I think there's a reason these things are popular. I think it's about convenience.

Jeremy: Okay. Avocados. I was intrigued that you called the book Avocado Anxiety when there's only one chapter about avocados. But leaving that aside, you conclude in the end that avocados are not that bad? And ... are you wearing avocado earrings?

Louise: I am yeah, yeah, yeah. I do it when I have [an] interview with them. You know, I like to be, I like to have a theme.

Jeremy: Okay, sorry about that. When you say they're not so bad, what are you comparing them to?

Louise: Well, beef. Well, it depends. So, I think with carbon, it's beef. And water, it's beef. It's just I suppose the reason I'm comparing it to that is I say in the book, you know, there are these scenes where someone might shout at a vegan or someone else, you know, you know, you think you're so great, you're saving the environment because you're ... But look at your avocado on toast. And it's a bit of a silly argument. I think it's an excuse to attack another generation or person from what you see as a different, a different class or different group to you. And it's not true.

So if you're looking at carbon, if you're looking at water, they can actually be ... If avocados have been grown in places where there is a water shortage then, yeah, sure, they're really bad. And if avocados are ... Blood avocados do exist. There are places where farmers live in fear of organised crime. I think that they can be bad. But it is a nutritious food. And if we go back to that green bean argument, there

is ... it's a food from a tree, that's low carbon. It's orchards. So I'm not ... I eat avocados, I try not to eat too many, to be honest, because there are issues with water use. And I think there is a big issue in this country with relying on water from other countries. And even, you know, you can't say about labour. It's not just in Mexico, it's in reports that come out from what's happening in Kenya with avocado farms. We get most of our avocados in this country from Peru. And I think actually relatively little is known about the ... I've been told that the water use is coming from reservoirs and dams off the Amazon and that ... You know, the economy of Peru has done really well off the back of avocados. That's good. But I think what we need to see more research from that, yeah.

Jeremy: Coming back to, in the UK, most people buy most of their fresh food in supermarkets. And you mentioned the role of the food chain and the suppliers for taking care of some of these things. Can we actually assume that supermarkets in their marketing have consumers' best interests at heart, or is it all about their own shareholders?

Louise: Well, it depends, I guess, on the supermarket itself. Like, the Co-op, there are ones which don't have shareholders. But that is a problem of capitalism that basically, yes, it is about profit. And that's why we're in a lot of the problems we're in today. I think you can try and get some independence from supermarkets by getting a veg box, by eating, you know, locally produced, sourcing from independent shops where you can. But I think it's not just cost, it is about convenience because people might have the money, but the reason they have the money is they're working so hard, they can't ...

And I always sort of write a book thinking, what do I do myself? If I never went to a supermarket, I'd be telling everyone else not to. But I do, and I think there are other ways that they can be motivated. Supermarkets would argue they have environmental, ESG, environmental and social goals, which they take very seriously, but I think we have to be cynical about that. And it is up to government. So we have a voluntary agreement on food waste. Well, you could make that regulatory. There are there are ways of pushing supermarkets to change by regulations. But I do think consumer things matter, and if you come back to meat, we see a lot more good alternatives to meat in supermarkets because the consumers demanded it. And I think that's something that we could be demanding, is better seasonal food

displays. If you go into the supermarket in April, it's all from Spain, and it's a hungry month in the UK. They could be doing a lot better at guiding people to good seasonal fruit and veg, and there could be ways of the government encouraging that, I think.

Jeremy: But people have to want to be guided.

Louise: Yeah. And I think it's like I said about the carbon footprints, too much to ask everyone to know all the facts about the food system. It's incredibly complex. And really at the core of this is ... My own theory is, we don't take food centrally in our culture, in government, and I think a lot of that is because it's been the female domain. And if we were taking food a bit more seriously, then there would be a lot more ... People would be educated better so that guidance wouldn't be so ... You know, in places like Finland, children are taught about food as not just fuel, but something that brings them together with other people and the nutritional value and things. If you grow up with that, then your choices are much more ingrained. You're a much stronger person to go into the supermarket and make decisions. And if your government is taking it a bit more seriously, that makes it easier too.

Jeremy: The book's called *Avocado Anxiety*. At the end of it I was thinking, well, what foods don't cause anxiety? I mean, what's what's your prescription?

Louise: Yeah, absolutely. I think we live in an age of anxiety, you know, and a lot of that is about information. We're being bombarded all the time by social media, and a lot of that anxiety is trying to be perfect. And I do think avocados are the epitome of that because if you follow any wellness influencer on Instagram, you're going to see a lot of avocados. And it seems something pure and good. And that's another reason why it's been knocked down, because we want to knock down do-gooders and the perfect people and say, hey, well, you think you're so great with your avocados, but did you know it's got child labour and water use and all these things behind it. So I wanted with the book to make people feel less anxious.

And it's quite interesting because some people come back and they're like, Louise, I feel way more anxious because, you know ... The chapter on bananas is going to make you banana anxious. This isn't a new word, but it's going to make you worry about that. But other people have come back and said, I do feel less anxious because I have the

information now. And I would like to say as well, your comment about avocado anxiety, yes I was using that as an epitome of anxiety about a lot of the foods that we eat and fruit and vegetables. But there's a great book *Avocado Debate* by my friend Honor Eldritch. And that's a whole book about the avocado issue, should you wish to dig deeper into that.

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