

Food as Learning at Airfield Estate – Living the Legacy

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Abstract

Food functions as a record of history, a conduit for science, a means of showcasing cultural identities, and a way to connect communities. This paper will aim to outline how the history and legacy of the Overend sisters is being adapted and drawn on to influence efforts in food education and food sustainability practices at Airfield Estate. In 1974, the sisters placed the Estate in trust to the people of Ireland on the condition that the space be used for recreation and education. Today, this has been reinterpreted to reflect modern challenges in food sustainability. Airfield Estate's overall mission is to inspire and enable informed food choices, with the ultimate ambition of becoming a sustainable food hub in a world leading sustainable food city. Food education is at the heart of this ambition, with food is used as a way of learning about the world, a tool for change, a conduit for the traditional educational curriculum, a window into the past, and a means of fostering knowledge transfer and connections amongst communities. As a working regenerative and organic farm, Airfield Estate couples learnings from historical practices with modern science to create a living representation of sustainable food systems from farm to fork. Utilising records from our historical archive in combination with results of our current research and education programmes, and our potential for future impacts, we will trace our use of food as a tool for learning on the journey to modern sustainability and food education.

Keywords

Food as learning; Airfield Estate; gastronomy; food education

“With our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably, knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but mainly ourselves” – M.F.K Fisher.

At Airfield Estate, food is the lens through which we view the world. The phrase “from soil to society” may seem superfluous, but it highlights how comprehensive our view of what the term food means can be – it begins with the very land we stand on, and cycles right back around to there in the end. Following in the legacy that was left for us by Naomi and Letitia Overend, today Airfield Estate aims to find ways that the food system can be harnessed for broader learning and a sustainable future, as school curriculums evolve and change.

The memory and legacy of the Overend family drives our efforts, just as their passion for farming and food production guided the growth of the Estate from their purchase of the land and house in 1894. In the 2018 piece 'Contextualizing the Irish Food Renaissance,' Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire points to the years following the recession from 2008-2014 as key years for the emergence of Irish chefs and food as world class leaders (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018a). In the story of Airfield Estate, these years were also crucial as they were the years during which redevelopments were undertaken to bring what was already a unique country gem in the heart of the city into the future, with a new full-service restaurant and spaces for bringing together like-minded people towards a more sustainable food, and therefore gastronomic system. Over the years since, Airfield Estate has played host to such events as Food on the Edge and the National Youth Food Forum, demonstrating that though it hasn't always contributed towards the broader conversations in the world of Irish gastronomy, it has been there all along as a space for those who are passionate about a better food system to reconnect with the legacy of food production and simple, local, safe food systems that the Overend sisters had the foresight to ensure for future generations in 1974 – now 50 years ago – by establishing a trust document to preserve the land as a space for education and recreation.

Food as Learning at Airfield Estate – Establishing the Legacy

In the classroom of life, food is the ever-present teacher. Food is much more than a simple satisfier of basic needs; it is a source of energy, nutrients, and sustenance (Stajic 2013). It is an avenue for communication and connection, a record of history and heritage, an archive of tradition and culture, a conduit for education, and a tool for revolution. As an innate and essential human experience, food is one of the first ways we learn about the world. For the Overend family, food was simultaneously a connection to their past and a means of finding greater enrichment in their daily life. In the earliest stages of life, before we can comprehend language or navigate our surroundings, we use our senses to learn about the world around us. Few experiences resonate as deeply or linger as vividly as our sensory journey with food. As a multisensory experience, food is one of the most potent avenues for exploration and discovery and is an essential and universal avenue of knowledge acquisition, from foundational learning to higher-order levels of thinking (Sumner 2016). The lessons we learn from food continue to unfold throughout our lives, expanding our minds by opening us to new experiences and knowledge and reflecting the ever-changing landscape of society. As summarised by Blackley and Reid, food offers a plethora of learnings through three major avenues; first, it acts as a lens through which we can examine the world around us, second, it serves as a tool for making complex issues and concepts tangible, and more easily understood, and third, it is a means through which to challenge injustices and change the world for the better (Blackley and Reid

2022). These three stages are not singular but are a recurring and expanding learning cycle that we will encounter repeatedly over our lives, and often at the same time.

Food touches and influences everything in this world: identities, relationships, communities, cultures, societies, economies, and environments (Blackley and Reid 2022). Claude Fischler, in *Food, Self, and Identity*, points to dietary habits as a key component of helping to organise human society: “The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently” (Fischler 1988, 275) This sentiment is echoed by the idea of food’s ability to help define a culture: “Apart from costume, food and diet are among the most notable markers of cultural otherness within intercultural encounters” (Mac Con Iomaire 2018b, n.p.). It is through studying food and the patterns and practices of its production and consumption that we learn about society, humanity, and the natural world in its past, present, and possible future forms. Modern gastronomy has been re-interpreted to recognise the social and ecological dimensions of food and the systems and processes that provide it, moving gastronomy beyond the sole consideration of culinary aesthetics (Philosophers 2023). In the words of Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food Movement, this reinterpreted definition poses gastronomy as the “reasoned knowledge of everything that concerns man as he eats” (Petrini et al. 2005, 55). This “reasoned knowledge” encompasses a holistic approach to learning from and with food that incorporates social, environmental, economic, and political aspects and how they change and evolve.

As Mac Con Iomaire writes; “Ireland has long been famous for its food but not necessarily for its cuisine or cooking” (Mac Con Iomaire 2018b, n.p.). This implies that what Ireland has been known for is its food production practices and today continues to have a legacy of quality, sustainable food production. This legacy comes to the fore at Airfield Estate, which acts as a space where people of all ages can learn about, interact with, and connect to the origins of their food in an increasingly urban area. This is key to honouring both the memory of the Overend family, but also to connect us to the rich history of food in Ireland.

The Overend Legacy – Food as Education and Recreation

As the capital of Ireland, Dublin is a place with a rich food heritage. The city’s food history and legacy are once again grounded in food production, with the establishment of Dublin much determined by its rich and fertile hinterland which provided the city’s population with the food required to expand and enlarge over thousands of years (Hanlon and Vicino 2018). It is in this hinterland that we find Airfield Estate, a working farm, gardens, and education charity situated in Dundrum in the suburbs of Dublin. Originally a nineteenth-century country estate, Airfield Estate and its gardens and farm were the life’s work of the Overend family, who lived, farmed, and gardened on the grounds for over a century. Throughout the twentieth century, the Overends witnessed significant changes in the systems of

food production and consumption in Ireland, with urbanisation, economic shifts, political changes, technological advancements and changing cultural influences exerting significant effects on Irish people's relationship with food (Friel and Nolan 1995). Acutely aware of the rapidly changing society and landscape around them, the Overend sisters, Letitia and Naomi, left Airfield Estate in trust to the people of Ireland for the purposes of "recreation and education" in 1974 (Office of Public Works 2014). In leaving this legacy, the sisters ensured that the precious farm and gardens were preserved so that they could continue to nourish the minds, bodies, and spirits of their community. Airfield Estate, today, serves as a living embodiment of this legacy, with food as a means of learning, philanthropy, connection, and activism engrained in the purpose of the modern-day food education charity.

Learning through Food – Food as a Window into the Past

The establishment of Airfield Estate is inextricably linked with the legacy of food and food production, and it is through food that we learn most about the Overend family and their lives. Coming from a family of grain merchants in Co. Down, Trevor Overend and his wife Lily purchased Airfield Estate in 1894 (The Irish Times DAC 2003; Office of Public Works 2014). When the Overends first bought Airfield Estate as their country retreat, the house and farm occupied just eight acres, a fraction of the 38-acre farm we have today (Office of Public Works 2014). Remnants of the original Estates legacy as a food production space can be found in its heritage fruit trees and herd of Jersey cattle, which showcase the long history of food production that is embedded across the Estate's farm and gardens. Food and its production were great passions of the Overends, borne out of both a fondness and appreciation for nature and nutritious food and the practical necessity of utilising their grounds to sustain themselves and the people in their lives. The family began to expand their land and their farming interests in the 1920s, driven by Lily's interest in farming and food production and her intent on making the farm a viable enterprise and their permanent home. During the Second World War, Airfield was turned over to food production and grew crops such as oats, wheat, and potatoes as part of the government's "compulsory tillage order" to combat food shortages (Evans 2011). Airfield Estate, like the rest of Ireland "has memories of food production throughout" (Mac Con Iomaire and Maher 2014), and it is from these memories that we learn and plan our future. Today, it would be fair to refer to the land that Airfield Estate occupies as not a landscape, but rather a foodscape, as its growth throughout the years is driven by this focus on sustainable food production as a means of both nourishing and educating our community and society.

Food as Philanthropy

Although today a densely populated urban area, Dundrum in the 1900s was renowned as a country health resort known for its nutritious goat's milk and clean hilltop air, removed from the pollution of inner-city Dublin (Súilleabháin 1967). The

promise of clean air and healthy food was of profound interest and importance to Lily Overend, whose second daughter Constance suffered from ill health and unfortunately died before her first birthday. Perhaps driven by her grief over losing her daughter, Lily Overend was a very active supporter of charities aiming to support women's and children's health and used the farm and gardens of Airfield Estate to promote and provide healthy food to those who needed it. Acutely aware of the issues of severe malnutrition that afflicted the impoverished populations of inner city Dublin, Lily and her daughters Letitia and Naomi were living embodiments of the use of food as a means of philanthropy. It is through the food-related actions of the Overends that we learn about the social issues of various times across Irish history. The women of the family played a pivotal role in the foundation of the Children's Sunshine Home, which was established as a response to the high infant mortality rates and prevalence of children suffering from rickets within the slums of inner city Dublin (Connor 2017). The home admitted patients from all over Ireland to be treated with a diet high in Vitamin D and exposure to as much sunlight as possible. Rickets was one of the most important hidden diseases of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but as a non-fatal disease, it attracted little attention among public health administrations (Wheeler et al. 2019). Through their actions of the provision of nutritious food, funds, and a space for healing, the Overends, and their collaborators, contributed to raising awareness of the crucial role of food in public health issues in twentieth-century Dublin. Today, this philanthropic and awareness-raising ethos is carried through the actions of the modern-day Airfield Estate as the charity works to advocate for and exemplify a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable food system.

Food as a Means of Connection and Community

Food as a means of connection and community was engrained in the daily lives of the Overends, and it appears very much as a way in which they channelled their generosity and hospitality. Numerous letters from the Airfield Estate archive detail offers from the Overends of eggs, Jersey milk, cream, or vegetables or "for anything you want of this kind" to friends and family, and an even greater number contain heartfelt thanks to the women for their gifts of fruits, vegetables, flowers, plants, and seeds (Office of Public Works 2014). They also frequently hosted visitors, both from their family and their community, in accordance with the longstanding Irish traditions of hospitality (Simms 1978). Food and hospitality are intrinsically connected, and commensal experiences within the home would have been a large part of the activity in Airfield House throughout the twentieth century. The Airfield Estate archive contains upwards of thirty menus saved from various occasions, some within the home and others outside. Amongst the collection are several hand-painted menus, listing forgotten dishes such as Clear Soup, but also Roast Lamb with Vegetable salad, the latter of which would not be out of place on modern banquet menus for weddings that take place today within the very same walls of the house. This memory of food as a means of connection, community, and charity is carried

through with the events, both public and private, hosted at Airfield Estate today. As an example of a community space, with food production at its centre, Airfield Estate demonstrates the potential of food for nourishment in all its forms: mental, emotional, and physical. Through food, the charity enables connections between food producers, consumers, and the natural world, which, amid current climate and biodiversity crises, are more important now than ever.

Food as Activism

The efforts of the Overend family in promoting good health and nutrition through food did not end with the provision of actual food. As highly educated and socially active women, the Overends were profoundly aware of the need for changes to legislation to protect and promote health through food. In their capacity as members of the committee of management of the Children's Sunshine Home, in 1930, they proposed a resolution that they wished to press "most earnestly" upon the Government for immediate legislation to ensure that "no contaminated milk shall be sold in the Saorstát" (Office of Public Works 2014). Dublin in the early 1900s had the highest infant mortality rate in Britain and Ireland, with much of this blamed on dirty milk (Durkan 2023). 1926 saw the establishment of the Irish Clean Milk Society, an organisation focused on educating the public and milk producers about animal welfare, safe milk handling, and bovine and milk testing, and lobbied for the introduction of legislation to ensure a clean milk supply (Bigger 1934). Driven by their direct experience in milk production and charitable work in children's health, the Overends joined their voices to the calls of the Irish Clean Milk Society in advocating for their primary goal of protecting children from disease. According to Bigger, the society used the power of food as a means of learning through "Clean Milk Demonstrations" and "Clean Milking Competitions" at agricultural shows such as the Royal Dublin Society Spring Show (Bigger 1934), of which the Overend sisters were frequent attendees with their prizewinning Jersey herd. These activism efforts eventually succeeded with the introduction of the Milk and Dairies Bill in 1935. This legacy of food as a form of activism has been continued in the modern activities of Airfield Estate today, with the charity currently working to exemplify and advocate for a sustainable food system through its Youth Board and research activities, all of which are grounded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities (FAO 2017).

It is through the lens of food that we learn about the cultural context, social practices, and challenges of the Overends era. Their food-related actions not only provided tangible support to those in need, but also served as a testament to the transformative power of food as a vehicle for compassion and social change. In unravelling the legacy of the Overend family's commitment to improving public health through food, we gain invaluable insights into the intricate fabric of Irish history and the role of food within it. It is through these learnings from the past that

we shape our future, with the modern-day Airfield Estate continuing these legacies of food as a means of learning, philanthropy, connection, and activism.

Food as Learning at Airfield Estate – Modern Educational Charity

Experiential Learning Through Food

Humans are born equipped to ingest nutrients, but they still must learn what to eat (Nicklaus 2016). Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. As one of the most innate and essential human behaviours, eating is a transformational experience which can impart many learnings to the consumer. This is apparent from the very first stages of life, with learning about flavours beginning in the womb during early infancy (Ventura and Worobey 2013). Even these very early food experiences and learnings have lasting effects, serving as the foundation of the continuing development of food preferences across the lifespan (Nehring et al. 2015). Feeling, smelling, seeing, hearing, tasting, and doing are the ways humans explore, understand, and build familiarity with new environments and experiences. As a multi-sensory experience, food poses a strong channel for learning as it leaves a corporal, intellectual, and emotional imprint on us (Hedegaard 2018). Food offers a unique experience that differs from other sensory impressions such as music and art – in eating and tasting we incorporate the sensory object, making it a part of ourselves. Our link to the earth is reinforced by the consumption of food produced on it. Sharing the bounty of food production with others can also reinforce our community connections through the principle of incorporation as introduced by Fischler (1988). We, literally, are what we eat, and when that is shared it bonds us to others. “To incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat” (Fischler 1988, 279). Food offers an avenue for the literal consumption of knowledge, fully embedding the learning experience and making it a part of ourselves.

Airfield Estate prioritises an experiential approach to food education, whereby learners actively discover food and food production through experimentation, exploration, and play. Active, experience-based methods of learning such as cooking, food preparation, taste-testing, food games, and gardening have been suggested to promote critical thinking and elicit improvements in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours more effectively than traditional didactic methods of teaching (Dudley, Cotton, and Peralta 2015; Petrie 2015). Airfield Estate has long been an advocate and example of this experiential approach to food education and has conducted research to support the efficacy of hands-on, sensory learning techniques as a means of increasing vegetable intake in young children (Moore Heslin et al. 2023). Adopting a lifespan approach to food education, Airfield also

exemplifies the power of experiential learning through food for all age groups, with our research indicating that the activities of our experiential education tours, cookery classes, workshops, and Community Food Hub are effective and impactful in improving food literacy across a diverse range of populations. Leaning into the concept of informal learning environments, which have been shown to promote and contribute toward a holistic approach to food education (Kauppinen and Palojoki 2023), Airfield Estate acts as a living museum and classroom that aims to encourage learners of all ages to discover and interact with systems of food production.

Food as a Tool for Education

Formal, curriculum-based food education in the Republic of Ireland has been critiqued for focusing solely on health and failing to address the multifaceted and complex nature of the modern food system and food consumption (Darmody 2022). Applied experiences of food education are suggested to help facilitate broader systems thinking, a greater understanding of and empathy towards nuanced and complex food system issues, and a greater acceptance of differences (Lehrer 2023). However, these approaches remain less widely used than curriculum-based approaches, which are less effective in improving eating behaviours and nutritional knowledge despite their enduring popularity (Dudley, Cotton, and Peralta 2015). In an effort to contribute to a more holistic approach to food education within the Irish school curriculum, Airfield Estate has created “Food From the Ground Up”, a short course in food education designed for students within the Junior Certificate cycle in Irish secondary schools. The course directly links students with food production and brings them on an interactive learning journey across the entire food system, starting with farming and the land and continuing to food processing, marketing, and consumption. As the consumers of tomorrow, the students who take part in this course are opened to a world of understanding about systems of food production at both local, national, and international levels. These connections are further continued through the Farmer Time programme, an education programme that connects farmers with schools across Ireland. A successful example of education outreach, Airfield Estate co-ordinates the delivery of the Farmer Time programme in Ireland, helping to bridge the gap between consumers and producers and change the narrative around agriculture and food. Serving as important additions to the existing curriculum, Food from the Ground Up and Farmer Time draws from the idea that learning from and connecting with food and food producers can help prepare individuals, teachers, and communities to transform the food system.

Food as a Means of Looking to the Future – Learning About Sustainability

There is much debate about whether food is a commodity or a common good (Vivero-Pol 2017; 2019; Vivero-Pol 2013). The narrative of food as a private good or a

tradable commodity has long been the dominant message and ethos of the industrial food system (Vivero-Pol 2013). This is reflected in the Irish food system, with the concept and use of food as a commodity item key to the history of Irish food. As Cullen writes in *The Emergence of Modern Ireland*, “Irish diet and cooking have thus been represented in what is on reflection a paradoxical position: a poverty of repertory and skill in a food exporting country” (Cullen 1982, 141). While the assertion that there is any shortage of cookery skills in Irish history could be debated (and in fact has been), the characterisation of Ireland as a “food exporting country” is a stark reminder of food’s economic value for the Irish throughout history. Irish food studies have perhaps been limited by the perception that the story of Irish food is a story of hunger, as it is true in that as soon as an item was seen to have commodified value it was often shifted to an export, leaving the local people to whatever was left behind (Mac Con Iomaire and Maher 2014). This has resulted in the positioning of food in legal, political, and historical spheres as a good, whereby its value is determined by price (Vivero-Pol 2017). This commodified framing of food has been central to creating the current global food system, where financial desires and economic returns are prioritised over social and environmental justice (Jackson et al. 2021).

This fragmented and unjust positioning of food has led to food being labelled by human rights expert Susan Marks as “the root of contemporary misery” (Marks 2011, 67). The brunt of this misery is being felt by nature and our climate, with our modern-day food system exerting major effects of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation (T. G. Benton et al. 2021; Vermeulen, Campbell, and Ingram 2012). Ireland has been noted as making a slow transition to a low-carbon society (Fahy 2020) and is somewhat struggling with action on improving the sustainability, healthfulness, equity, and resilience of its food system (Sage and Kenny 2017). Through its education, research, and advocacy efforts, that involve and target stakeholders across all levels of the Irish food system, Airfield Estate is working to help improve the sustainability of the food system from soil to society.

Food is a “bundle of ecological relationships” (Vivero-Pol 2018, 35). By studying food systems, we gain insight into ecological sustainability and the interconnectedness of the earth’s communities and environments. As a traditionally agricultural society, small, family farmers have long been the guardians of Ireland and the custodians of the countryside. At Airfield Estate, the central role of agriculture in modern nutritional systems and environmental stewardship is highlighted through living examples across the estate. When visiting, consumers can experience and learn about a seasonal, local, circular, regenerative food system through direct experiences with organic and regenerative systems of food production as well as through interpretive experiences like World of Soil. Traditional methods of regenerative and organic agriculture and horticulture are being preserved and promoted, as modern research proves them as viable means of sustainable, efficient, and profitable food production. With an aim to help inspire

and enable informed food choices outside the gates of the Estate, showcasing and involving all levels of society in food production is key to a more sustainable food system. As Dublin's sustainable food hub, food is used as both a means of learning about preservation and progress, and in doing so translates the history and legacy of the Overend sisters into the modern day. Sustainability was a way of life for the Overend sisters and those who lived and worked at Airfield Estate. Today, we continue and learn from this engrained and holistic approach to food sustainability, and consistently work to communicate these learnings to wider audiences in an engaging and impactful way.

Conclusion

Through the sustainable food system at Airfield Estate, food enables the preservation of our connection to the landscape that produces it, and we can learn about the lives and practices of those who came before us. At Airfield Estate, we are not just educating people, we are empowering change within them to become responsible participants in a sustainable food system. The link to the past is strengthened by our continued use of food as a means of education, recreation, connection, philanthropy, and activism, all of which are fundamentally grounded in the learnings and legacies that come from and through food. Ultimately, Airfield Estate is not just a farm; it is a repository of living memory and learning that inspires curiosity and fosters deeper learning about the intricate interconnectedness of food, history, culture, and the environment. Through our ongoing efforts, Airfield Estate exemplifies how food can serve as a powerful vehicle for education, preservation, and positive change, inviting us all to become responsible stewards of our sustainable food system.

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