

Supermarkets

Love them or loathe them, supermarkets are highly convenient and the majority of the British public uses them regularly. They hold a central place in the retail economy and have a great deal of power – over producers, consumers, and the way food is farmed and transported. While some supermarkets still have a very long way to go, others are making significant efforts to use their power more benignly and conduct their business in an ethical manner.

A HUGE POWER

For every £1 of household expenditure around 49p is spent in supermarkets. And of this, 33p is spent in just the four largest supermarket groups (Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco). So, for the ethical shopper, the choice of supermarket is probably one of the most crucial decisions to make.

The first supermarkets as we know them today opened in the 19th century, when the Co-operative Movement formed a group of local retailers. Today the UK shopping landscape looks quite different, with 80 per cent of grocery shopping being done in supermarkets. As William Moyes, Director General of the British Retail Consortium, said: 'Let's be honest, life without supermarkets would be hell... What used to take all day now takes a couple of hours.' With better value, more choice and more convenience, no wonder British consumers seem to be in love with supermarkets. But however much we try to ignore it, this convenience comes at a cost.

SUPERMARKET PROGRESS

There are some ethical areas in which supermarkets have made a lot of progress, and are even showing the way for other big businesses. The four product sectors below have increased in availability as a result of support from supermarkets, which have the selling power to move an alternative brand into the mainstream market. In each case, however, consumer demand has had a huge effect in getting the changes made.

1 More fair trade products

All supermarkets now sell some fair trade products – products which give a fairer price to farmers and producers in the developing world. Furthermore, most of them also have their own fair trade brands.

2 More organic products

The Soil Association says that 'our health is directly connected to the health of the food we eat, ultimately to the health of the soil'. Organic farming refers to the growing

SUPERMARKETS WHICH SELL OWN BRAND FAIR TRADE PRODUCTS INCLUDE:

- Asda
- Co-op
- Marks & Spencer
- Morrison's
- Sainsbury's
- Somerfield
- Tesco
- Waitrose

of food crops without the use of synthetic chemical pesticides or fertilisers. Pests are controlled by cultivation techniques and the use of pesticides derived from natural sources. Organic farmers may use seven out of the hundreds of pesticides available. Moreover, animals are reared without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers, common in intensive livestock farming.

In response to growing consumer concern about the quality of the food they eat, big retailers have made real efforts to provide a wider range of organic products.

Today the Co-op is considered the largest organic 'farmer' in the UK. Sainsbury's has received its third award from the Soil Association for being best organic retailer. Both received Soil Association approval for their own-brand products.

3 Putting a stop to GM

Genetically modified (GM) foods are foods produced using plant or animal ingredients that have been modified using gene technology. The British public are anxious about the use of GM foods because their effects on human health are unknown. Also, releasing genetically altered organisms into the environment could disrupt ecosystems, and genetically modified crops have been proved to be more harmful to many groups of wildlife than their conventional equivalent.

The major supermarkets have reacted to consumers' opposition to genetically modified food and have taken measures to reduce the number of products containing GMOs. All major supermarket chains now store non-GM products, and Marks & Spencer have a non-GM policy on the whole range of their products.

4 More vegetarian products

Some people choose a vegetarian diet for religious, ethical or environmental reasons, or to save money. Others switch to a plant-based diet for health reasons. A vegetarian diet generally contains less total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol and includes more dietary fibre. Vegetarians have lower rates of some cancers, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and type-2 diabetes. The vegetable kingdom provides all the vitamins, minerals, proteins, carbohydrates and fats needed for the human diet, although it is important to watch what you eat to be sure of getting the nutrients from vegetables that you miss from animal foods.

Most people become vegetarians out of concern for animal welfare. The green pastures and pastoral barnyard scenes of years past have been replaced by windowless metal warehouses, wire cages and gestation crates in the factory farms of today. On factory farms, animals often spend their entire lives confined to cages or stalls barely larger than their own bodies. And death for these animals doesn't always come quickly or painlessly.

Today, it is possible to find a good range of vegetarian products in our supermarket aisles. Compared to Europe, the UK has quite an advanced approach to labelling their products as suitable for vegetarians.

LOCAL ISSUES

The opening of a big out-of-town supermarket inevitably has an effect on smaller high street shops. By 2005 there were only 9,000 local butchers, compared to 23,000 in 1985, and in 2001 small newsagents were closing at the rate of one per day. This situation has been exacerbated by the growth of branded convenience stores, which, due to their town-centre locations, pitch themselves directly against independent shops.

Crucially, while supermarkets create new jobs, they can also have an impact on existing employment – particularly if small stores lose business as a result of increased competition. Nevertheless, in response to a growing consumer appetite for ethically-traded foods, many communities are pulling together to establish stronger local initiatives, such as farmers' markets and home-delivered vegetable boxes.

The supermarkets themselves are also working harder to improve their reputations, and are in the process of making a number of positive changes to their environmental and sourcing policies. For example, Sainsbury's now sells only line-caught cod and haddock and many of the major stores now source in-season fruit and vegetables from Britain, rather than abroad. The supermarkets have also been instrumental in the drive to phase out energy-hungry incandescent light bulbs.

CONSUMER CONCERNS

Although the supermarkets can be commended for the improvements given above, there are still a number of areas in which more could be done to address consumer concerns. These include:

1) Producers

As large-scale operations, supermarkets rely on industrial farms to produce the huge quantities of food they require. The balance of power in these producer-retailer relationships is usually weighted towards the big stores, which can make it difficult for smaller suppliers to have their voices heard. A public code of conduct, covering issues such as contractual terms, de-listing and product pricing, would reassure shoppers that the people who produce their foods are being treated fairly.

2) Healthy foods

Obesity is a growing problem in the UK, and while supermarkets cannot be blamed for our expanding waistlines, they undoubtedly have a prominent role in influencing our food choices. The introduction of labelling systems such as traffic lights, which indicate the level of fat, sugar and salt in a product, is a major step forward, but clear, straightforward labelling is needed on all products to ensure that consumers really know what they are buying.

3) Loyalty cards

Loyalty cards can be indispensable money-saving devices for regular supermarket shoppers, but they also allow stores to keep an unprecedented amount of data on their patrons. This enables them to build up extensive profiles of their cardholders, a procedure that is currently used to improve the supermarket's quality of service, but which could soon branch into other areas such as security and surveillance. Greater transparency from the supermarkets about the information they hold – and what they plan to do with it – should be a priority.

FOOD MILES

Environmentalists have long been concerned about food miles – the distance food has travelled to get to your plate. Now there is greater awareness of this, and today’s shoppers are confronted with the ‘food miles dilemma’: do you choose a packet of organic beans imported from Africa, helping a local farmer overseas, but which came to England on an aircraft emitting tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere? This transportation also leads to extra packaging, and means the food has been chemically treated to keep it fresh during the journey. What is even more nonsensical is when, thanks to tax-free aviation fuel, we import food we could easily grow ourselves.

The oddities of the global market, and our demand for exotic foods, can lead to ridiculous situations. In 1997, 126 million litres of cow’s milk was imported into the UK at the same time as 270 million litres was exported. Animals suffer from our desire to have all products available everywhere; they often have to be carried alive for hundreds of miles before they are slaughtered.

Another economic issue linked with food miles is ‘just-in-time’ food management. It is an operations approach whereby food is rushed to superstores only when it is needed, to save on expensive storage. This leads to refrigerated trucks doing frequent daily return journeys to farms, only collecting some of the merchandise, with a resultant increase in pollution.

Sustain, an organisation campaigning for ethical farming, warns that as road freight increases and more and more people drive to out-of-town supermarkets, it is even more important to reduce the number of miles travelled by our food. It would like to see the end of air-freighted food altogether.

Tips for your next shopping trip:

- 1) Buy from the supermarket whose ethical policies you believe in
- 2) Buy locally-produced, organic and fair-trade goods where possible
- 3) Buy ethically accredited brands so you know they have been properly checked out - and you are buying more than just ethical claims!



- Budgens
- Co-op
- Marks & Spencer
- Morrison’s
- Waitrose



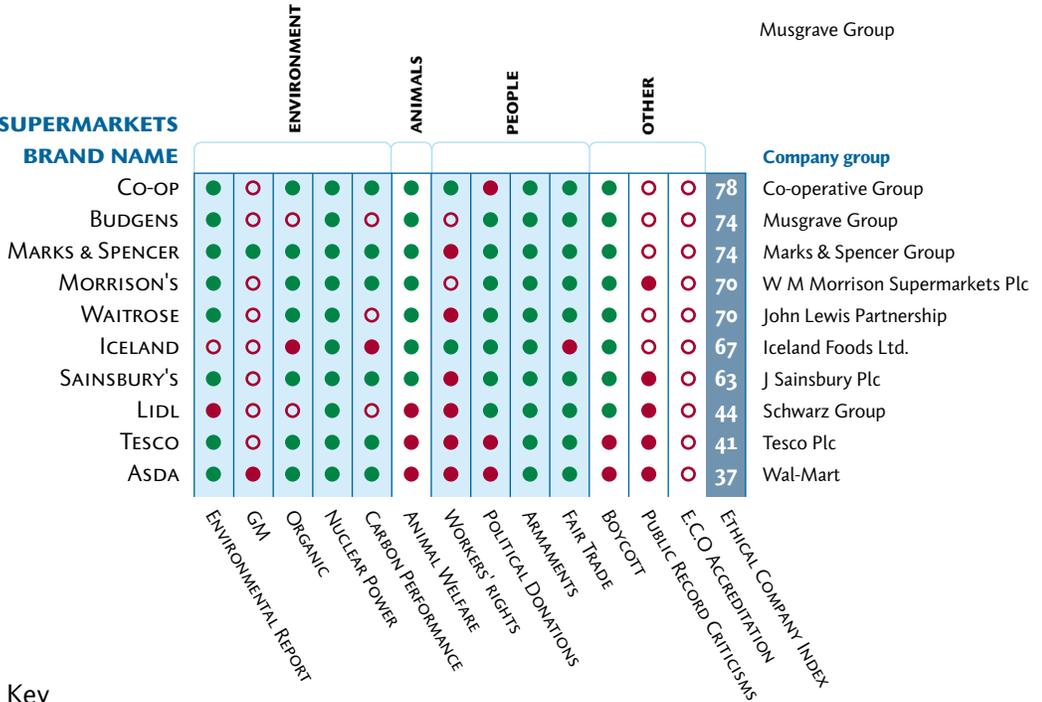
- Iceland
- Sainsbury’s



- Asda
- Lidl
- Tesco

Musgrave Group

SUPERMARKETS BRAND NAME



Key

- Top rating
- Middle rating
- Bottom rating

Source: The Ethical Company Organisation (2010)

THE WELL-TRAVELLED SUNDAY LUNCH

Source: Corporate Watch

Chicken from Thailand	10,691	miles by ship
Runner beans from Zambia	4,912	miles by plane
Carrots from Spain	1,000	miles by lorry
Mangetout from Zimbabwe	5,130	miles by plane
Potatoes from Italy	1,521	miles by lorry
Sprouts from Britain	125	miles by lorry
TOTAL	26,234	MILES

If you choose products that are in season and purchase them locally at a farmers' market, you could reduce the total journey from 26,234 to just 376 miles!

Fresh Fruit & Vegetables

In an era when supermarkets started selling blackberries from Argentina in May and mange-tout from Ethiopia all year round, the importance of seasonal organic produce seemed to be retreating at the end of the 1980s. But in the face of this unnaturally season-less global trading organic, local and seasonal food has become increasingly fashionable.

THE ORGANIC DEBATE

The media debate on whether organic food is actually nutritionally better for us or not is relentless. But the fact remains we don't actually know what the effect of continuous pesticide and fungicide ingestion will have on the human body in the long run. On top of that organic farming uses intelligent crop rotation and pasture-resting to reduce soil erosion while playing an important part in wildlife conservation. Two perfectly good reasons to go organic!

In our research the most ethical wholesale supplier of organic fruit and vegetables are Organic Farm Foods which has gained Ethical Accreditation and an outstanding Ethical Company Index score of 100. Working at the height of ethical awareness they have also adopted and been accredited with the Soil Association Ethical Trade Standard. Independent store owners (and supermarkets) looking for more information can visit: www.organicfarmfoods.co.uk

On the veg front, the purists will of course know that UK vegetable seasonality means the following:

Winter (January):

Beetroot, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, carrots, celeriac, celery, chicory, horseradish, Jerusalem artichoke, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, onions, parsnips, potatoes (main crop), radishes, rocket, salsify, shallots, spinach, turnips.

Spring (April):

Broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, chicory, cucumber, jersey royal new potatoes, kale, leeks, lettuces & salad leaves, onions, potatoes (main crop), purple sprouting broccoli, radishes, rhubarb, rocket, samphire, salsify, spinach, spring onions, watercress, wild nettles.

Summer (July):

Artichoke, aubergine, beetroot, broad beans, broccoli, carrots, celery, chillies, courgettes, cucumber, fennel, French beans, garlic, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuces & salad leaves, mange tout, new potatoes, onions, peas, peppers, potatoes (main crop), radishes, rocket, runner beans, spinach, spring onions, sweet corn, turnips, watercress, wild nettles.

Autumn (October):

Artichoke, beetroot, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, butternut squash, carrots, celeriac, celery, chicory, chillies, cucumber, fennel, garlic, horseradish, Jerusalem artichoke, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuces & salad leaves, marrow, onions, parsnips, peppers, potatoes (main crop), pumpkin, radishes, rocket, runner beans, salsify, shallots, spinach, spring onions, swede, sweet corn, turnips, watercress.



- Organic Farm Foods
- RB Organics
- Worldwide Fruit



- British & Brazilian Produce Co.
- Chingford Fruit
- Direct Produce Supplies Plc
- Empire World Trade
- Greencell
- OrchardWorld
- Wealmoor



- Keelings
- Norman Collett
- Primafruit

GOOD FOOD & DRINK

FRESH FRUIT & VEGETABLE BRAND NAME

BRAND NAME	ENVIRONMENT			ANIMALS			PEOPLE			OTHER			Company group	
	ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT	GM	ORGANIC	NUCLEAR POWER	ANIMAL WELFARE	POLITICAL DONATIONS	ARMAMENTS	FAIR TRADE	ETHICAL TRADING SCHEMES	BOYCOTT	PUBLIC RECORD	ETHICAL ACCREDITATION		ETHICAL COMPANY INDEX
ORGANIC FARM FOODS	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	100	Organic Farm Foods
WORLDWIDE FRUIT	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	88	Enza/Turner & Growers / Northcourt
RB ORGANICS	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	84	Produce World
BRITISH & BRAZILIAN PRODUCE CO.	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	80	AG Thames Holdings
CHINGFORD FRUIT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	80	AG Thames Holdings
DIRECT PRODUCE SUPPLIES	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	80	Direct Produce Supplies
GREENCELL	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	80	Westfalia Group/Hans Merensky
ORCHARDWORLD	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	76	Poupart / Argent Group Europe
EMPIRE WORLD TRADE	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	72	Empire World Trade
WEALMOOR	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	72	Wealmoor
KEELINGS	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	64	Keelings
NORMAN COLLETT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	64	Norman Collett
PRIMAFRUIT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	64	Fresca Group

Key

- Top rating
- Middle rating
- Bottom rating

Source: The Ethical Company Organisation (2010)