

## Speaker Series – The *Ethical Omnivore* with Grant Hilliard and Laura Dalrymple

**Interviewer:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. We'd like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. We were recently joined by Grant Hilliard and Laura Dalrymple from Marrickville Feather and Bone Providores. Grant and Laura joined us from the shop floor to discuss their newly published book *The Ethical Omnivore*, a user-friendly recipe and guide book to a more ethical way to buy, cook and eat meat. Welcome, Laura and Grant.

Australians are the third highest per capita consumers of meat in the world and 90 percent of the pork and chicken that we eat is factory farmed, which is a system that produces cheap product for the consumer, but a devastating cost on several different levels. *Feather and Bone* provide meat supplied only from farmers that engage in regenerative agricultural practices, a farming system that prioritizes balance over yield. Can you explain a little bit about this concept for those of us that may be new to it or unfamiliar with it?

**Laura Dalrymple:** [00:01:00] Yes, absolutely. When we first started on our journey, well, I should say, when Grant first started on this journey, he was preoccupied with finding animals that were rare breeds or heritage breeds. And he'd become aware of the lack of diversity in the animal product offering for a number of reasons, and he was energised by the opportunity for there to be different kinds of products available, as in, not just beef, but maybe Angus beef or Wagyu beef or even more.

And, he also understood that genetic diversity was a really important pillar of sustainability without genetic diversity, without complex, intricate relationships with different kinds of creatures, you don't get a robust, healthy, resilient system. So that was what first started driving him, but as he sought out those who were growing different breeds of animals, he and I, when I joined him, started to understand that the farmers who were working with these different breeds of animals and who selected those breeds for their flavour profile, but also, of course, for their contribution to the ecosystems of the farms they were running. What we started to understand was that the farmers, in some

ways placed a greater priority on the health of the soil than the health of the animals that they were actually farming for profit. And that was intriguing to us. And, over the course of time, we started to understand that what these farmers were focused on, was ecosystem health, starting with soil, and then that spreading out through all the living creatures within the farm. And, this idea of regenerative farming, I mean, literally regenerating landscape is a really critical one, particularly in Australia, where we have a very ancient, very, very dry landscape, very thin topsoil that's been farmed in a very, in quite a brutal way, with conventional farming for the last couple of hundred years. And, there's a lot of repair work that needs to be done to reintroduce balance and fertility and resilience into that landscape. So these regenerative farmers, or rather the practices regenerative, what they're focused on is creating really balanced ecosystems, balanced landscapes, where all of the creatures in that landscape are as important as each other. And it's the interactions that create the vibrant platform, the health and vitality. Regeneration, is literally regenerating landscapes.

But it's also about giving every living creature in that landscape the greatest opportunity to express its genetic potential. And so, what you end up with is farm landscapes within which there's greater carbon sequestration.

There's greater water holding capacity, there's incredibly diverse life forms of all kinds from the microbes in the soil through to the insects, through the plants, through to the animals that the farmers raising for profit.

And, it ends up being a system where, the farmers job is almost just to get out of the way of nature, and let nature, which is superior in every way in managing balance and ecosystems to do its job.

**Interviewer:** [00:04:22] So you also mentioned in the book that you're the proud owner of several retired "layer" chickens who've taken up residence in your backyard in Marrickville, which you also mentioned is great for introducing some biodiversity to your soil with the added benefit of the occasional egg. Do you have any other suggestions on how we can simplify or adapt regenerative farming practices to introduce some biodiversity to our own backyard?

**Grant Hilliard:** [00:04:45] It's diversity in the plants that you have in your yard. Probably less lawn, would be a good start. And chickens are obviously very useful for contributing fertility and processing scraps, but they do eat quite a lot of things too, so you've sort of got to protect what you've planted. If you're closely attached to it they might decide that they like tomatoes as much as you do, so fencing becomes an issue.

But apart from that, they're a great bonus for the garden.

**Interviewer:** [00:05:10] So chapter five of *The Ethical Omnivore* focuses on the dying art of whole animal butchery. And you go into the mathematics of modern butchery practices as informed by our consumption patterns of particular cuts of meat. You mentioned several examples, probably the most obvious one being the miracle Christmas ham. But the one that stood out to me was the cattle that *Feather and Bone* buys direct from the farm, that only 50 percent of the carcass yields cuts that most consumers are familiar with and comfortable cooking with.

And I've got a quote from the book that says, "While we can turn the remaining 50 percent into products like dice, mince, sausages and broth, but if we're going to pay dues to the life given up to feed us and not waste a thing, customers need to be persuaded to jump in the deep end and try new cuts." So the second half of the book is titled *Let's Eat*, and it's a collection of recipes featuring both familiar cuts and those that have fallen out of the common culinary repertoire in recent years.

One of my earliest culinary memories is my mum's lambs fry.

**Laura Dalrymple:** I love that.

**Interviewer:** Which I haven't seen for years. I know. Why have these cuts fallen out of favour and what can we do to bring them back?

And why is it important that we bring them back?

**Grant Hilliard:** [00:06:24] It really closely mirrors the rise of industrial agriculture, providing of so called prime cuts to the exclusion of other cuts and the adaptation of animals shape and size, so that, for instance, in the chicken, the breast meat is

probably twice as much now as it was only 50 years ago. The evolution of industrial agriculture has created a sense that you only need to eat those pieces from an animal, and that that's quite alright and they're cheap enough, so why would you argue with that? We would say that the argument is that the cost of that is greater than the reward, both in terms of animal welfare, the people who look after those animals in many cases, especially in terms of intensive industrial agriculture, and for the choices the consumer gets. So, most of these recipes and the ingredients would be very familiar to our elderly parents or grandparents or virtually anyone. So we've only really dropped a generation or two, but that those one or two generations means that we've lost a significant amount of skill and kitchen knowhow. Your memory of your mother's cooking, that would have been relatively standard to cook offal probably once every one or two weeks. Now it seems some sort of an exotic peculiarity, unless it's in the form of pate or something like that where it's sort of denatured. That would have been extraordinarily ordinary. It's certainly commonplace. And it's not now, but that's a very recent phenomenon and it is about what industrial agriculture says that we can have. That's what we're contesting, that the cost of providing those just singular cuts, whether it's eye fillet or breast fillet, is not worth the exchange.

**Interviewer:** [00:08:07] It's interesting because you were also talking about how meats that are, unfamiliar cuts to modern consumers, that are cured in traditional methods, now, the palette is quite unfamiliar to modern consumers. That it might be a bit too intense.

**Grant Hilliard:** [00:08:23] You have flavour and texture, actually. Yeah, well, they are more flavoursome and chicken is almost the most insipid meat available now. It virtually has no flavour. Chicken breast is close to flavourless, but that becomes desirable.

It's dressed up with sauces and lots of salt.

So the way it gets processed then becomes the critical thing rather than the object itself or the ingredient itself.

**Interviewer:** [00:08:44] And I have to mention, I did try one of the recipes on the weekend.

**Laura Dalrymple:** Oh, yes. Which one?

**Interviewer:** [00:08:49] I tried the chicken. The basic one. My enthusiasm's a bit greater than my skill, so I tried the chicken with pine nuts.

**Laura Dalrymple:** [00:08:58] Oh, that's Kathryn Sommerlad's one.

**Interviewer:** [00:09:02] Yeah, it was beautiful.

**Laura Dalrymple:** Yeah, it's delicious.

**Interviewer:** And very user friendly given my skill level.

**Laura Dalrymple:** [00:09:05] Well, that's the point of it. I mean, there are some harder recipes in there, but the point was to offer recipes from our community, who are all different kinds of people.

The point is that sometimes people look at food like the food that we sell, and say, oh, that's outside my price range, or, that's only for affluent people, but really the fact is that anybody can choose to eat like this, if they want to.

It does take a certain series of decisions and there are choices that have to be made.

You have to inform yourself a little bit more about which parts of the animal you're eating. And, you might have to spend a little bit more time in the preparation and sourcing, but, we have people who, don't think twice about dropping plenty of money on the food that they buy from us and others for whom it's a really, really careful decision. And they choose the secondary cuts, they choose very particular things and they might not eat meat very often.

But when they do, they choose to eat meat that they feel matches their belief system and their ethics and the production systems they want to support.

So, so the point of those recipes really was to say, look, all sorts of different kinds of people do this and you can do it too.

**Interviewer:** [00:10:16] Even me.

And you also talk in the book about the complex and quite contrary relationship we've developed with the food that we prepare and consume. You're right, on one hand, there's this sharp decline in the time we spend making and cooking food and the importance we attach to the traditional understanding that food is medicine. But on the other hand, we've become utterly obsessed with the idea of food. So obviously, the COVID-19 lockdown and the social distancing environment has obviously intensified this issue in recent weeks, with people turning to online influences as their only access to the outside world and in a desperate attempt to relieve boredom, I suppose. What can we do to capitalize on this moment in time to encourage a shift towards a more sustainable approach to food consumption?

**Grant Hilliard:** [00:11:03] I'll let Laura answer that but I would just say before she starts that the interesting thing is time, and suddenly people have time. And so people have started baking again and doing things that would be, again, fairly standard two generations ago, three generations ago. Generally, people feel time poor and that's why they're looking for cuts that are very quick to cook, but Laura can expand on that.

**Laura Dalrymple:** [00:11:24] Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, I think it has a little bit to do with the previous question which is that at a certain point if you get used to something, then that becomes what you ask for, and what you're used to determines the extent of your imagination and your desire. So customers are going to butchers shops, and they're being presented with a particular range of cuts that defines the extent of their knowledge and understanding.

So that's what they ask for. And then the butcher gets those cuts in because that's what the customers are asking for, and it becomes a self-fulfilling thing and it just gets narrower and narrower and narrower unless somebody says, hang on, here's an option, here's an alternative, here's another way of looking at things.

And I think what Grant's saying is right, in this time, where people do have more time and also they've been catapulted into a fearful position, suddenly questioning everything that's going on around them, and the safety and the security, there's a heightened sensitivity to some of these things. So people are exploring a little bit more.

They're questioning a bit more. We've seen an increase in people coming to us because they're saying "I had time to stop and think about it. And I thought, I only want to eat healthy food. I want to know where my food comes from. I want to understand the animals I'm eating or raised. And so it forced people to stop and consider things a little bit more carefully, which is really welcome.

And that's the start of it, because the change in terms of food is going to be grassroots. Legislation is important. Changing regulations is critical.

Political will is critical, but that's a slow process.

What really changes things in our experience is what people buy every dollar they spend, is a dollar that they're voting for, a different food system. Whether you buy an intensive, intensive chicken breast, that's a vote for an intensive production system. If you buy something else, it's a vote for something else. So, I think people are starting to become, there's a glimmer of awareness around that now. And, there's nothing like a bit of a shock to make people stop and consider things. And that's what we've had. So, I think it's an opportunity for these kinds of conversations to occur.

**Interviewer:** [00:13:22] For my final question, as this is a library podcast, we always like to finish by asking for reading recommendations. And you mentioned in the book *The Ethical Omnivore*, that you did a huge amount of reading while you were establishing *Feather and Bone*. You both did. And given that you were new to the industry and wanted to learn as much as you could, do you have any reading recommendations for anyone wanting to learn more about regenerative agriculture or environmentally sustainable food practices in general?

**Laura Dalrymple:** [00:13:50] There's lots of I mean, there are just piles and piles of books. And what I guess is really exciting, is that there's more and more and more of this material coming out constantly now. So, 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 20 years ago,

there was some amazing books that had been written by the people who started some of this thinking. But, since that time, there's just this increasing cascade of fantastic stuff written about all of these issues. Particularly when it comes to meat I think there's more and more interesting stuff happening. So there's also some fantastic websites that are really worth going into. In Australia there's a few standouts depending where you want to jump in. Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* is a really important book to read, that's a very particular book. There's a great book called *Call of the Reed Warbler* by Charlie Massy, which is a really important book about Australian generative agriculture.

**Grant Hilliard:** I'd just say that Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is a very good, readable starting point, as a background to these sorts of concerns, and he's very skilled at amassing information, but also conveying it with a journalistic flair.

If you're going to probably read one book to introduce you to the ideas I'd almost say that *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is the best starting point. At the background though Eric Rolls *A Million Wild Acres* is a really extraordinary book and provide an overview of how we came to do European style agriculture in Australia and also, *The Bush* by Don Watson. I think those two both provide really good context for the issues that are discussed really clearly in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.

**Laura Dalrymple:** [00:15:16] There's a whole list of books and websites in the back of our book. These are all the ones, I suppose. So it's a good reference if you are looking for more stuff.

**Interviewer:** [00:15:24] Thanks for your time, Grant and Laura. *The Ethical Omnivore* has recently been published by Murdoch Press and is available at all good local booksellers. If you'd like to continue the conversation with Grant and Laura, you can subscribe to the regular *Feather and Bone* newsletter or the *Chew the Fat* blog. Details are available on the *Feather and Bone* website. You can also share recipes and cooking tips by joining the friends of *Feather and Bone* Facebook community. If you'd like to take advantage of some of the Grant and Laura's reading suggestions, you can find many of these titles available for reservation in our online library catalogue. Thank you for listening and look out for more upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library, What's On and social media channels.