

## Is urban farming only for rich hipsters?

Farms are springing up in cities across Europe, but if they exclude lower income groups they'll do little to help shift towards sustainable food system



A new wave of urban agriculture enterprises faces challenges around making the technology and produce accessible to everyone. Photograph: Mandy Zammit/GrowUp Box

**Gina Lovett**

Monday 15 February 2016 12.35 GMT

**S**pending on ethical food and drink products - including organic, Fairtrade, free range and freedom foods - hit £8.4bn in the UK in 2013, making up 8.5% of all household food sales.

By leveraging environmental credentials, such as local, sustainable and transparent production, a new wave of urban agriculture enterprises are justifying a premium price. But while a higher price point might better reflect the true cost of food production and help build a viable business,

it can also exclude lower income groups, fuelling perception that local, sustainably produced food is the preserve of food elitists.

### **Making urban grown produce affordable**

“This is a real challenge,” says Kate Hofman, CEO and co-founder of London-based aquaponics enterprise GrowUp Urban Farms, which produces fish, salads and herbs in unused city spaces to sell wholesale. Unit 84 - its aquaponic, vertical farm - is housed in an industrial warehouse in east London. Launched in autumn last year, it has a projected annual production of 20 tonnes of greens, salads, and herbs (enough for 200,000 salad bags) and four tonnes of tilapia (cichlid fish). It sells its produce as wholesale to local restaurants and grocers.



GrowUp farms fish inside an industrial warehouse in London's Beckton. Photograph: Mandy Zammit/GrowUp Urban Farms

“Food is a commodity, and we have to make the business work. Of course, we are growing more expensive things [such as micro-greens] with a bigger margin for a customer who has more to spend, but we are trying to grow other affordable things like mixed salad, and get those into retailers that are widely accessible,” says Hofman. GrowUp Urban Farms does not share wholesale prices but, as an example, customers can currently buy 50g of peashoots through Farmdrop for £1.10 compared to £1 for the same weight on Sainsbury's website.

As the business develops, Hofman is aiming to produce premium micro-greens for Michelin-starred restaurants that in turn can, she says, support the expansion of more affordable salads and herbs.

### **Accessible technology**

Erez Galonska, founder and CEO of Berlin-based Infarm which sells a range of modular, app-controlled, indoor hydroponic growing systems, agrees that accessibility is important.

A big part of Infarm's focus, according to Galonska, is democratising growing technologies to produce high quality produce at affordable prices. "Anyone [shops, restaurants, schools and hospitals] should be able to have their own farm, and grow their own food. The first ones to do it are obviously the early adopter types but, in principle, there is no reason for it not to become a standard."

Berlin's Metro Cash & Carry supermarket, part of the Metro Group wholesale chain, has already implemented the Infarm hydroponics system in store, growing herbs, radish and greens which Infarm says will be available at a price comparable to Metro's other fresh goods. Infarm will begin targeting businesses globally this year.



Indoor farm in Berlin's Metro Cash & Carry supermarket. Photograph: Merav Maroody/Infarm

### **Workforce diversity**

Swiss aquaponics enterprise Urban Farmers - which sells its urban growing system and raises tilapia, micro-greens, salads and herbs - has taken over the rooftop floors of De Schilde, a former Philips TV and phone set factory in The Hague. It aims to produce 45 tonnes of vegetables and 19 tonnes of tilapia annually from summer 2016. Other enterprises including a microbrewery are expected to follow.



Tycho Vermeulen - a horticulture researcher from Wageningen University who has worked to attract more urban agriculture enterprises to become tenants of De Schilde - is concerned about diversity of the urban farming workforce. “It’s just an observation, but the tendency for urban agriculture entrepreneurs is to be white and middle-class,” he says.



Urban Farmers pilot rooftop farm in Basel , based in the Dreispitz area south of Basel, just a few tram stops from the centre of the city. Photograph: Raphi See (Raphael Seebacher)/Urban Farmers

For urban agriculture to move beyond serving a niche group of people and make a real impact on the global food system, it will have to engage a wider demographic. This has been the driver behind GrowUp’s education and training programme in the London borough of Newham.

According to Hofman, Newham has “one of London’s highest unemployment rates ... There’s a real need for job opportunities [with companies] that are prepared to invest in training young people with a poor history of educational attainment”.

GrowUp has created roles specifically for young local people with a history of poor educational attainment, training them as aquaponics technicians for commercial food production and developing their skills in planning crops and monitoring quality. Hofman hopes that they will stay and develop with the business as it expands.



GrowUp is creating jobs for local people from London's Newham borough. Photograph: Mandy Zammit/GrowUp Urban Farms

## **Wider inequalities in the food system**

For some the challenges around equality in urban agriculture are simply a reflection of the global food system's wider issues. Patrick Holden, founding director and CEO of the Sustainable Food Trust, says, for example, that many of those working in the food sector are paid poorly and as a result, "the people who produce our food can't afford good food".

Holden hopes the interest in urban food will end up benefitting the whole of society in the future. "There's a whole generation for whom urban food growing is becoming a major interest. These kinds of food revolutions tend to be led by people who have more information, and maybe more disposable income, but that's not to say they're not tapping into something of interest to all sections of society," he says.

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