

I want my food to be fair

From the Caribbean to the Middle East, *Joanna Blythman* learns how Fairtrade is benefiting producers around the globe



People often ask me if they should trust and support Fairtrade. My answer is always an unequivocal yes.

Admittedly, when it first emerged as an alternative model for sourcing food from far afield, this certification scheme met scepticism from some consumers who, while prepared to pay a premium for a more ethical product, found the range of food limited and not necessarily top quality. Now things have changed. I'm addicted to its products, such as Equal Exchange's luscious cashew nut butter, made by small farmers in El Salvador. Nowadays, I wouldn't dream of buying a banana without the familiar black and blue logo.

I have met many Fairtrade growers who have left me in no doubt about the tangible difference that this more equitable style of global trade makes to their lives. On the Caribbean island of Dominica I saw the colourful bus shelter, emblazoned with the familiar Fairtrade logo, that shaded workers from the unrelenting sun on their way to and from the banana fields. This small but important improvement was funded by the 'social premium', the name given to the extra funds that Fairtrade producers receive and use to fund community projects of their choosing. Fairtrade growers are also guaranteed

a minimum price for their products. This reliable income shields them somewhat from fluctuations in the market price. These concrete benefits to producers' lives all over the world are what we're funding when we pay a little more at the checkout.

In the West Bank, I watched a co-op of

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women who live in a refugee camp hand-making matfoul, the traditional Palestinian

couscous. Without

the extra funds and public profile that

Fairtrade generates from supportive

consumers, I doubt

that this women's venture would still be in business, and the wider world would not have tasted this authentic food.

In Ghana recently, I visited the world's first Fairtrade plantation. Since 1996, the extra revenue has literally transformed its local area, funding the building of a school, an operating theatre in the local hospital, drinking water storage tanks in three villages, educational grants for workers' families and more.

What struck me particularly in Ghana was how worker empowerment programmes, run by local trade unions in collaboration with Fairtrade organisations, are transforming women's lives. Female workers on Ghana's Fairtrade plantations, even when hired on a temporary basis, enjoy working conditions that many Western women would envy: a written contract; a guaranteed minimum wage; an eight-hour day (with an hour's break, or two for breastfeeding mothers); three months paid maternity leave, paid public holidays, two weeks paid annual leave, and paid sick leave.

Recently, with a grant from Comic Relief, female workers in Ghana tackled less overt issues, such as sexual harassment by foremen, and the right to change to lighter jobs when pregnant. So female workers' reticence about speaking out publicly is giving way to confident negotiation that is securing theoretical rights in practice. Adwoa Sakyi, a Ghanaian women's workforce organiser, says: 'Now we are bold!'

When we buy food from faraway places, we often worry about the working conditions of the people who produced it for us. My first-hand experience convinces me that Fairtrade is everything it's cracked up to be and, if you care about the people who produce your food, worth every penny.

Good Food contributing editor Joanna is an award-winning food journalist who has written on the subject for 25 years. She is also a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4.

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Next month:
My eco-friendly kitchen

Other labels to look for

A number of other certification schemes aim to benefit workers and producers. These include Rainforest Alliance (rainforest-alliance.org), Cocoa Life (cocalife.org), Waitrose Foundation (waitrose.com) and Tesco Nurture (tesco.com/nurture/). They do demand certain enhanced social, environmental and health and safety standards, but none deliver a guaranteed minimum price for growers or the social premium.



Do you seek out food carrying welfare or certification labels when you're shopping?

Contact us at hello@bbcgoodfoodmagazine.com

Fairtrade Fortnight runs from 27 February-12 March. To take part in fundraising or find out about events near you, visit fortnight.fairtrade.org.uk



'Darina Allen, of Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland (cookingstun.ie). There's no one whose instincts about food I trust more. She marries food appreciation and knowledge with activism and principle. Her school is on an incredible organic farm that produces some of the best food you'll ever eat.'