



EAT, DRINK

AND BE

GREEN

At Acorn House, diners can indulge in exotic food and fine wines in luxury surroundings – and still save the planet.

Adharanand Finn visits an eco-eatery with a difference

A taste
of the
future

Acorn House might just be the greenest restaurant in Britain. Absolutely everything about it has been done with the environment in mind, from the seasonal menu to the organic paint on the walls.

Not that its environmental credentials are immediately apparent as you walk in through the door. The modern decor, sharply dressed staff and rows of fine wines lined along the wall make it the kind of restaurant to which you may bring someone to impress them. But underneath the surface, the whole thing is an environmentalist's dream.

Arthur Potts Dawson, the head chef at Acorn House and one half of Bliss Restaurant Consultancy, the company behind the opening of the restaurant in King's Cross, London, is a man on a mission. A former head chef at the River Café and Jamie Oliver's Fifteen, he says he wants to make an impact on the restaurant industry by showing that a top commer-

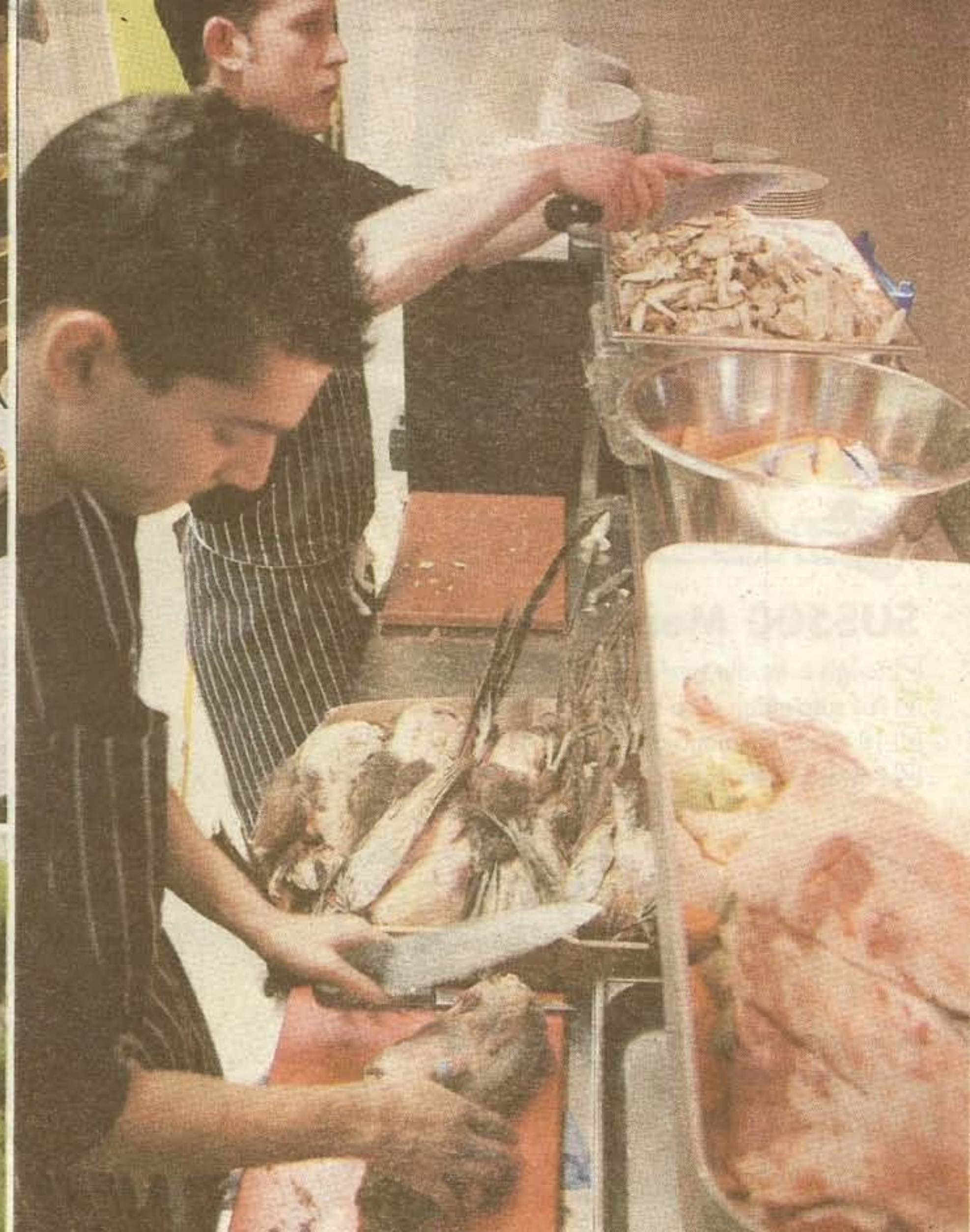
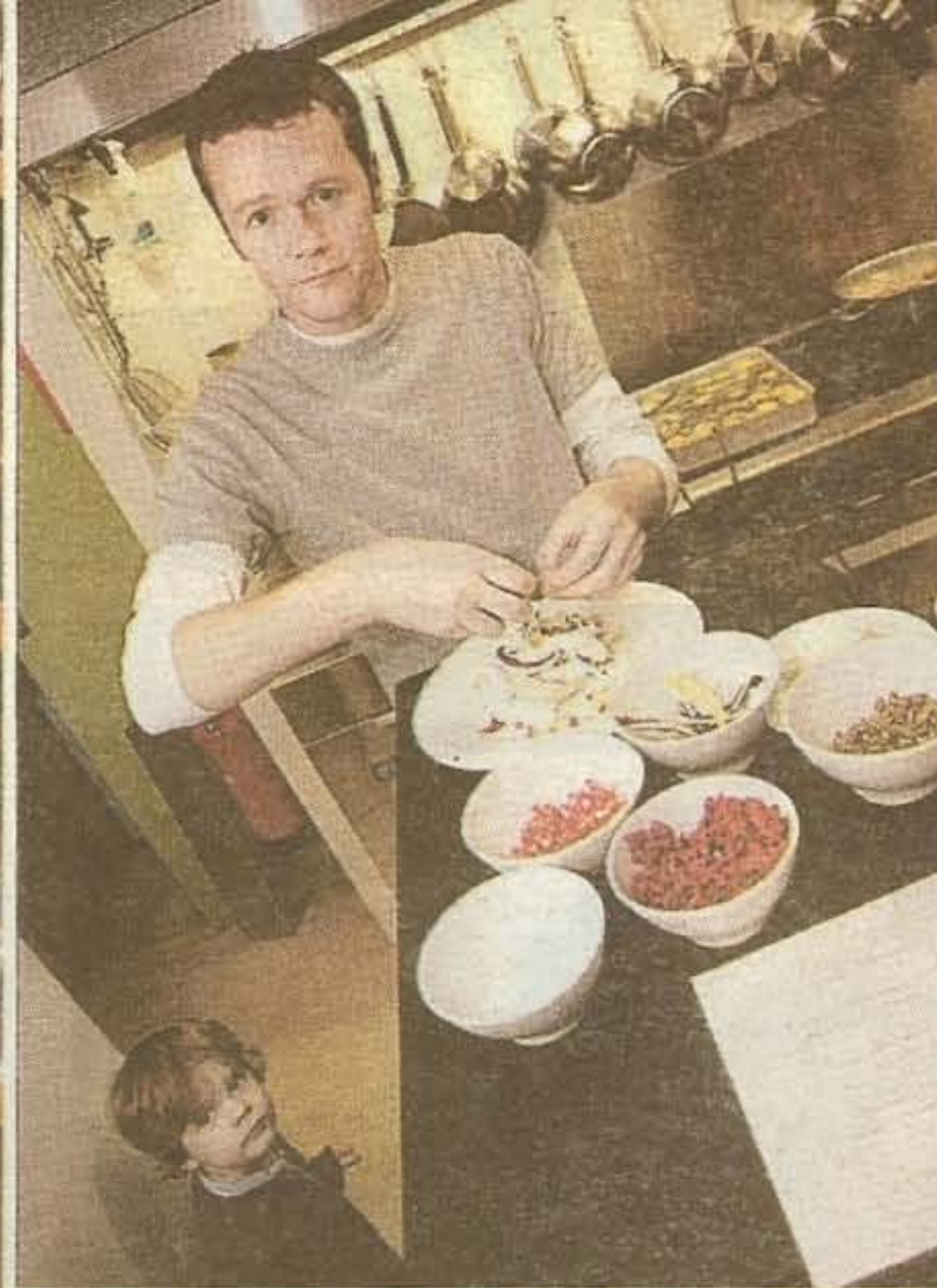
cial restaurant can be green. He talks passionately about understanding the whole food process, from where and how the food for the restaurant is grown to how the waste is disposed of.

"Normally, the chef is just involved in purchasing and preparing the food," he says. "But I know where my food is grown, how it is transported, how it is stored, and I know where my rubbish goes."

Most of the restaurant's food is bought from local suppliers. In doing this, Acorn House is supporting the Mayor's Food Strategy for London, which aims to reduce the capital's ecological footprint over 10 years by making its food system sustainable. Jenny Jones, the chairwoman of London Food, says the strategy "seeks ways to support local, regional and organic producers, and help connect them to London markets and consumers".

As well as buying primarily local and seasonal fruit and vegetables, Mr Potts Dawson says he is less demanding of his fish suppliers than most chefs. "While some chefs will pay through the nose to get a particular fish, I rely on the supplier to tell me what's available," he says. "For us, it's back to the 'fish of the day' ethos."

And it's not just the food that is green. Mr Potts Dawson's partner at Bliss, James Grainger-Smith, the restaurant's director and wine expert, says he is doing



his best to get local English wines on the list. And bottled water is supplied by Belu, which makes bottles from biodegradable corn and gives all of its profits to clean-water projects.

Some things can't be produced in the UK, of course, things such as coffee and peppercorns. But anything Acorn House needs to import from abroad is brought in by boat rather than plane. And Mr Potts Dawson and Mr Grainger-Smith are constantly looking for innovative ways to save on the amount of transportation involved. For example, after sourcing fairtrade coffee from Brazil, they decided to buy Brazilian cutlery, and so Acorn House's knives and forks travelled across the Atlantic on the same boat as the coffee.

Another of Bliss's innovative ideas is to give customers a choice as to the size of their portions. This saves on waste and offers customers the option to save money if they are not particularly hungry.

Cost savings for the restaurant are particularly relevant when it comes to getting rid of waste, which is one of Mr Potts Dawson's favourite talking points. "Our raw waste will be mulched, then processed through an on-site wormery and used to create soil for a vegetable and herb garden on the roof of the restaurant," he says, obviously pleased with this solution. He points out that

restaurants have to pay to have their rubbish taken away, and that the cost of this is set to rise steeply in the next few years. Financial pressures are always helpful in making people choose the green option, and Acorn House hopes to set an example of the potential cost savings by setting up a procurement company to take away and recycle the waste from other restaurants. Although the restaurants will have to pay, it will cost them less than throwing it away.

"We have been approached by a government agency to set this up," Mr Potts Dawson says. "It won't make us any money, it's a social enterprise, but hopefully it will show restaurants that recycling makes sense."

Setting an example to the food industry is one of Bliss's main aims. Mr Potts Dawson talks about creating a "ripple effect on the industry". He and Mr Grainger-Smith were instrumental in setting up and running

Customers can choose the size of portions, which saves on waste and lets them save money

Fifteen, and it was largely because of this that the Terrence Higgins Trust and the Shoreditch Trust, which are financing the restaurant and will get 78 per cent of the profits, approached Bliss. Acorn House, too, will be a training restaurant. But while Fifteen was a social venture, Acorn House is about making an impact on the environmentally damaging practices of the catering industry. Each year, it will train up 10 "top eco-warrior chefs", as Mr Potts Dawson calls them, who will go out and spread their green food knowledge throughout the industry.

But will the industry pay any attention? "Well, it will have to change in the future, anyway," Mr Potts Dawson says. "So there is longevity in this." His reasoning is vindicated by the recent Stern report detailing the huge financial costs for businesses of ignoring their environmental impact, and Acorn House may be a glimpse into how all restaurants will be run in the future. Perhaps someone reading this in 10 years will wonder why it was even worth commenting on, but for now, the way Acorn House is being run is still a radical shift from normal restaurant practices. "We're trying to be more than just another restaurant," Mr Potts Dawson says.

To help distinguish it further, Mr Potts Dawson has devised a cuisine he calls Modern London

for the restaurant's menu. Born, raised and trained in London, he wants his food to reflect what he calls the city's "melting pot of food", embracing everything from French to Japanese influences, though using primarily local ingredients, of course. "I want it to be formless, and dependent on supplies. While the menu is fixed each month, in reality it will be different each day depending on how I interpret it."

Mr Potts Dawson admits that the restaurant is still a work in progress in some areas. The restaurant van, for example, still needs a sponsor to pay for its switch to biofuel, while a plan to set up a healthy breakfast club for local schoolchildren is still in its infancy. Mr Potts Dawson says he is open to further changes that will reduce the restaurant's environmental impact still further.

"This restaurant is all about evolution and experimentation," he says. "It's OK competing with Gordon Ramsay and Tom Aikens, and trying to make everything look nice, but that market is saturated. We're trying to do our own thing here, we're playing on our own field."

And while Acorn House, which opens to the public on Tuesday, may stand virtually alone among smart restaurants on its own green field, ready to make an example of itself in light of the Stern report, it may soon find that it has plenty of followers.

■ WATER

When it is washed down the plug-hole, restaurant waste passes into the sewage system, creating numerous problems. One of the worst is caused by the vast quantities of cooking oil, fat and grease that are disposed of in this manner. In the Thames Valley area alone, 1,000 tons of fat enters the sewage system every year. Eighty per cent of this is estimated to come from restaurants and takeaways.

The fat quickly congeals, forming plugs that can cause raw sewage to back up behind the blockages - just like in a domestic sink. This is particularly bad in Soho, in central London, where in the year 2000 a 150ft-long, concrete-hard slug of cooking fat had to be cleared with pick-axes.

■ TRANSPORTATION

Forty per cent of UK road traffic is food-based. These vehicles generate 18,000 tons of carbon emissions annually. Although much of this can

be attributed to supermarkets, restaurants that do not use local produce are also to blame. Transporting foodstuffs by boat is more environmentally friendly than using planes.

■ FISH STOCKS

About 65 per cent of UK fish stocks have suffered from reduced spawning levels, which are now insufficient to guarantee replenishment. Restaurants should use fish that are in season and sustainable. Anchovy and North Sea cod, sea bass and tuna should be avoided. Lobster and mackerel are sustainable.

■ WASTE

A third of the food grown for human consumption in the UK is thrown away, and this figure is exacerbated by restaurant waste. Food waste adds to the 330 million tons of waste produced by the UK every year, 74 per cent of which is dumped in landfill sites.

Rachel Shields

