



Elodie Valette interviews Kevin Morgan about his new book,
Serving the Public: The good food revolution in schools, hospitals and prisons
(Manchester University Press, 2025)

***Kevin Morgan** is a Professor of Governance and Development in the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. His internationally renowned, inspiring research in the field of food studies focuses primarily on food sustainability, public procurement, and territorial politics. He led the EU's Smart Specialisation project and held various advisory roles, including with the UN-sponsored School Meals Coalition and the European Commission's S4 Scientific Committee.*

***Elodie Valette** is a researcher with Cirad, the French agricultural research and international cooperation organization working for the sustainable development of tropical and Mediterranean regions. She is also the Project and Scientific Coordinator of *Urbal: Urban-Driven Innovations for Sustainable Food Systems*, an international project on mapping the impacts of sustainability initiatives in food systems.*

Elodie caught up with Kevin in early January 2025 for a fascinating discussion about his recently published book, **Serving the Public: the good food revolution in schools, hospitals, and prisons**. The book is a timely contribution to the ongoing debates on public food procurement, food justice and sustainability. More specifically, it emphasizes the role of public institutions—schools, hospitals, and prisons—in promoting food justice and sustainability. Morgan’s central argument is that public food procurement is a crucial yet often overlooked battleground in the struggle for more sustainable food systems, or, to put it in his own terms, for “good food.” Drawing on case studies from the UK, Sweden, and the United States, the book emphasizes how public institutions could use their purchasing power to promote public health, social equity, and environmental sustainability for all. It also interrogates the existing food policies and the structural inequalities rooted in neoliberalism.



Elodie: Why did you choose to write a book about this topic, and especially about what you call “good food” in public spaces?

Kevin: Originally, I never planned to work in the food sector. My background was more in urban and regional development. But then, around the turn of the century, I came across a project in rural Wales that caught my attention. A group of farmers, health professionals, and civil society campaigners tried to introduce local food into a local hospital. Unfortunately, it was a total failure. I found this intriguing because, on paper, it made so much sense. Nutritious, fresh, local food for patients or students—why wouldn't that work? I contacted the project leaders, and we started discussing the reasons behind its failure. Eventually, we launched a new project to look into public procurement and its surrounding regulations. It was what we called “a labor of love”—we didn't have any funding, but it was a meaningful project. After about a year and a half, we produced our first report, and surprisingly, it gained a lot of attention. People were suddenly interested in local food and the re-localization of the food system.

Elodie: Why did you choose the term “good food” instead of “sustainable food”?

“GOOD FOOD IS ... FOOD THAT IS NUTRITIOUS, APPETIZING, CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE, AND SUSTAINABLY PRODUCED. IT WAS A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO MAKE THE TERM BOTH CLEAR AND RELATABLE.”

Kevin: In academia, we often use terms that seem simple and well understood, but in the general public, they can be quite confusing. Words like “net zero,” “1.5 degrees,” or even “sustainability” can be interpreted in many ways. Sustainability, in particular, is a term full of trade-offs, and I try to address that in the book.

Good food, on the other hand, is more accessible. I define it in the first sentence of the book as food that is nutritious, appetizing, culturally appropriate, and sustainably produced. It was a conscious decision to make the term both clear and relatable, aiming for a broad understanding. This ties into my work in public food systems, and the language used was important for accessibility.

Elodie: Do you think that over the years, your research has shifted from a more academic focus to one that's more aimed at creating societal impact? Is it also about connecting with a wider audience, as you mentioned?

Kevin: Yes, I think that's a fair way to describe the shift. Just as I never intended to work in food 25 years ago, I also didn't plan to write this book. About three years ago, I felt I had said everything I could say about food. I had written enough academic articles, and I thought I was done. But then the publisher approached me, and the series editor, Karel Williams, suggested that it wasn't enough to just publish academic articles. I realized he was right—I needed to consolidate my work into something more accessible and impactful. Writing for a broader audience means making political decisions about style and purpose. If I only write for the academic world, the reach is limited. So, I rearranged my life and spent almost two years working on the book. I was lucky, because having worked in the field for so long, I knew many people around the world who helped me update my knowledge quickly.

Elodie: And it certainly worked because your book is really easy to read. It's accessible and dense at the same time. I really enjoyed it!

May I ask you now a specific question about schools, hospitals, and prisons. You decided to focus on public spaces and public food procurement. I assume it's because you see public procurement as a lever for creating more sustainable food systems. Places like schools, hospitals, and prisons are where good food can have a big impact on vulnerable groups—children, patients, and prisoners. But, as Foucault put it in *Discipline and Punish*, focusing on prisons, these public institutions are also places of power dissymmetry, where the eaters have no say in what and how they eat. Who defines what “good food” is for these people?

Kevin: That's a fantastic question. What constitutes “good”? How is it fashioned? How is it made? How do people agree on what it is?

Schools, hospitals, and prisons are special institutions. They are not easy to negotiate in terms of power and status, with the asymmetries in power, standards, and regimentation à la Foucault, for example.

Kevin (continued): Not just prisons, but also schools and hospitals. I wanted to show that it was important to talk about a public duty of care, because 40 years of neoliberalism had completely devalued and destroyed any sense of the public sphere, and the public duty of care that the state has towards its citizens, particularly vulnerable ones. This is what focused my attention on these institutions and the quality of food. What constitutes “good” is something that should be negotiated between the different parties as part of a deliberative process.

The role of parents, for example, and the role of children in a good food system in schools will only emerge if there's genuine negotiation. That's why I use the example of Malmö in Sweden. There are similar examples in France and in Italy, where students and parents are involved almost as co-producers or co-designers of the menus. When new menus emerged, as they did in Malmö, the whole reform was driven by the environmental department of the municipality. In other cities, like Toronto, it was driven by public health. These are important details because what mattered in Malmö was reducing the carbon footprint of the food procurement. That was the number one driver. And, of course, they went for organic as well to reduce the carbon footprint, even though that had very strong public health benefits.

So, sustainability or “good” isn't defined in a single dimension. It's determined in many dimensions. But the reason parents and children need to be involved is that when new menus emerge, it has to be an experimental process of trial and error. When the Malmö catering staff told me they had to reduce meat in the menu and introduce plant-based options, there was a strong backlash from parents who said, “But what about the protein?” The Malmö team said the parents were not well-informed. They thought protein meant that their children were eating protein-free food because it was plant-based.

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Kevin (continued): So what did they do? They invited the parents, along with the children, to sample the new plant-based diets. And there was informal discussion about protein, not top-down, patronizing talk from experts lecturing uninformed citizens. Nothing like that. They said, “Let’s talk about protein. Let’s talk about non-meat protein.” In that engagement, they co-produced an appetizing, plant-based menu. That’s key for sustainability—literally sustainable. If the food is to be consumed and plate waste reduced, it’s no good having a highly nutritious plate of food if it ends up in the waste bin. Children have to eat it. Therefore, they must be partners in designing the menu.

I understand the tensions between the users of the food, especially in prisons, by the way. Going back to the Foucault analysis, I was very influenced by his work *Discipline and Punish*. I wish he’d spoken more about food in that book because I think he missed something important about the menu. But it’s a brilliant book, and it informed my thinking when I did the case study of the nutraloaf in American prisons, which was deliberately used to punish prisoners—using food to discipline and punish. I thought it was a remarkable story.

Elodie: Going on with prisons, based on your research in the UK, what changes have you seen in the way food is approached in prisons over the last few years?

Kevin: If we look at a spectrum, on one end, we have American prisons, where food is poor. On the other end, we have the Nordic countries like Norway and Denmark, where food quality is much better. The UK is somewhere in the middle. Prisons in the UK have started to recognize that better food leads to better behavior. As one prison governor said, food is one of the four key things you need to get right to maintain order in a prison—along with mail, hot water, and family visits. Still, the food in British prisons is mostly ultra-processed, which is a health concern. And many prisoners will eventually be released, so it’s crucial they’re rehabilitated, not just punished. Good food plays a role in that rehabilitation process.

Elodie: That leads me to another question. You mention the risk of “green gentrification,” and I assume you believe that focusing on public plates could help avoid this?

Kevin: Yes, exactly. I have two examples here. When the Slow Food movement first launched in the UK, I had to respond to Carlo Petrini, its founder. Slow Food had published a manifesto, where they said, “we must defend the typical produce of ingredients and foodstuffs.” And the phrase that made me mad was “we need to defend this food against the masses”. Against the masses? Against the majority of people's taste? Which was seen as vulgar, low and cheap. As if people, ordinary consumers had shaped the food system. They were the victims of the food system, not the architects! So in my presentation, I said, in a fraternal way: “Shame on you. Shame on you for defining yourself against the masses. You should be supporting the masses and gaining them access to affordable good food. Don't ever define yourself against the masses. It's part of a green elite gentrification of the food system.” This type of “green gentrification” can indeed create an elite, exclusionary food system. And we had a good discussion and I'm glad to say they joined the school food movements to promote slow food values in public canteens.

The other example is more local: where city values revolve around farmers' markets. What was intended to bring good food to the city has achieved that. But it hasn't benefited poor people, because they don't shop at farmers' markets—unless something special is designed, like the SNAP cards in the USA, to make food accessible at these markets. I love that American expression, which I think grew out of the work of people like Julie Guthman, who said: “There's nothing so white as a farmers' market.” I know things have changed, but in my “good food movement” chapter, I talk about these values in the American movement and how, ultimately, it was racial inequality that undermined one of the best food movements I had ever seen. I was a big fan of the Community Food Security Coalition. I'd never seen such a big tent bringing together all the different factions of the food movement. And as I say in that chapter, if you add up all these factions—organic, local, fair trade, animal welfare, workers' rights, etc.—the good food movement would be the biggest and fastest-growing movement. But because it's so fragmented and fractured, with each faction focusing on single-issue identity politics, it hasn't come together.

To sum it up, my reaction to the slow food movement and to gentrification is: “Sustainability for the few, not the many.”

Elodie: You focus on public food procurement and clearly state that it's not just about improving it alone. As you say, and I quote: “To be effective, the power of purchase needs to be embedded in the food system.” You also mention the increasing importance of both supply-side and demand-side policies in creating a more robust food system strategy. Could you elaborate on that?

“TO BE EFFECTIVE, THE POWER OF PURCHASE NEEDS TO BE EMBEDDED IN THE FOOD SYSTEM... PROCUREMENT, PRODUCTION, AND CONSUMPTION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS PILLARS OF AN INTEGRATED FOOD SYSTEM APPROACH.”

Kevin: There is a need to think of procurement as being integrated into what I call a food system approach, rather than treating it as a simple, discrete policy like procurement, where it is isolated in a silo. Politicians are now recognizing that procurement is a potentially powerful public tool, and as a result, they are jumping on the bandwagon, claiming that we need to

use public procurement to promote more local food, better worker rights, support SMEs, or whatever the goal may be. The point is that we should not define procurement in such a siloed way, almost as a policy in itself. We are setting procurement up to fail. For example, if the goal of procurement is to buy the kind of food we need to promote health and well-being, such as horticultural produce, we need to buy less meat. We need to promote fruits and vegetables in our diets. We know this because all the health evidence suggests it. So, if we need to buy more fruits and vegetables, ideally from domestic sources to avoid long transportation distances, procurement policy must be integrated with a strategy for horticultural policy and supply-side policies.

And then, if you are able, for example, to purchase more spinach, cabbage, kale, and brassicas in Wales, we need to ensure they are consumed—that children actually eat them. For this, we need more imaginative consumption-side policies, such as menu design, reducing waste, and treating school lunch staff with more respect in terms of the time they spend with children, encouraging them to try those green vegetables.

Therefore, procurement, production, and consumption should be considered as pillars of an integrated food system approach. This is why I tried to suggest that procurement is part of both production and consumption. This, if you like, is the horizontal dimension of your question, in terms of “from farm to fork.”

Kevin (continued): Then, there's the vertical dimension to your question in terms of central authorities and governments. This presents another significant challenge for the food movement, as national governments will need to pass legislation to set standards and the direction of travel—what policy designers in Europe now refer to as “directionality.” Systems need directionality to give policy a goal and a clear trajectory. But we also need subsidiarity, because national governments do not design or deliver policies directly. Procurement policies are implemented in municipalities, schools, health centers, and so on. Therefore, people on the ground must be empowered to meet these national standards. They need the skill sets, competence, and confidence to deliver these policies. That was the argument I am trying to make in the last section of the book.

Elodie: As a conclusion, you might want to develop something in particular that is important to you and that I missed?

Kevin: Probably, what we haven't had time to explore, and what might be important for both of us as well as for the FLOW Program of action research, is how we convert our ideas about good food and sustainable food systems—how we turn these well-grounded, well-researched ideas into policy and practice.

I think we need to engage more with the policy system. We need to build stronger coalitions and alliances of the able and willing, so to speak, to come together and set aside our single identities—whether it's health, social justice, or any of the many aspects of the food movement. We need to recognize that we must unite on certain key issues.

I'd like to see food on every political agenda, both nationally and locally. We need to work on ensuring that good food becomes the norm, not the exception.

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The book is available from the publisher,
[Manchester University Press](https://www.manchesteruniversitypress.com/)

