

## **Alana Mann – ‘Come Grocery Shopping With Me’**

**Moderator:** Welcome to the podcast series of *Raising The Bar Sydney*. Raising The Bar, in 2016, saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into 20 bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you will hear Alana Mann's talk *Come Grocery Shopping With Me*. Enjoy the talk.

**Alana Mann:** Before I start, I do want to make a short acknowledgement to country, and just pay our respects to the traditional owners of the land, past and present, and recognise the fact that they hunted, foraged, and feasted exactly where we're standing, and I'm really happy to be here, and I'm talking about something that's probably a little bit challenging because I'm trying to get you to think that it's not a good idea to buy cheap food. I tried to get them to call this talk "Going Down, Down, Down," but it didn't get past the censors, but I do want to make the point that if you leave tonight with any message, I'd like you to realise that food isn't cheap and the costs of cheap food to the environment and our health and our biological diversity, and our workers, and our farmers are quite expensive.

So a little bit about me, thanks for the great introduction, Anna. I'm delighted to work at the University of Sydney. I didn't start there until really mid career and prior to that, I worked at Fairfax Media, and thank you to some colleagues who are here tonight, as well, and my colleagues from the university, and some of my students as well, and my dear friends and my husband, et cetera, et cetera. I haven't said anything yet and I'm getting credit, but my journey to the university is a little bit of an interesting one. It does involve food, so I should talk about it.

I grew up in Hervey Bay in Queensland and my father was a fisherman, a charter boat fisherman, so we grew up with a lot of fish, obviously, and he always treated his job very much as if he was a steward of the environment. I always was very proud when I went out with him, and I did go out with him a lot because you work on the boat when you live in a family like that, and he refused to let people litter. I saw him turn ... I used to be mortified. He turned the boat around so tourists could go and scoop their can of beer, their empty beer can out of the water, things like that. He used to kiss fish that were undersized before he threw them back, and yeah, he was never, never allowed to be described as a "greenie." Oh, no, that would be terrible in Queensland, certainly in the '80s.

However, he was one of the biggest supporters of the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation, which was opposing sand mining and also trying to find ways of I guess negotiating the impact of tourism and also agricultural runoff and the impact of that on the fishing environment there. So I grew up in an environment where I was thinking about the landscape, beautiful place to live, but also about food, and I was very lucky to because we didn't have a takeaway store, so we had very healthy diets. We ate a lot of fish, but we did get Woollies, which was really good when I turned 15 because I got a job. Hands up if you've ever worked at Woollies or Coles. I'm really interested in ... okay. Who's ever worked on a checkout? Okay.

So you know what great training and motivation it is for later in life when you go to get a degree, because you think "If I get the degree, maybe I won't have to stand up for eight hours a day," because it's really hard work, but I never forget getting my first little pay envelope and you did actually get the cash and it was really cool to be in a staff room and it was my first experience of a work environment. I have to be fair to Coles and Woolworths; they employ something like 400,000 people. So they're not necessarily the bad guys. The problem is they're the big guys. They're too big.

A lot of the arguments I'm going to tell you or present to you tonight, they're not going to be new to you because I do feel I'm preaching to the converted a little bit because if you came to this talk, you get it, and you actually live possibly in the inner city and you also recognise some of the challenges with the food system because you've got access to markets and alternatives, so it's not easy. I acknowledge that. It's not easy to avoid the duopoly or Colesworth as they sometimes get called. Just tonight, I've got a small prop basket, and I am going to talk a bit but I also want you to talk a lot, and I want people to ask me questions. Rather than waiting until the end, if you've got something you want to say, by all means, please tell me, and if you do have a question or want to make a comment, you can lucky dip.

The lovely Anna or Sarah might give you access to the basket. Now, it comes from my local co-op, Alfalfa House, which I wanted to talk about at the end of the talk because unfortunately after 35 years, they might have to close because they're not getting enough custom. This is a co-operative in Enmore Road, which as I said, I'll tell you about. If you're wondering why the toilet paper's in there, it's because everybody when I talk to them about supermarkets says, "Where am I going to buy the toilet paper? I have to go to the supermarket because I have to get the toilet paper," and this is a very valid issue. This is a very genuine concern.

You can't get dry groceries at a lot of farmer's markets or co-ops so you have to look to alternative places, but what I'm asking you to do is just think about that decision when you walk into a supermarket because, and not just any supermarket. It's worth considering with the Aldi's, and we'll talk about them, and the IGAs et cetera, too, that you're really making a choice about the future food security of Australia and I want to talk to you about why I focus on food security and it might also seem strange that I'm a media and communications person that focuses on food security but there's a very good reason for that, too.

When I came back to study and I started doing my doctorate, I was very interested in how marginalised groups get their issues into the media because it always struck me at Fairfax and Jock probably remembers this, too, but there was one, I remember, week where there was three covers with Nicole Kidman on the front and I remember thinking, "Oh, can't do this anymore. We cannot do this anymore." I worked for the Smith Family for a while, and I was always looking at how non-profit organisations get their issues into the media without any resources, so I was very interested in how and as Anna said, how ordinary people get engaged in activism through media channels and I came across a movement of farmers called Via Campesina which means "the peasant way."

That's a social movement that is now international in scale, claims to represent something like 500 million... billion ... million farmers I should say, but I would expect that it would possibly exceed that because they represent people like migrant workers, fisher folk, landless workers, and I'm working on a project with Phil at the moment that involves landless people's movement in Brazil. Now, obviously in countries around the world, particularly in the global South, the pressures of food security and the pressure of food availability are much greater that we're experiencing here. It seems that we live in a land of plenty, but I would like to tell you that 1.2 million Australians actually live in a situation of food insecurity, which means they don't have access to healthy, available food on a regular basis. This is a real challenge, and if you're Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, you're five times more likely to be food insecure, so we should by no means think that everybody's got access to food, for a start.

However, the reason why I mentioned my research is because after doing research in places like Latin America and talking to Chilean indigenous women about why they plant potatoes, indigenous varieties of potatoes, in defiance sometimes of their husbands, because they're not the right seeds, they're not the Monsanto seeds, for example, not the approved seed packages, Mexican farmers who are trying to grow maize and compete in an open market created by the North American Free Trade Agreement that has meant that a lot of white processed flour now crosses the border causing huge issues with obesity. The opening up of places like Mexico to those conglomerates who also sell sugary drinks so that kids in Mexico find coke more available than water.

Some of these challenges, but also places in Europe. I worked with some Basque farmers in Northern Spain who were having to close down their farms because of the competition in the dairy sector. When I came back to Australia, I thought, "This is exactly what's happening here." It's remarkable that we live in a global food system and these pressures are affecting people in poor countries, in rich countries, and in all different sorts of scales. I mentioned a couple of the negative impacts of the supermarkets specifically, and I should talk about the duopoly, because that's what you've not paid, but you've kindly come to hear me talk about.

Does anyone know what the margins are that Woolworths makes on say, fresh produce? An average? Would anyone like to guess? There's a lucky dip in it for you.

**Audience:** Three hundred.

**Alana Mann:** Sorry?

**Audience:** Three hundred per cent.

**Alana Mann:** Wildly unacceptable, but he gets a lucky dip for having a go; 8%, but thank you. I wish I could have said 300%. That would have made my statistic all the more impressive; 8%. Now, it's not that that in itself might sound unusual. Coles is about 5.7% and actually people, does anyone invest in ... oh, do you want to tell me? Do you invest in supermarket shares, like the duopoly? Anyone investing?

**Audience:** (11:15).

**Alana Mann:** Actually, yeah, where's your super going? This is a really good question. It's about 5.7% margin for Coles across most fresh food, but in the UK, it's only 2.7%. in the US, it's only 4.4%. You know, when people talk about margins, it's really important and I'm not an economist, but even I can recognise that that's a bit of a difference, and you really need to think about where are those costs transferred to. Now, who knows where the costs are being transferred in Australia? Where do you imagine? To ...?

**Audience:** Customers.

**Alana Mann:** Well, the customer actually does really well out of this, because ... you still get lucky dip, though. There's no wrong answers. The customer does really well and this is where Coles and Woolworths have done a really good job, because it's all about the customer, isn't it? It's all about lower prices. It's about down, down, down. The actual pinch is felt by the farmer, and we saw that with the milk, the \$1 litre milk. We see it across the board with a lot of citrus and at the same time as we have conversations about the fact that our farmers are having to bury oranges which did happen 18 months ago, two years ago, having to actually bury oranges, could not get rid of them. We've got navels from California in the supermarket.

This is obviously an issue. Now, my argument is that yes you could probably still shop at Coles and Woolworths and avoid those products that are imported. That would be really challenging. Is anyone shopping at Aldi? Yeah, I was talking to my hairdresser the other day who's perfect for this sort of discussion. I asked her everything about my speech. She earns \$19 an hour. This is someone to ask about what they buy to eat. That's a really interesting question. She said, "Oh, I feel bad. I've been going to Aldi." I thought, well, you know, one thing about Aldi is they are actually sticking it to Coles and Woolworths, but what's the problem with Aldi? Everything ... yeah?

**Audience:** (13:41).

**Alana Mann:** They do.

**Audience:** (13:45).

**Alana Mann:** Very good point. While they're offering consumers even lower costs, they are actually only receiving a margin that they would in Europe, but they're paying tax offshore, too, so there's a whole lot of reasons why we don't ... that's not helping Australia producers, either. I'm arguing that what we have to do is we have to ignore the supermarkets to an extent as much as we possibly can because if we continue to have farmers feeling the pinch, they are not going to be able to survive, and there's a couple of things that you can do, I think, to work around this problem. One of them is to shop in alternative stores, and there are a few reasons you might do this. Who knows what the dominant hardware leader is at the moment?

**Audience:** Bunnings.

**Alana Mann:** Bunnings. Who owns Bunnings?

**Audience:** Wesfarmers.

**Alana Mann:** Okay. So who shops for their liquor at Dan Murphy's? Come on, be proud. I've done it. I've done it. I did it before my conscience just could not do it anymore. They're also owned by the duopoly. You've got car insurance as well. I saw Coles the other night is actually advertising car insurance. How do we avoid the growth of these companies? They're not going to go away unless we stop giving them our custom. The effects of not giving them our custom are hitting our neighbourhoods really hard. Who's lucky enough to have a local deli? Okay, well you're very lucky. We don't have one down the St. Peter's end of King Street anymore. What about local butcher? Okay. Also fairly thin on the ground.

Now, these are real problems because of course, not every person who grows food or livestock or makes sausages is a supplier for Coles and Woolworths, as well. Unless we start to spend our dollars in other places, we are not going to be able to secure our long term food future. There is also the challenge to our health. Now, what's the best place to eat in the supermarket? Has everyone heard of the Gruen Effect? We've all watched The Gruen Transfer, but we know the Gruen effect? Okay. Guy in the '60s called Victor Gruen came up with a store design that all the supermarkets still use.

This is what The Gruen Transfer is about. It's about unpacking all the mystery behind the marketing, all the smoke and mirrors. You're all right. Basically, he set out to design a supermarket where you had to go passed all the discretionary items. You had to work your way through the supermarket to get to what you wanted to buy via all the stuff that you shouldn't buy. It's pretty diabolical when you think about it, but of course, it's really interesting. I've said it to my students before. We presume that everybody knows about advertising, and so that means we don't have to worry about the fact that we're being marketed to because we're aware of it, but it actually doesn't work like that, does it? There's a real psychology.

Anyway, if you look at the supermarket layout, it would be really the healthiest way to eat at the supermarket would be to work around the edges, to eat around the edges, as they say. Fruit, veg, dairy down the back, maybe some frozen goods because they're peas and things like that, they're quite good, too. You've got this basically in the middle; just do not go there. Like really, if you put a fence around it, that'd probably be the best thing we could do. It's not as bad as in some countries. We were watching a program the other night and I was absolutely gobsmacked to hear about the situation with ready-made meals in the UK.

Now, in the UK, apparently they eat more ready-made processed meals, pre-packaged, than the rest of Europe put together. Is that just bizarre? You've got this incredibly toxic food environment in the supermarket and do you know what the leading sellers for the supermarkets are the most fastest growing products? Have a guess. There's more produce. Have a guess. Come on. Have a stab.

**Audience:** Is this in America?

**Alana Mann:** No, here. Actually here. What are the fastest growing areas of sales? What products? Sorry? Cheap seats down the back. What's that?

**Audience:** Coca Cola.

**Alana Mann:** Soft drinks are up there.

**Audience:** Tobacco.

**Alana Mann:** Tobacco. Loose leaf tobacco. Anyone else want to have a go?

**Audience:** Ready-made meals.

**Alana Mann:** No, not ready-made meals. We're not as bad as the UK yet. There's some hope.

**Audience:** Condiments.

**Alana Mann:** No, not condiments.

**Audience:** Organic juice.

**Alana Mann:** No organics. I'll give you a clue. The entire range of healthy food in the supermarket is eclipsed thrice by the sales of this item.

**Audience:** Gluten free.

**Alana Mann:** No, not gluten free. We're not there yet. Heaven forbid.

**Audience:** Lollies.

**Alana Mann:** Close. Ice cream.

**Audience:** Ice cream.

**Alana Mann:** Ice cream. Can you believe that? Ice cream.

**Audience:** I can believe that.

**Alana Mann:** You can believe it? And chips, or crisps, depending where you're from. Now, that means ... And also medicine, bizarrely. Like medicines, all your chemist sort of stuff that you'd get. You've got this situation where stimulants, nicotine and sugar, are really driving the purchasing patterns of shoppers. You know it yourself. If you go to Alfalfa co-op, you will go in and you will see unpackaged goods for a start. If you live alone, you buy three carrots. It's not a problem. You fill up a paper bag with grains, with your lentils, or your beans, or whatever. You can buy your yogurt; you can get your toilet paper. Has anyone taken the toilet paper yet?

**Audience:** Yeah.

**Alana Mann:** Yeah, I knew that would be a quick one. You've got a situation where you actually have no packaging, so no damage for the environment. You pay \$20 to be a member, so you're supporting something, and the food's coming direct from farmers. Now, the benefits of food coming direct from farmers solves a great deal of problems, many problems, because I'm a member of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, so we're actively campaigning for this idea called "food sovereignty" which is about not only local production, it's not anti all sorts of trade, but certainly food sovereignty is a concept that's a bit different from food security. It means that you manage your own domestic market.

You have more control. You have more local control, more national control over your food system. I think this is extremely important for Australia because at the moment, farmers are not able to compete because there aren't enough avenues for direct selling and there's some really heavy regulations. I'll give you an idea. We've got a farmer in the Yarra Ranges who's a member of AFSA, and she's a free range pig farmer, so her pigs are beautiful, and they are great big, enormous black things. They're really happy, they talk to you, they're absolutely blissfully ... they're just delightful things. They're also super, super intelligent, and as this farmer tells me, don't tell me that a pig is as smart as a four year old child, because that's what they say, it's smarter.

They can do things like get through electric fences and one of them even pulled over a log or a branch and put it on the fence before he walked over it, like you know, I'm sorry, that's smart. These animals, if you care anything about animal welfare, and I do, but I'm a carnivore. Hey, but I want to be a kind carnivore. I want to eat that sort of pig, because he or she is very happy. The problems for my friend to sell these beautiful animals is that if she went to the supermarkets, she'd get about \$5 per beast, literally, because pork's about seven bucks a kilo. It's ridiculous. By the time she's paid her overheads, et cetera.

If you go to Feather and Bone, which I highly recommend, who have a shopfront at Marrickville. Yeah, you'll only be able to eat meat twice a week because you'll only be able to afford to eat meat twice a week, but that's what you should be doing. We should all only be eating meat twice a week so okay, pay more for it, but you've got this differential, this idea about what's meat? Pork from Woolworths, \$7 a kilo. Pork loin chops from Feather and Bone? Laura and Grant make sure they get them from ethical producers, but it's like \$32 a kilo. Yeah, it's more expensive and I acknowledge, you're not going to do ... if you're a family of five, or a family of four or three, or even if you're a couple, and one of you don't have a job. We've all been there.

You actually ... yes. I acknowledge that there are some challenges around this, but when it comes to meat, there are ways around it, but there's one thing that's really standing in the way of producers who want to provide ethically farmed produce to consumers directly, and that is unfair and not to scale, not appropriate to scale regulations. We have farmers in this country who would love to produce and sell their product and sell it directly to consumers but there are these laws that actually prevent them from doing so. Some of these laws are really unfair, so this is one of the things that we're campaigning on, but of course, the other thing that we're very concerned about is the fact that free trade in its current state, is not going to do any of us any favours in terms of our health or the economy, or the law term food security of Australia.

An example of this would be if we stick with pork, the Chinese Australian Free Trade Agreement, CHAFTA, is reciprocal so this sounds like a great idea in terms of diplomacy, big numbers that never make any sense because they're too big. Yes, great for the Australian economy, but if you think about the difference between Australian pork which is antibiotic free, very, very strictly monitored in terms of its quality and we're exchanging or trading with a market that we're quite unsure about in terms of those issues, and the food safety thing keeps coming up again and again. Everyone remembers the Nanna's berries situation, the salmonella.

That was a classic case of food moving around the world. We don't know where it comes from. Now, Nick Xenophon's really been going hard on this in parliament, but is anything going to change while we have two super corporates running the show, not just in grocery, but across a whole range of other sectors? What are the likelihood of any of those politicians, apart from an independent like Xenophon, actually getting on it? He makes some quite elaborate and probably a bit overblown metaphors. He says that the contracts that farmers enter into with Woollies and Coles actually treat them like medieval serfs.

Now as my friend Kathy reminded me earlier, serfs didn't actually own their land and they probably didn't get paid anything, so that's probably a little bit of an overblown comparison, but at the same time, he has got a real point when if you can't walk into a restaurant in Sydney and ask someone where your fish came from, and you can't, there's rules, they don't have to tell you where your fish came from. Now, having grown up as a daughter of fisher people, fisher folk, I really, it breaks my heart when I went home to my mum to visit her and she wanted to make me some fish but she had to go to the supermarket and she came home and she realised, yes, 75% of our seafood is actually imported, and that was from Vietnam and she was horrified because she lives in what she thinks is the fishing capital of Australia.

This clarity around labelling, this clarity around country of origin is something else that we really need to address and that the supermarkets, quite frankly, do the minimum on. Now, I've complained about a lot of things about the supermarkets and I haven't quite tackled the issue of price. What are the other options? I mentioned Alfalfa co-op in Enmore Road. Now, it started in someone's basement in Erskineville 35 years ago. Like, it's an amazing story. Been in Enmore Road since 1998. Costs \$20 to be a member, and they're looking after farmers and consumers, and I would argue that they need support. The 35th birthday year, and they're in real financial trouble, so they need volunteers, they need members, they need people who will do things like come and clean the shop after hours so they don't have to pay cleaners, because they're running on that tight a margin.

I would argue that's a great option. Aussie Farmers Direct, does anyone do Aussie Farmers Direct? Yep. We just moved into an apartment a few months ago and it's been a real problem because you can't get it delivered to your apartment, so we're finding we're going to Alfalfa and buying our meat at Feather and Bone which again, is breaking the bank slightly, but we're eating less meat. We're trying to. The other options available to you, of course, involve supporting a movement like the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance. I would argue that getting involved personally means you can contribute in lots of different ways.



We've been running these "You can't eat what I eat" potluck lunches, which is a little bit of a problem because if anyone came, they could probably arrest us because we're eating all this illegal food like homemade salami and stuff like that. It's really the pointy end of the criminal system that one, but it literally is against the law to eat these things and a lot of it is really over the top. If you are lucky enough to be able to go to your local farmer's market, again, a really good option, and I would argue that even though I know it's expensive, we've got Eveleigh is probably our nearest.

Yeah, it's very expensive, but you know what? I think that is the cost of food, a lot of it. That's the real cost of food that's good for health, good for the environment, good for farmers, and basically good for our long term food security. Thank you very much. I am looking really forward to having a discussion, so if anyone's got any questions, there's a nearly full basket of wilting greens there for you, very attractive, but please any questions and thank you so much for coming tonight. It's such a pleasure to talk to you.

**Moderator:** Thank you for listening to the podcast series of *Raising the Bar Sydney*. If you want to hear more Raising the Bar talks, head to [raisingthebarsydney.com.au](http://raisingthebarsydney.com.au).

**End of Recording.**