

Have taste and soul disappeared from modern food?

Dr Rosemary Stanton, Sophie Thomson, Philip Bruem, Andre Ursini, Mark Tester and Rob Lewis debate innovation in our food

Innovation in agriculture, driven by a growing population and increasing climate variability, has led to 'fast' food. Six opinionated panellists will examine if it's time to slow down.

Almost a third of Australia's GDP comes from farm products, and our farmers have leapt ahead in many areas of innovation to boost their productivity—but has it gone too far?

A stimulating panel will get their hands dirty debating this question at the annual Cooperative Research Centres Association of Australia [conference in Adelaide tomorrow night](#).

Phillip Bruem, a dairy farmer from Forbes and Chair of the Australian Year of the Farmer board, says innovation is only becoming more critical. "We have a huge opportunity to capitalise on the 2 billion extra people there will be in the world in the next 38 years. We won't do the job properly if we don't have intensive and correct cropping and livestock practices," Bruem says.

"If it wasn't for innovation, Australia wouldn't be leading the world now in agricultural practices, we'd be following. Our farmers contribute so much to the economy, and everyone can benefit from that."

But Sophie Thomson, ABC Television's *Gardening Australia* presenter, believes not everyone benefits from increased production values. "Consumers are smart. They want freshness, quality, taste and nutrition. But farmers want different things to consumers—they want a tomato that can fall on the floor and never bruise; a tomato with a long shelf-life," Thomson says.

Both sides of the debate argue that understanding food production is important, but in different ways.

Sophie Thomson emphasises the environmental and health benefits of simpler food production. "Ideally, we should all get back to having our own vege patch. We may not be able to be self-sufficient, but home-grown will always be better. Plus, the food-miles, carbon footprint and chemical inputs are massively reduced and we can control what we get," she says.

Fellow panellist Dr Rosemary Stanton, a well-known Australian nutritionist, echoes concerns about food and health issues. Cheap food has led to more obesity in Australia and many

other countries worldwide. "At the moment, Australians get 35-40% of their kilojoules from junk foods and drinks. With a population where the majority (60%) of adults and a quarter of children are overweight, that is a problem," Dr Stanton says.

Dr Stanton believes when growers have little connection with people who process and consume food, they become "divorced from the food chain". She says that when people understand the source of their food, they value it and its producers more.

The 'fast food' panellists will argue that innovation isn't just about producing more, but about creating smarter and more sustainable methods. As well, public investment in agricultural research in development has slowed down in recent years, which may create a lag if it's not increased again. 'For innovation' speakers:

- **Philip Bruem**, Chair of the Australian Year of the Farmer board
- **Mark Tester**, Professor of Plant Physiology at the University of Adelaide's Australian Centre for Plant Functional Genomics
- **Rob Lewis**, Science Without Bounds and the University of Adelaide's Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and the Faculty of Sciences

The speakers for 'slow food' contend that innovation in agriculture has led to fewer people producing food, consumers that don't value or understand food production, and increasing pressure on animal and plant production systems. 'Slow food' speakers:

- **Dr Rosemary Stanton**, Australian nutritionist
- **Sophie Thomson**, ABC Television's *Gardening Australia*
- **Andre Ursini**, former *Masterchef* finalist

The public is encouraged to come along to the debate (free entry), which begins at 5pm. To attend, register online: www.debatecrca2012.eventbrite.com
It will be at the National Wine Centre of Australia, on the corner of Botanic and Hackney Roads, Adelaide.

Led by Dr Paul Willis, Director of RiAus, the debate is hosted by the Cooperative Research Centres Association (CRCA) conference, [Collaborate | Innovate | 2012](#), in conjunction with [Australian Year of the Farmer](#).

The debate will be followed by a discussion with scientist-turned-filmmaker Randy Olson.

[Register as a delegate for the conference](#) or get more information about the conference online: www.crca.asn.au/conference/

If you can't get along, feel free to join the discussion on Twitter at **#AgChatOz**

Conference hashtag: #collab_innovate

ENDS

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Media attending the conference can use the Yarrabee Boardroom at the National Wine Centre of Australia. It is just outside the main entrance on the corner of Hackney Road and Botanic Road, Adelaide.

About Australian Year of the Farmer

Founded as a non-political, not-for-profit organisation, Australian Year of the Farmer 2012 is an education and awareness campaign to celebrate the contribution farmers make to the Australian economy and community.

Australian Year of the Farmer 2012 enjoys the patronage of the Governor-General, as well as the support of Federal, State and Territory Governments. Seed funding for the development of the Year was provided by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The program is supported by **Foundation Sponsors Elders, Woolworths and Suncorp Bank**, as well as many other sponsors and supporters.

As one of Australia's leading agribusinesses with more than 360 points of presence in rural and regional locations employing 3,300 personnel in Australia, New Zealand, China and Indonesia, **Elders** is a proud Foundation Sponsor of Australian Year of the Farmer 2012. Through its national network, Elders offer services tailored to the needs of primary producers, including cropping, livestock, wool, dairy, horticulture and a range of product solutions to support agribusiness such as banking, insurance and real estate. Its international connections also help link Australian farmers with global markets, reinforcing value as a business partner through people, expertise and relationships.

Australian Farmer of the Year 2012 is also made possible by Foundation Sponsor, **Woolworths**. One hundred per cent of the fresh meat and poultry and 97 per cent of the fruit and vegetables sold in Woolworths supermarkets are sourced from Australian producers and growers.

Foundation Partner **Suncorp Bank** is Australia's leading regional bank with 110 years of heritage supporting the growth of rural and regional communities. As Australia's fifth largest bank, Suncorp provides personal, small business and agribusiness banking services via 240 branches across the country. From trade finance and foreign exchange to deposits and the home mortgage Suncorp Bank offers award-winning products backed by leading customer service. The Bank is part of the Suncorp Group, a top 25 Australian company with 16,000

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