Matt Eastland:
In every corner of the world, the climate crisis is no longer a distant threat. It's a daily reality. Farmers from Krakow to Kansas to Kenya are watching weather patterns shift before their eyes. Crops are wilting under unexpected heat waves or being washed away by once-in-a-century floods that somehow now arrive every few years. Yields are down, costs are up, and food prices are rising across the globe. supply chains are starting to crack under the pressure of instability, and the world is beginning to reckon with a sobering truth. We cannot feed a hotter, more volatile planet with the same systems we've relied on for the last century. And yet there's a blind spot in our response. A solution hiding in plain sight. While we focus much of our climate energy on electric cars, renewable power and industrial decarbonisation, we're overlooking a sector that contributes nearly a third of global greenhouse gas emissions. The food system. From how we grow our crops to what ends up on our plates, the choices we make in our food system shape land use, water scarcity, biodiversity and climate resilience. And reforming how we produce and consume food isn't just a side issue, it's one of the most powerful tools we have to fight climate change. We've said it before and I'll do it again. You can't fix the climate if you don't fix food. Welcome to the Food Fight podcast from EIT Food exploring the greatest challenges in our food system and the innovators dedicated to solving them. I'm your host Matt Eastland and joining me today to unpack the hidden potential of a plant-based shift in the climate debate is food systems expert Sarah Lake. Sarah has spent her career digging into the complex, often invisible forces that shape our food system. And as CEO of Tilt Collective, today she's leading a movement to redirect billions in climate investment toward plant-rich food innovation. Welcome to the show, Sarah. Pleasure to have you with us.

Sarah Lake:
Thanks for having me, Matt. I'm thrilled to be here.

Matt Eastland:
Great stuff. Can't wait to get into it. Let's talk about what you do with the Tilt Collective. So what is your work mainly focused on there and what's your role specifically?

Sarah Lake:
You mentioned it in your introduction, we cannot solve climate without food. There is no way we can feed 10 billion people on a planet and have planetary health. And so what we do at The Tilt Collective is recognize that to date, we've talked so much about how we produce food, but we often don't talk about what food we're producing. And ultimately, we have a massive efficiency issue. and how we're using our land, our water, our resources to produce a whole lot of meat and not a lot of plants. And so what Tilt Collective does is say we're overlooking this opportunity to

increase the amount of plant-based proteins in our food system. What would it look like to have a more plant-rich food system that meets climate goals, health goals, water goals, biodiversity goals? And our role in this is we work as a field catalyst. And by that, we mean that we are building out the field of NGOs and philanthropies who are working on this issue. Our role is trying to direct more effort and attention on what food we produce and how we can shift this more towards plant-rich options. So for us, that looks like trying to get philanthropy behind this to mobilize millions, if not billions of dollars into this as a climate and health solution, but also re-granting. So we make grants to organizations around the world who are leading the efforts to shape what foods are offered. A key part of our approach is we're looking at this question from that standpoint. What is offered and what is incentivized? We're not trying to convince people that they should eat differently. That's pretty difficult to do. We're not trying to change what people like because people do like meat and that's okay. But what we're saying is how can companies and governments offer and incentivize more sustainable choices and healthier choices and make those widely available the way that meat is now made cheap and available everywhere that people go. So we're really building this global movement, trying to elevate the idea of a more plant-rich food system, not just for climate goals, but for the whole array of solutions that come when you start producing more plants and less meat.

Matt Eastland:
Got it. Thank you for explaining that. What an amazing part of the food system to be working in. Sarah, can I just ask then, so we've arrived at this place now and I'm interested just to kind of get some context from you. So looking at where we've come from, How have things like historic policies and the marketing within the agri-food system, how has that shaped our current landscape in terms of the food system around things like food production and dietary patterns? How have we got to this place?

Sarah Lake:
our current way of eating is relatively new in the last 50 to 70 years. So when you think about the main foods that we eat, there are two big traits that characterize our food. One is heavily focused on meat, and the second is highly processed. And all of these are new. Even in World War II, not very long ago, people weren't eating that much meat. Meat was seen more as a treat. You had it maybe you know, a couple times a week as a nice dinner. And now meat is in every meal. And this is really a modern invention that came about from processing techniques that were invented in the 30s and 40s and the invention of preservatives that could make more stable meat products. So you had the iconic one is the invention of spam. Everyone knows spam is this kind of gross processed canned meat, but it was invented you know, around the World War II era and became highly popular as this processed product to the point where 70% of Americans were eating Spam. Wow. Pretty wild.

Matt Eastland:
That's amazing. That's like proper food innovation at the time, I guess, right?

Sarah Lake:
Absolutely. And the reason, to your point, of why it became so popular is because of advertising and promotion. So the meat industry helped promote it, but so did the US government. It was promoted as part of military feeding, so it was used to feed troops overseas because you could ship cans of meat, but then became popularized as this dish with massive advertising from the meat industry. But we also saw globally the export of processed meats and large effort by the meat industry to promote meat broadly. We saw the invention of school food programs, for example. So we didn't have in the U.S. a national school food program until around the 40s. And as part of that, the meat industry was involved. And we still have that legacy today where the majority of proteins that are approved by the government to serve in school meals are meat, right? There's no reason they have to be meat, but this is a legacy of the meat industry's involvement in setting school food programs. So this is really a modern invention in terms of how much meat we eat and the processing of that meat that makes it really cheap and highly convenient to eat. But we've also seen that this is legacy of policies that make it very, very subsidized. So we have a lot of policies that are making meat incredibly cheap to what it should be. So research shows if you actually had the true price of meat in the US, you took away all the subsidies, all the payments for farmers, a pound of ground beef would cost about $30. Wow. At which point, probably not a lot of people would eat it because you'd go to buy a burger at McDonald's and it would be $10 plus. But the government is actually subsidizing this off of the assumption that people need to have meat in their diets. And so we have a proliferation of meat that's made widely available. And I actually think about it this morning when I visited my family over the summer holidays, like lots of people do, and it reminded me of all the things we did as kids that are now unheard of. Like my parents used to use so much styrofoam. Remember having like styrofoam bowls as a kid? And we used to go to restaurants that had smoking sections. And all of these things don't exist anymore, but we thought they were essential. And I was thinking about how probably in 20, 30 years, my kid will say the same thing, which is, I can't believe how much processed meat you gave us, right? How the schools were serving me bacon and cheeseburgers and meatballs and chicken nuggets, right? Everything is this processed meat that we're serving, which hopefully is phased out within the new understanding of how this is so unhealthy for the climate and unhealthy for people.

Matt Eastland:
You were talking about how things are kind of legacy and embedded. So do you think currently there's any incentive for the main actors

across the global food supply chain, those are the ones who are kind of controlling everything, to change the status quo? So I mean, I guess it's the obvious question, things have got to where they are now, but is there any incentive to change?

Sarah Lake:
I think there is, and the main reason is from the instability of meat production. And when you look at the supply chains of how meat is produced, they're so vulnerable. They're so fragile right now. And for many different reasons, part of it is the impacts of climate change. So where I live in Colorado, over 70% of the water in our river is used to grow animal feed and the river is running dry. And what people are doing here, the policies that are being recommended are things like maybe we shouldn't water golf courses. which is wild when you look at the data. Actually, the vast majority of this water is going to animal feed, not to golf courses. Or they tell residents, don't water your lawn as much. That's not going to solve it. But we're running out of water. So it's going to be difficult to keep producing meat the way we do. In other places, you're seeing impacts of drought, right? So there's not as much feed. Cows are dying from heat stroke. And we're also seeing a lot of disease. So the new one in the U.S. that you might have seen in the news is we had avian flu before. Now we're about to have screwworm. And screwworm is a parasite that literally eats the flesh of cows. They've closed the border between the U.S. and Mexico for imports of cattle because screwworm is so pervasive within Mexico right now. So these vulnerabilities in the supply chain make it pretty clear we can't keep doing things as we are. There's going to be smaller and smaller profits. So there is an incentive for meat companies even to look at producing other products. And we're seeing this. We're seeing some major meat companies start to produce alternative proteins and plant-based proteins because one, consumers want it, but two, there's a good reason why the margins on meat aren't going to be sustainable for them. They're going to, have higher and higher costs and there's only so much consumers are going to be willing to pay at the end of the day. So I do think there are some incentives from an economic perspective for meat companies to be offering and producing a different type of protein for consumers.

Matt Eastland:
That's interesting. I'd like to talk to you about alternative proteins in a second as well, actually. In terms of the people or the parts of the food supply chain that's affecting now, I'd like to get your view on how this is affecting farmers, availability of food, prices for consumers, for example. I was reading this shocking statistic about US farming that net farm income has dropped by around 8.2 billion dollars so that's like a 5.6% decline in a single year and that was 23 to 24 and I think across Europe there is a similar pattern but it's more around the reduction in the number of people working in agriculture So I guess from your perspective and the research you're doing, how are these climate shifts making the situation for farmers so, well, let's say challenging?

Sarah Lake:
Mm-hmm. Farmers face more challenges than ever. And a lot of it is climate-induced, where there simply isn't the same productivity of land as there used to be. And there's very different policy contexts. So we just had $6 billion in USDA funding cuts that will impact farmers in the U.S. data is spot-on that farmers are making less than ever and that's before in the U.S., you know, before tariffs, before the cut in public programs. So the average American farmer even last year was making negative $850. So most farmers are losing money and that's not specific to the U.S. That's actually globally quite a trend that many farmers are losing money and they're relying on off-farm income, meaning they have second jobs. they're perhaps leasing their land or they're using the land for conservation projects. They're not simply making enough by producing crops or raising animals. And this is only going to get worse. One reason why is a lot of the economic value that farmers have is in their land. They own the assets of their land. In the U.S., a lot of that is tied to water rights, for example. It's not just the U.S., but elsewhere. And that water is disappearing. So the actual value of their land is disappearing in front of them. And so there's not really a good outlook for this. And as you have generational transition, you have a lot of young farmers who don't really want to inherit the family business when it's already not profitable. So you are seeing a shift where a lot of small farms are going out of business. You're seeing incredible concentration where these small farms are being bought up. So this idea of a small family farmer in Europe and in the U.S. not really true anymore. It's the exception rather than the norm, where mostly big companies own massive amounts of farmland. In the US, a major owner of farmland is China. The Chinese government owns an enormous amount, and this has gotten attention from the Trump administration as foreign influence. Is that right? I didn't know that. That's very interesting. It is, yeah. Yeah. So we have, you know, between Chinese government or government-influenced companies, you have massive corporate consolidation among land ownership. So overall, farmers aren't doing well. And this is something that's so important to understand when we talk about shifting towards plant production. It's not like you have farmers and ranchers who are thriving. We're not going from an idyllic system where Ranching is an amazing opportunity to a plant system where everyone's losing. It's actually the opposite. We're in a system where farmers are being absolutely screwed. They are losing money. Their land values are falling apart. The cost to consumers is so high that they're getting smaller profits. But we have the opportunity to go to a system that is more plant-based and at the same time explore new economic opportunities for farmers and ranchers to help actually improve their livelihoods, not just keep them the same.

Matt Eastland:
I mean, I suppose you probably answered this question, but do you see that there are any farms or farmers who are actually faring

better than others? So you spoke about consolidation. Does that mean that there are like, it's only the big farmers that are actually doing okay, or actually are even they suffering? I wonder as well whether you have any stats on or any thoughts on like regenerative farmers in the US. So big in the US, big over now in Europe and you know we talk about climate resilience as farmers in terms of the sort of regenerative nature. Are there any which are kind of buffing this trend at all?

Sarah Lake:
There are some. It depends on what impact you're looking at. So an interesting example with bird flu is that Canada did not see a massive rise in egg prices the way we did in the U.S., and it's because the average size of a chicken operation was smaller. So when a herd or a flock of chickens was infected, they'd lose the flock, but it wasn't a million chickens. You were talking about 100,000 chickens. So smaller production can be more resilient to some of these impacts. But it's not always true. You have smaller production of cattle where if you lose a dozen head of cattle to screw worm or to drought or simply low yield, it can take out an entire operation. So you're seeing smaller producers who simply can't thrive with small losses every year like that. So I don't think there's a universal way of saying certain types of farmers are protected. Certainly, regenerative and sustainable practices are more climate resilient. One of the challenges, though, is regenerative production is more extensive. It requires more land. And so one of the things that is so important to understand is if you want to have regenerative production, you have to have more land to do it, which also implies you actually need fewer animals. We need to be using less land with fewer animals in order to free up land to do more sustainable practices. If we were to try to produce the same amount of meats that we have now in a regenerative fashion, we simply wouldn't have the land to do it. we would actually have to convert more land, which is not good for biodiversity and conservation and carbon sequestration. So we need to first think about how do we have less meat overall in our food system, and then how do we repurpose that land for an array of things, one of which is more sustainable production through regenerative or agroecological practices.

Matt Eastland:
You're kind of nicely moving us on towards, you know, some of these things that we're talking about are shocking, but hopefully we're now moving towards more solution-based conversation. So the recent report by Tilt Collective and your partner Systemic, so they revealed how a shift towards plant-based dietary shift can reduce carbon emissions from the food system. So can you talk us through some of those findings?

Sarah Lake:
Absolutely. One of the most shocking things to me in the climate movement right now is that shifting towards a plant-rich food system

is one of the most impactful levers we have, yet it's one of the ones that's most overlooked. And people always say, why? Well, if this is so effective, why aren't we doing it? And ultimately, it comes down to the fact that food is a really sensitive topic. It is political. It is cultural. It can even be religious. So people don't want to touch the idea of shaping what we eat. But as we talked about, what we eat has been wildly shaped for decades. We have many forces between governments and companies that are influencing what we eat. So it's not a new idea to talk about shifting what we eat or changing what's offered to us. And what we find in our research with systemic is that Looking to change towards a plant-rich food system is one of the largest levers in terms of climate mitigation. When you compare it to things like renewable energy or to electric vehicles, it can have exponentially more climate mitigation potential. But we often hear more about things like electric cars or solar energy as a climate solution, when in reality, we will get two to five times as much emissions, depending on what other interventions you're looking at, for simply shifting towards more plants and less meat. So we could have five times the emissions reduction compared to things like renewable energy. if we were to invest that same money in shifting towards plant-rich food systems. So we see the potential here to have significant climate gains simply by changing a little bit of what we eat. And a key part of this is we're not talking about everyone being vegan. That is not the world in which we imagine. And that's never gonna happen, we know that. And it's important that there is some meat left in our food system. for various reasons, right? Religious and cultural reasons, for food security and nutrition reasons. But what we're talking about largely is overconsumption. So in, you know, in the UK, in the EU, in the US, we are eating so much more meat than what is recommended. In the U.S., it's six times the recommended amount of red meat is being consumed by the average American. That's a lot. And that's what's recommended by the government, which is already probably higher than it should be. So we're saying, what does it look like to just bring it down to what the dietary guideline is? And that alone can have enormous climate benefits. We're not even talking about reducing it beyond that. So how do we have the conversation of shifting what is being offered, what products we're growing, rather than just how they're grown?

Matt Eastland:
In terms of the impact that this could have, so if we were able to shift towards this more plant-based dietary system, so how would that impact things like land and water use? And do you think it would really kind of help make our system more secure in terms of being able to absorb these shocks that we're coming up against?

Sarah Lake:
it would absolutely make our system more secure. And we see this in terms of disruptions in the meat industry already. So during COVID, we saw disruptions to slaughtering facilities and meat scarcity that came from that and rising prices. And generally, any system is more

resilient when it's more diverse. So if we were to have 20 different main sources of protein rather than right now where it relies on a handful, we would have more resilience as any of those are impacted. So we certainly see the opportunity to have more resilience from diverse production. In terms of impacts on land and water, this cannot be underestimated. And this is because meat production is one of the most resource intensive foods that we can produce. And if you look at this, the land inefficiency is shocking. So we use over 50, about 50 times as much land to produce protein from beef as protein from peas. That's a lot of land. When you're thinking about land scarcity that we have, we're using more land for other things like living, data centers even. You're seeing urban expansion. So when we talk about having to produce more food on less land, it's simply not possible if we're doing that with animal protein, when it's a 50 to one ratio just about for meat. Yeah, it's crazy. And it's also really inefficient from a caloric perspective. So if you think about it, we grow a lot of plants. We then feed those plants to cows, and then we eat the cow. But how much of that energy is actually translated to what we get is very minimal. We lose 98% of the energy in that conversion.

None:
98%.

Sarah Lake:
There is nothing in our world that is that inefficient. If you had a car that was that inefficient, it would be taken off the market. If you had a refrigerator that was that inefficient. But we have a food system that wastes 98% of its energy on producing beef versus just eating more plants in the first place.

Matt Eastland:
That's so interesting because, I mean, obviously we talk a lot about food loss and waste. But actually, when you talk about sort of calorific loss, like you're saying, actually, by the time you get to a lot of that food, which actually hits the plate, then some of that is then wasted. But you've already baked in a lot of that waste already by this system that you've got right up front. That's really interesting. And what you mentioned at the top of the show about alternative proteins and So what role do they play in this transition? You said, of course, that, you know, we don't all have to be diehard vegans. And obviously, that's a very, very hard message to kind of get across. So do alternative or as we call them, sort of like diversified proteins, are they going to be the real thing that moves people and also moves the needle?

Sarah Lake:
Alternative proteins definitely have a role to play, but the question is, what role do they play? And that, I think, has been very complicated and not well explained to date. People may not even

know what alternative proteins are because we use this term to talk about everything from a black bean burger to lab-grown meat. These are very different products, and we have failed to have the right language to discern between them. And this is one of the biggest mistakes that we have made in the food conversation.

Matt Eastland:
It's just protein, right? It's just protein.

Sarah Lake:
It's just protein, exactly. It's just in different forms, but why are we using one term to talk about all of it? It's almost like if you were to say, I'm having meat for dinner, someone would be like, well, what type of meat? Are you having chicken? Are you having fish? Are you having beef? We have failed to come up with the right terminology. And this is a large opportunity that we at Tilt C of how do we refine the language we use and how do we help communicate this to consumers too so that consumers understand, oh, I'm actually interested in a black bean burger, but I'm not interested in in a lab-grown product, for example, or vice versa. So when we talk about all proteins, there's a lot of different types. So when asking what is the role of all proteins, well, it depends on what type and it depends on for whom we're talking. But I think the way in which we see it is it has a role to play, but we also need to be mindful that it's not a magic solution. We're not going to replace every burger with an all-protein burger. But it is important for certain consumers to have like-for-like products. And there are times where you want that, right? If you're having a barbecue, you're going to want something that is a like-for-like product for a beef burger. But there's other times where you're going to say, actually, I'd rather have something that's very different. I might like a black bean stew, or I might like right? Like a mushroom paella. There's no reason why we have to only have that. So it is certainly, I often refer to it as sort of a gateway drug for hardcore meat eaters. It is an important way to get them to try more plant-based products, but is it meant to substitute everything? Absolutely not. The other key part of this is they're not all perfect, and we do have opportunities to improve on the products we have. So there's lots of critiques of these products are highly processed. There's two important things to consider. One is some of them are highly processed, but for the majority of them, they're not as processed as meat products. So if you compare it, sure, if you're comparing a processed all protein product to a salad, Yes, it's more processed. However, most people are not replacing salads by eating, you know, an all protein burger. They're replacing a very processed meat burger or sausage with this. So it's not really a fair analogy. The other option is that there's many solutions that include lower or minimally processed products, right? You have the black bean burgers of the world, or you have one of the products I really like is sort of plant forward blends, like diversified blended meat. You can have a burger that's 50% beef and 50% mushroom. You're immediately eating half as much meat, but it's actually, taste tests show it's almost

identical to consumers. So we have, it's a very low tech option, but we sort of lump it together with this idea of these high tech solutions and all protein when they're very different products. But there's many reasons why we could have greater uptake of some of these products. I've always been really convinced we should never sell chicken nuggets again. We have good enough plant-based chicken nuggets that we could replace them in all of schools. and do it at cost for many types of the plant-based chicken nuggets. The key question is, for kids, it doesn't really matter as much. But if you're trying to replace a steak at a high-end restaurant, then yeah, we do have a ways to go in terms of the role that all proteins can play in that.

Matt Eastland:
you know, in terms of like the actual detail of how we make this shift happen. So let's start with farmers then. So what very practical steps could farmers make to transition to plant rich, climate resilient production without jeopardising what is already quite a risky livelihood? So how do you convince them and what steps should they or can they be making right now, do you think?

Sarah Lake:
It's such an important question, Matt. And we at Tilt Collective, we have an advisory council of about 40 experts globally. And we asked them this question, what do you think we should be doing on just transitions, as we call it? How do we support farmers in making this transition? And this included farmer groups, landowners. And their number one answer is you have to build the demand rather than telling us to change. We need the economic incentives. We need the supply chain structure before you're telling us to switch. So I think it's really important to say it's not actually about what farmers do. It's about what are companies and governments doing to help create the financial mechanisms that support farmers and ranchers. Because there's lots that farmers and ranchers could do, right? You have farmers who could grow winter cover crops. So that's one option, right? They grow a primary crop, and then in the winter they could grow oats. And this helps both with soil quality, but also it's an economic opportunity. They can grow oats that go to an oat milk facility. But if there's no oat milk facility nearby, if there's no oat milk market, if there's no subsidies for oat production, it's actually not feasible for them. So so much of it is about looking at the broader context than specifically what farmers can do. So that's really what we focus on is saying, how do we get financing, public and private financing to farmers? How do we get companies purchasing these products? How do we build the consumer demand first and then be able to start engaging more farmers around this. I do think there's an opportunity, though, to have farmers who understand that there are other options out there, because a major challenge is there are sunk costs that these farmers face. In my conversations, I did my PhD studying cattle production. I've visited many ranches and slaughterhouses and feedlots. And the number one challenge that many of these people face is they have enormous debt.

So they own, you know, if you're a, if you're a chicken farmer, you have a chicken house that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more. And you also have contracts with a processing facility that you are obligated to fulfill. So it's not as simple as, let me just start producing something else. But One of the top answers I hear a lot from farmers and ranchers is, I need someone to buy my debt. I need someone to help me get out from under the crushing debt I have, either through the assets I have for production, from land, from contracts I owe. So I think that's one of the financial mechanisms that often gets overlooked.

Matt Eastland:
Wow. Again, I hadn't quite appreciated farmers. They really are up against it, aren't they? They're in a system which they're trying to do their absolute best and then they get themselves into debt in order to do that, but then they're stuck into it while they're repaying that debt back. So I guess for them, like you say, that shift becomes even harder because they've got bills to pay. So you spoke about leveraging finance and things like that. So how are policy tools or subsidies or supply chain incentives, how are they being leveraged or how should they be leveraged more to the point to make this shift? How is this going to work best for farmers?

Sarah Lake:
What are the important considerations before I dig into this is how heterogeneous farmers are, right? We can't talk about farmers as one lump. They're wildly different in terms of where they are in the world, what production system they're using, what crops they're producing, what are the constraints in terms of water or land. So first to say there are millions of different types of farmers to consider, and we can lump them into categories. But along those lines, I think it's the right question of what is the ideal supply chain or policy mechanism? One of the pieces that we've seen be most successful is direct financing from funds. So we've seen this in places like Denmark, where there's actually a fund that supports farmer transition. And this has been leveraged as part of climate action and part of direct efforts to disincentivize meat production through pricing mechanisms, and then reallocate the tax revenue, for example, to a pooled fund that goes to support farmers who want to transition. You can also have mechanisms like conservation projects. And we have this in the U.S. Most farmers participate in some sort of conservation project where if you have a circle, you have a crop circle, you use your corners because you have square land and the corners are conservation projects where the government pays you to keep them wild. These are really successful and are important elements of farm income. There's no reason you couldn't expand those. It's just a question of how are we allocating government funding. Right now, most of the government funding goes to things like disaster relief from climate-induced disasters. So we've seen huge spikes in the U.S. in government funding just for disaster relief, not for things like how do you actually switch what you're producing. So certainly the government financing is key. The second

piece is around the building demand from downstream companies, from consumer goods processors, from retailers who create that market opportunity for more of these plant-rich products. You can see, you know, if McDonald's, for example, were to offer a 50-50 burger that was 50% beef and 50% mushrooms, you would see a lot of farmers say, hey, I will start growing more mushrooms. And we see this when Walmart starts to carry a certain product, farmers will shift even in beef production. If Walmart says we're interested in antibiotic-free beef, ranchers will start producing that because they have such market power. So our hypothesis at Tilt that is proven true is If you build the retail demand among supermarkets, among fast food companies, among food service, you will see the shift further upstream among farmers. So focus on getting those supermarkets to build the demand, build the consumer interest, and then support them in their sourcing from farmers upstream.

Matt Eastland:
I'm interested in the consumer side of this because yes, it'd be great, and I know this is happening in certain quarters, that the retailers and the producers are shifting, but it is heavily dependent on consumer trends and consumer wants and needs. And just kind of asking a blunt question on this, why should consumers care? And the only reason I ask that in such a blunt way is that often consumers feel quite powerless in this, and they feel like they're the takers of products, not necessarily those who are able to influence them. And I imagine for some consumers, they're like, well, this is for the food industry to sort out. So why should they care? Or maybe the question is, well, what can they do to influence that, really?

Sarah Lake:
Yeah, I'm going to give you a very candid answer to that, which is consumers shouldn't care. Consumers shouldn't have to care. We shouldn't rely on consumers doing this out of moral ambition. We shouldn't rely on consumers feeling good because they bought a climate smart product or something that was low carbon. In fact, what we should do is you make it the easiest and obvious choice for consumers and then they buy it. So much social science research shows that consumers aren't motivated when you say something is more sustainable. Even with, not just in food, but in anything. If you label a pair of blue jeans as more sustainable, people think that they're lower quality and they won't buy them. even if they're sustainably oriented as a consumer. And it's the same with food. If you label something as sustainable and healthy, people tend not to buy it. But we've seen this with other foods. I often point to this example of quinoa. I think quinoa is a fascinating example because I remember the first time I ever ate quinoa when I was about 19. And I had the moment where I was embarrassingly pronouncing it. I was like, what is this quinoa thing?

Matt Eastland:

I used to call it quinoa. I used to call it quinoa.

Sarah Lake:
Quinoa, right?

Matt Eastland:
Until I was corrected by someone who was very, very upset with me.

Sarah Lake:
And this is a food product we never ate. We just never ate quinoa. It wasn't a part of our diet. But it wasn't that all of a sudden consumers started caring about quinoa. They weren't driven like, oh, I should be eating quinoa. It was something that just became popular because Oprah included it in one of her trendy diets. and it then became labeled as a superfood and there was an interest in sort of healthy eating and this one thing started being presented in supermarkets at an affordable price and in really, you know, like chic packaging. So, so much of it had nothing to do with the product itself as much as this cultural moment that was made happen by celebrities and by grocery stores who made it easier to buy it. They put quinoa instead of in sort of the the boring rice section. It was featured on different shelves. So much of this is just how you convince consumers this is something they want to buy. And right now, we do that with meat, but we don't necessarily do it with plant-based products. So if you go to the store, you have a whole meat section. right? You have a whole wall dedicated to meat. You have a deli where you can get fresh cut meat. You have prepared meats that are already made and sold to you to buy ready without you having to do it. We don't really have the same for plants, right? If you go to buy a plant-based burger, you're not sure, is it in the freezer section? Is it in the fridge section, in a natural foods area? There's no prepared options at the store. And even a lot of the plant-based options, they're not presented well. Beans is a great example. Beans come in ugly metal tin cans. They're not this savvy, presented, oh, here's a lovely bean lunch meal. So there's so much that is shaping consumer choice that has nothing to do with whether consumers want this or are seeking it out as much as how much we're making it easy for them to want these products.

Matt Eastland:
Do you think that puts us into a, I probably shouldn't use this expression in this context, but a chicken and egg scenario where You have the sort of the retailers and the food producers sort of saying, well, we're not going to really push this until we see that there's a shift in consumer desire. And the consumers are sort of looking at the retailers saying, well, we kind of think that this is your responsibility. So surely there is something has to break in that relationship somehow.

Sarah Lake:
Yeah, it is very much a chicken and egg situation. I haven't figured out what the plant-based alternative to that is. I don't know if it's like soy and tofu. That doesn't quite work the same, but it is a challenge because we hear that from supermarkets and from fast food companies of them saying, we're not gonna offer this because consumers aren't demanding it. Or they tried it and consumers didn't want it. But when you dig into the details and you say, well, why didn't consumers want it? We find out, it was a dollar more per burger, or it was offered but not with the same sauce and condiments as the traditional burger, or it wasn't advertised at all. It wasn't promoted, no one knew it was on the menu. There's all these reasons why these things have failed when they've tried them.

Matt Eastland:
Not comparing apples with apples, shall we say.

Sarah Lake:
Exactly, yeah. And so there is a need to build some demand, but what we find is that when retailers really lean in when they make it the same price, they put it next to the other product, they present it as like for like, you do see consumers choosing it. So we have a couple of really salient examples. The first is supermarkets in Germany. So there's examples of supermarkets where they put the plant-based meat next to the conventional meat, they made it the same price, they use similar packaging, and they saw an immediate 30% increase in the sale of the plant-based. just by pretty much putting it next to it and making it the same price. We've also seen that in hospitals where they offer plant defaults, which a hospital is sort of, you know, I think the obvious place to be offering more plants and less processed meat. And what they saw is 60% of the hospital patients preferred this. So you actually saw a lot of the hospital patients wanting this, but they also saw that it was costing the hospitals less. So the hospitals were saving about 50 cents per meal. to be offering plant-based. So it was a true win-win-win. The hospital patients wanted it, it was climate-smart food, and it was cheaper for the hospitals who were also struggling from funding. So we see this of when it's offered, people want it, but it's a question of how it's offered and making sure that the companies are really leaning in to how it's done. Same with school meals. There's a lot of school meals where they commit to doing plant-based, and then you see these poor kids get four carrot sticks and a pile of unseasoned beans. They're not gonna want that. So it's about creating desirable options as well. That takes a little bit more effort at first to understand what is the right recipe, what's the affordable way of doing it, but we know now what that looks like, and we simply need more companies and governments to be doing this.

Matt Eastland:
It's interesting. I see this from my own very kind of micro world at

the moment with my 15 month old daughter. People keep saying, well, just, you know, offer her cucumber sticks or carrot sticks or raw pepper or some salad. And I'm like, well, I wouldn't kind of eat things like that without a dressing, without going with something. So why would I expect her to? And it's this I don't know, it is a cultural thing that it's like healthy food, like plants, has to somehow be devoid of all other kind of excitement and taste. And I think that's kind of unfortunately baked into us from the start, which I'm very much trying to not do as a parent. It's tricky though.

Sarah Lake:
I feel like vegans have ruined everything for us because the assumption is if you eat vegan, it's flavorless, it's not something you want to eat. So I have a seven-year-old and he is my food experiment all the time to figure out what he's willing to eat. But it's been interesting because he will eat things when they're presented in a way that he wants to eat it. He loves tofu, and he actually doesn't like ground beef. He thinks it's like a weird texture to eat ground beef, but tofu is like, when it's prepared well, it's like a fried little cube. He's like, this is delicious, right? But so much of it is our preconceptions that go into what is good food. But you also touch on something that's really important, actually, around kids, because a lot of what we eat in our household is based off of our kids, which is why getting plant-based foods into schools is so important because kids will then bring it home and they'll say, oh, dad, I tried kale today. Can I have this at home? But when we're only really feeding kids, you know, fish sticks and potatoes, they're not really looking for new eating experiences. They're not being exposed to that.

Matt Eastland:
Just before we move on to future stuff, you mentioned about cost to consumers and you were saying that when it's like a dollar more, consumers won't have it. And one of the things I'm always very conscious of on the show is making sure that we talk about that kind of affordability angle. So in low-income communities, which often face like high levels of food insecurity and food poverty, so how can these sorts of transitions towards more plant-based diets be managed to ensure that kind of equitable access for them? And of course, you know, that those gains are felt all the way back down to the farmer. So how do we ensure that this doesn't become like an elitist thing?

Sarah Lake:
Yeah, it's such an important question because food equity is not just about, you know, equal access to food, but also equity in terms of the health outcomes associated with that. We see it in the U.S. as sort of a compounded form of racism, that we actually feed low-income communities of color super unhealthy food. They live in food deserts. They don't have access to produce. Then we also don't offer

health insurance. They get sick. They spend more money on that. It's just compounding the inequity. So it's a really important question of how do we ensure access to these foods. And it's interesting you mention it. It just came out recently in the latest UN report on the state of food security and nutrition. And they point out that fruits and vegetables remain the most expensive foods per kilocalorie. So we still have a food system that is making the healthiest foods the most expensive and therefore the hardest to access. And some of the most processed meat options and ultra-processed foods. When you're talking about, you know, all of the processed cookies, cakes, et cetera, they are cheap and widely affordable. So it is a challenge when we talk about equity of shifting these incentives, like we talked about, some of the policy measures around what is made cheap and widely available to consumers. Right now, a lot of that is influenced by the food industry. So you see food companies who are pushing to influence policy so that they don't lose money, that they can continue to push processed and meat-centric foods as the cheap option. And this leads to the obesity epidemic we see globally, that we have most people eating lots of cheap, unhealthy food, whether it's McDonald's burgers or it's candy and sweets and sodas, but we haven't yet tipped the scales in terms of saying we should actually have subsidies and policies that make it easy and cheap to have these other foods. The onus certainly should never be on consumers. If it is on consumers, that is an elitist thing right now in terms of who can afford it. But trying to shift that on its head, and there are policies for that, like food aid programs that can offer free access to fruits and vegetables, as well as the means to prepare those. We're seeing the removal of sodas and processed foods from some of those food programs. But even things like there's programs in the US, like Food is Medicine. How do you get insurance companies to write whole foods as a prescription, right? How do you have the way in which healthcare is giving access to healthy food in order to help with preventable disease, rather than prescribing actual medicines? It's an interesting way of thinking about it, where we can have all of our institutions, from schools and hospitals and healthcare and prisons and military, helping to ensure that we have access to the healthiest foods at a cheap and affordable rate.

Matt Eastland:
I mean, Sarah, you've already kind of thrown out, excuse me, a few examples there of like the sort of positive progress that you said previously about Denmark and there's great things to be going on in Germany in terms of providing the same kind of level of access in retail stores to plant-based foods. And you've thrown out a few examples there. But are there any kind of like standout governments or companies which who are making changes that we, and shall I say we the food system, can learn from. Things that we've seen which are really working and people just need to kind of take up the mantle and push it.

Sarah Lake:

The first one that comes to mind, you'll be excited to hear, is the UK.

Matt Eastland:
Oh, OK. I'm all ears.

Sarah Lake:
So there's a lot of skepticism. We hear all the time, nothing's really happening. Governments are slacking. And it's true. There is room to do more. But the UK is a great example, where the UK had the lowest recorded level of meat consumption in modern history. This was just a few years ago. And since recorded history, it was the lowest level of meat consumption that had ever happened. And there was a study done to understand why. And one of the driving factors was portion size, which is such an interesting point to what we are trying to do at Tilt Collective, which is to say this isn't about being vegan. This is actually just eating less. So we're seeing that if you simply have smaller portions, that can be packaged foods and prepared foods. It can be what's served at buffets or in schools. It can be what the packaging of raw meat even is a smaller amount that people just tend to eat less of it. Even in buffets, if you put a smaller spoon in the tray that has meat, people will put less meat on their plate and then eat less of it. These are so simple. And we're seeing that this actually is a population level impacts. We're not talking about one university or canteen. This is all of the UK had the lowest level of meat consumption. So it's happening. It's happening. Could there be more? Sure. The decrease was small in the bigger scale when you're talking about overconsumption. But it's one example where interventions to help with portion size are important. Some of the other examples we see are policy measures to help incentivize the plant-based eating. So the UK also encouraged meat reduction for climate and for health. Personally, I think we're seeing some of the most success around health. Most people don't care about climate change. We know that, I accept it. Even as a climate champion, I'm not gonna try to convince people to care about climate change. What they do care about is their own health and their health of their family. So we're seeing, for example, in the US, some of the largest growth in consumption of plant-based proteins is the families who include men over 40, who are facing heart disease. from a history of eating meat. And it's not actually them. It's their wives who are doing the food purchasing who tend to be buying these products out of a health mindset. They want low cholesterol, healthier fat options for their husbands. And so we are seeing success where there's more attention on health and healthy eating, on the impacts of meat-centric diets, on the obesity epidemic, on preventable disease. And so this framing has motivated a lot of countries. I think there's dozens of countries now that have plant-based protein plans that are part of both a health and climate agenda. What those look like is asking the question of how do we offer and incentivize more plants in our school food program. So Brazil has one of the largest school feeding programs in the world and they prioritize minimally processed whole foods that are

also locally and indigenously sourced to have sort of a win-win of offering these within school systems where they're trying to prevent, you know, preventable disease and also support local economies. So there's lots of examples like that where we're seeing success and it's simply a question of how much it's being scaled and replicated and we are trying to do just that. Encourage more companies and more governments to take these successes and run with them.

Matt Eastland:
Amazing. Sarah, it sounds like you're doing some incredible work, and I really applaud you for that. And I really hope that everything continues to go in the right direction, shall we say. So, yeah, huge congrats. And in terms of our listeners, where can people go to find out more about you and all the great work you're doing at Tilt Collective?

Sarah Lake:
Absolutely. You can check us out at tiltcollective.org, as well as follow us on LinkedIn, where most of our updates can be found there.

Matt Eastland:
Fantastic. Sarah, this has been a really, really excellent conversation. I always said wicked conversation. It's been a wicked conversation. And I've really enjoyed talking to you about it. I've personally, as always on these shows, but particularly on this one, I've learned loads. So thank you for that. And I'm sure our listeners will too. So Sarah, thank you once again for being on and thank you to everyone for tuning into this week's episode. So this has been the Food Fight podcast. If you'd like to find out more, then check out the EIT Food website at www.eitfood.eu and join the conversations via the hashtag EIT Food Fight on our LinkedIn channel at EIT Food. And of course, if you haven't already, please hit the follow button so you never miss an episode. Thanks everyone, speak to you soon.