

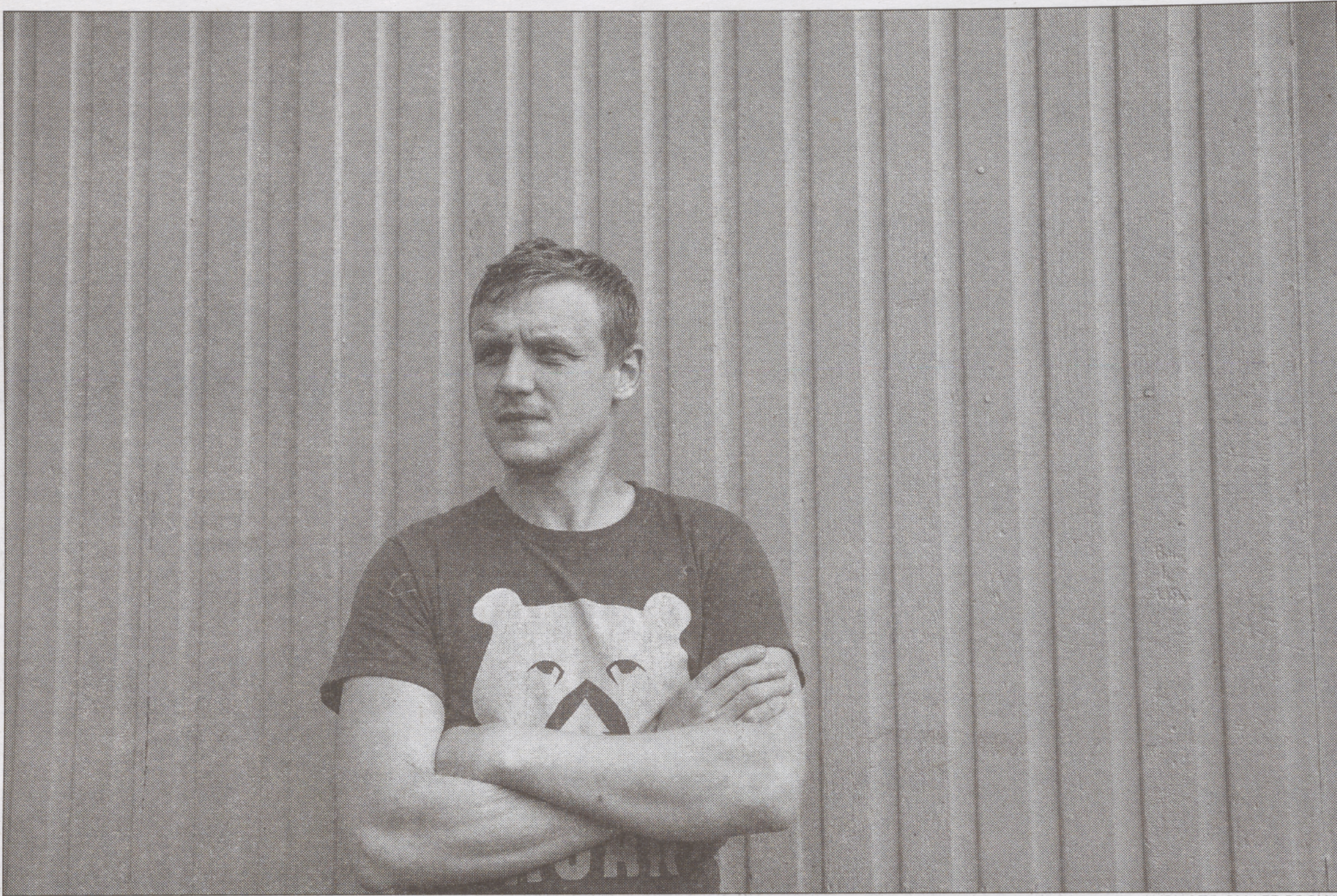


PHOTO BY LEE BROWN

Adam Smith: Food junkie

After witnessing pigs being fed perfectly edible food that had been branded as waste, U.K.'s Adam Smith established The Real Junk Food Project, the goal of which is to take food deemed inedible and cook it up into delicious meals.

BY TONY INGLIS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Adam Smith, founder of The Real Junk Food Project in the United Kingdom, speaks about his stand against food waste and poverty, he is passionate, unstoppable and completely unequivocal.

"We should be deeply embarrassed and ashamed as a society that we've got children going to school hungry, food banks and homelessness on the rise in the U.K., resources being wasted all over the planet, and food being unnecessarily thrown away when it's still perfectly edible.

"There are empty buildings all over the country when people are in need of homes. Give them these homes. The answers are all staring us right in the face."

For those who do not know – and, considering its meteoric rise, it should be hard to miss – The Real Junk Food Project was established by Smith four years ago in a bid to end food poverty. The nonprofit organization does this by gathering food and other produce that would otherwise be considered waste, past its use-by date, and feeding it to people in cafés where customers are encouraged to pay what they feel. This latter point is crucial to the ethos of the project. "I am more into an empowerment approach. People should be treated as human beings, and be valued the same as everybody else regardless of who they are, where they come from or the situation they find themselves in. People should always be given the opportunity to give back.

"It should be a basic human right to have access to food. We should allow and teach people to not only value their food as a

resource but also value themselves.

"There's a huge stigma around food waste and it's attached to people who are poor, needy, homeless and vulnerable. To try and break down those stigmas, we're trying to stop pigeonholing people into these groups. People are human beings."

Smith picked up the concept after working as a well-paid head chef at high-end restaurants while living in Australia.

"I was working on a farm trying to gain

Australian citizenship," Smith said. "I had witnessed extreme poverty and homelessness in Sydney and the demolition of the Occupy protest camps on a daily basis. I had come across the pay-what-you-feel concept in a restaurant run by a Buddhist monk in Melbourne. And

then one day, I was in the middle of the desert, on this farm, and it all just clicked – I'm going to feed the world with food waste. That was it.

"Who knows where it came from," Smith continued. "There was nothing around me except for almond trees and a caravan on this horrible farm where the owners treated us terribly. I'd been a chef; I knew how to cook food, I knew how to handle food. I was eating the same food that the pigs were

being fed – beautiful squash, apricots and courgettes that had been wasted on neighboring farms. The whole thing just came together. There was no epiphany moment, it was just the whole journey of going to and being in Australia was a very eye opening experience. I knew I could go back home to the U.K. and do this."

Smith is so utterly committed to his aim that, when he gets going, he can speak for 10 straight minutes, without interruption, about the problem he has set out to eradicate and the work the project is doing to achieve this. "I created The Real Junk Food Project as a single café that was created in order to question and expose the reality of food waste in the modern world, but also poverty and the classist approach that we have to poverty."

In four years, the project has grown from one café to 127 across seven countries throughout the world. In Leeds alone, its city of origin, the project feeds 35,000 people a week. The first Real Junk Food café is about to open in the U.S. and, thanks to Fuel for School, a partner program which diverts food waste to schools, feeding children as well as educating them about how to cook, handle and save food, Smith has reached 20,000 school pupils in Leeds. He has ambitions that the program will go nationwide within 18 months.

Smith knows connecting with young people is essential if his project is to have a positive, long-lasting effect. "For me, when it comes to tackling issues around poverty

and homelessness, I want to deal with it at the bottom end of the spectrum. I try to go right back to the beginning, and that means teaching people not to be wasteful with their food.

"We should be empowering and educating these young people. Because at the point of trauma, it can take up to 10, 15 years for people to end up in a position where they

are in need and vulnerable, so I say let's empower this generation. If we don't tackle it right now at the grassroots, all these problems – food waste, homelessness, malnutrition – are going to continue to exist.

"We could go to supermarkets and ask them to stop wasting food, but they don't care, they're raking in too much profit. We could go and give food to people

"As consumers, we have been manipulated to foot the blame by the big corporations who benefit from people returning to their supermarkets and buying more and more food. They say this is what we want. But we don't really have a choice. We've been exploited and manipulated to feel responsible for the way our food industry is run."