



# When Food Becomes a Crown: A Reflection on Luxury Agriculture, Entitlement, and the Ethics of Nourishment

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## Abstract

Encounters with everyday commodities can sometimes expose deeper structural and ethical tensions within modern food systems. This reflective paper examines a personal encounter with an ultra-premium watermelon priced beyond ordinary affordability and marketed as the sole fruit matured on a plant for optimal sweetness and nutritional balance. Drawing on decades of experience in biology, ecotoxicology, and environmental education, this paper reflects on how such luxury-oriented agricultural practices redefine food as a symbol of entitlement rather than nourishment. By situating this experience within the broader literature on food security, sustainability, agricultural intensification, and environmental ethics, the paper argues that extreme quality optimisation through artificial scarcity conflicts with ecological efficiency, social equity, and the foundational purpose of agriculture. The objective of this paper is to critically examine how such practices challenge the ethical, ecological, and social roles of food within contemporary agricultural systems. The reflection positions food not merely as a biochemical product but as a moral and social artefact, raising questions about dignity, pressure, and values in contemporary consumer culture.

**Keywords:** Food Ethics; Luxury Agriculture; Sustainability; Food Security; Reflective Practice

## Introduction

Food is one of the most intimate interfaces between humans and the natural world. It carries energy, nutrients, culture, memory, and meaning [1]. For most of human history, agriculture has been guided by a simple ethical imperative: to feed people [2]. Yet, in contemporary societies, food has increasingly become a site of spectacle, branding, and social signalling. This shift is not always visible in policy documents or yield statistics, but it reveals itself sharply in moments of lived experience.

I recall walking through a premium supermarket and encountering a watermelon priced at more than RM250 (About 10 times more than the regular water melon of the same size). The explanation was simple and proudly displayed: only one fruit was allowed to mature on the plant, while all others were removed. Water, nutrients, and photosynthates were deliberately concentrated into a single fruit to achieve exceptional sweetness and texture. Scientifically, this claim is plausible. Morally, it left me deeply unsettled.

As a biologist and ecotoxicologist who has spent more than two decades studying how ecosystems distribute resources under constraints, I found myself asking a basic question: when did food stop being about feeding, and start becoming about crowning?

This reflective paper aims to critically examine how luxury-oriented agricultural practices, exemplified by the production and marketing of ultra-premium fruits, reshape the fundamental meaning and purpose of food in contemporary society. Drawing from personal experience and grounded in biological and ecological understanding, the paper seeks to explore the tension between scientific optimisation for quality and the ethical principles of resource efficiency, sustainability, and equitable access.

## Biological Logic Versus Social Meaning

From a physiological perspective, reducing fruit load can indeed increase individual fruit size and sugar concentration due to reduced competition for assimilates [3]. This principle is well established in horticultural science and is often applied to improve market quality within reasonable limits. However, biology does not operate in a moral vacuum.

What disturbed me was not the technique itself, but its extreme application and the meaning



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attached to it. Producing one fruit per plant is no longer an agronomic optimisation for efficiency or resilience. It is a deliberate creation of scarcity. The fruit is not designed to nourish many but to impress a few. In this moment, agriculture crosses a conceptual boundary. It moves from food production into luxury manufacturing.

As scholars have noted, food systems are not only biophysical systems but also social constructs shaped by power, culture, and economic inequality [4]. When scarcity is engineered not by environmental limits but by design, the ethical justification of such systems becomes questionable.

## Food, Pressure, and the Psychology of Entitlement

What I felt standing in front of that watermelon was pressure. Not hunger, but psychological pressure. The fruit silently communicated that it was not meant for ordinary people. It was a symbol of refinement, exclusivity, and status. In that moment, food ceased to be welcoming.

This is a critical but often overlooked dimension of food ethics. Food should not humiliate. It should not signal who belongs and who does not. Studies in environmental psychology and sociology have shown that consumption spaces can reinforce feelings of exclusion and inadequacy when value is tied to wealth rather than need [5].

Entitlement, in this context, is not merely economic. It is cultural. It suggests that perfection is deserved by a few, while adequacy is sufficient for the many. This logic is deeply at odds with the ecological worldview, where resilience emerges from diversity, redundancy, and sharing rather than concentration.

## Sustainability, Efficiency, and Moral Contradictions

From a sustainability perspective, luxury fruit production raises further concerns. Concentrating resources such as water, fertilisers, labour, and land into a single fruit increases the environmental cost per unit of edible biomass. This contradicts the principles of sustainable intensification, which aim to produce sufficient food while minimising ecological footprints [6].

At a global scale, food insecurity remains persistent. The Food and Agriculture Organization continues to report that hundreds of millions of people face inadequate access to nutritious food, even as premium food markets expand in affluent regions [7]. This coexistence of excess refinement and unmet need is not accidental. It reflects structural priorities.

As an ecotoxicologist, I am acutely aware that environmental stressors such as climate change, pollution, and soil degradation already constrain food production. In such a context, choosing to reduce output for the sake of luxury is not a neutral aesthetic decision. It is a political and ethical one.

## Reflection as Resistance

Walking away from that watermelon was not an act of frugality. It was an act of refusal. Reflective practice, long recognised as a legitimate mode of scholarly inquiry, allows such moments to be examined rather than dismissed [8]. Reflection makes visible the values embedded in ordinary encounters.

In my academic life, reflection has always been intertwined with science. Whether studying metal accumulation in molluscs or teaching ecological principles to students, I have learned that data without ethics is incomplete. Likewise, food without compassion is hollow.

True quality in food should not be defined by how few can access it, but by how well it serves collective well-being. A watermelon that feeds ten families imperfectly is, in my view, more valuable than one that feeds one individual flawlessly.

## Conclusion

This reflection is not an argument against excellence, nor against farmers seeking fair returns for their labour. It is an argument against redefining food as a crown rather than a common. Agriculture must remain grounded in its primary purpose: to sustain life with dignity.

In an era of climate uncertainty, widening inequality, and ecological fragility, we must be careful about the stories we tell through our food. When food becomes a symbol of entitlement, it exerts pressure not only on consumers, but on the moral fabric of society. Refusing such narratives, quietly and consciously, may be one of the simplest forms of ethical resistance available to us.

## Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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