

Edible Cotswolds

By Andrea Mynard



An Autumn walk in the Cotswolds, skirting hedgerows rich with dusky purple sloes and damsons, following meandering paths through lush pastures where sheep have grazed for centuries, always makes me hungry. Those paths lead so enticingly into pretty villages where the russet leaved orchards lead my thoughts to crumbles and pies full of plums, apples or pears. Past farmhouse dairies where decadently creamy milk is being churned into cheeses, ice creams and yoghurts. It isn't just the steep climbs up onto the Cotswold escarpment that stirs my appetite; even the shortest walk across the fields always reminds me just how tasty our Cotswold landscape is.

Strolling across our undulating hills it strikes me just how much our delicious local food has played its part in shaping the countryside that it comes from. Cotswold lamb is the most obvious of course – living as we do amidst honey coloured towns and villages that were mostly built from the wool trade, sheep are still a key feature of our countryside. The Cotswold Lion, the breed whose fleece made fortunes for Cotswold wool merchants, is still farmed widely. In fact, Chipping Campden schoolchildren are playing a great part in preserving this traditional breed – the school has its own flock of pedigree Cotswold Lions which they keep in Wolds End orchard along with Gloucester Old Spot pigs and chickens. They learn how to make tasty lamb burgers with the meat at Dorn Farm locally and enjoy tucking into them at the school canteen.

Back in the Cotswold Lion's heyday when there was a market for wool, farmers could afford to keep their sheep longer and so mutton and hogget (meat from sheep between 12 and 24 months), would've been a tasty feature of our ancestor's diets. Now that their fleeces have so little value, it rarely makes sense for farmers to keep sheep, other than ewes and rams for breeding, beyond 12 months. Great then that we're lucky enough to have mutton and hogget playing its part in our landscape once again at Cold Aston where Peter Harkness breeds pedigree Windrush Berrichons, Dorsets and Whitefaced Woodlands and sells delicious hogget and mutton, all naturally reared on pasture. Suiting long, slow-cooking, maybe with our local cider adding moisture and a little honey or a handful of damsons complimenting the wonderful flavour, this is slow-reared, flavoursome food at its best.

Recently harvested barley fields next to my house (providing local brewery Hook Norton with a key ingredient for their delicious beer) lead onto ploughed fields where wheat is often grown, reminding me of the long tradition of milling in the area. Artisan Flour millers, like FWP Matthews in Shipton under Wychwood or Shipton Mill, near Tetbury, have been providing



Blue Heaven cheese from Woeful Dane Dairy

HI-REST TO COME



Hobbs House Bakery

HI-REST TO COME



Prize-winning Windrush Berrichons

Cotswold flour to local bakers for generations. You can walk along the Cotswold Way to Stanway Watermill, which has had working watermills since at least the thirteenth century and is once again producing stone-ground Cotswold flour from wheat grown less than a mile from the mill. I love experimenting with local, stone-ground flour at home, in focaccia, sourdough and in easy overnight loaves.

Cotswold bakers are making excellent use of our local flour, including the fabulous Hobbs House Bakery (Chipping Sodbury, Nailsworth and Cirencester) and the Natural Bread Company which specialises in wild yeast breads or sourdoughs that are made over a period of days, using traditional slow fermentation techniques.

There's a hint of fermentation in the air closer to home as my walk takes me through orchards with fallen, unpicked fruit (providing a feast for wildlife) reminding me of local Perries and Ciders. Both drinks provide the perfect accompaniment to some of our local cheeses, whether a Cotswold Brie or a gloriously stinky blue cheese from Woeful Dane Dairy in Minchinhampton; hedgerow jelly is delicious with both.

Tempted into woodland paths by all those crunchy Autumn leaves underfoot, pheasants, wood pigeons and partridge add to the rich colour: game is another traditional feature of our edible Cotswolds. Many of our woodlands are once again providing

perfect foraging material for old breeds (such as Gloucester Old spots) of pigs too, who love rooting around, the woods offering them a steady supply of food and space to roam while they do their bit for the ecosystem, clearing the undergrowth to allow plants to regenerate.

As dusk leads me home, it's time to light the wood-burning stove and start slow-cooking some of the wonderful local produce that's given me such an appetite!

To read more about Andrea's appetite for locally reared/produced food, see her blog, www.shabbychick.me.uk