

Best of British to you



The sourcing of home-grown products is a trend many restaurants are keen to follow to do their bit for the planet. Here's how to turn worthiness into wealthiness

Local heroes: a range of high quality British produce has grown in response to customer demand

Cornish mackerel, Old Spot pork, Morecambe Bay shrimps, Cumbrian lamb. The list is potentially endless. The booming trend for championing British produce on the menu means that many dishes come with their own post code these days. Whether it's to show that they support local farmers, to reduce food miles or simply because there is little need to look beyond the shores of this fair Isle, restaurants have taken British bounty to their bosoms.

The approach has had similar resonance with diners who, over the past few years, have become more interested in food provenance. While a few years ago a simple steak and chips would be enough to satisfy the majority of carnivores, today there is a growing desire to know the country the meat hails from, as well as other de rigeur information, such as what the cattle has been fed on and how long it has been hung.

And recent research undertaken by EBLEX, the English Beef and Lamb Executive, (rather unsurprisingly, maybe) has found it is better for restaurants to display the country of origin of their

Words
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meat on their menus, with people believing it provided an indication of animal welfare standards as well as supporting the British economy. "The findings support the fact that people are interested in knowing more about the food they eat," says project manager Hugh Judd. "When it comes to motivating menu claims, eating quality and 'locally produced' both rank highly." It's a compelling argument - so what are you waiting for?

Sensible sourcing

Of course, buying more British produce and telling your customers about it isn't suddenly going to transform your business. There are a number of things restaurants need to consider in order to make a success of it, including how they market their approach, whether it will affect the quality of the food and how much their customers want it.

Some restaurants have turned a fanatical approach to sourcing British-only produce to their advantage. At North Road in London's Clerkenwell,

Danish chef Christoffer Hruskova has eschewed imported ingredients, opting instead for British alternatives - there's no olive oil in his kitchen and no chocolate graces the menu. Even though the restaurant is modern European with a Scandinavian twist the type of dishes cooked at North Road - light and fresh, and vegetable-led - means that Hruskova can get away with his stalwartly British stance. Ironically, however, this might not be the same for restaurants serving what could be construed as a more British menu because diners expect to eat ingredients not native to this country as part of their regular diet.

At The Olde Bell Inn in Hurley, Berkshire, for example, head chef Warren Geraghty tries to source as many ingredients as locally as possible but isn't going to go down the British route at the expense of quality. "All our lamb comes from Marsworth. It's the best available," he says. "I'd like to use British chickens but you can't always get the quality here. If I need 75 chickens one day I'm not going to get them from an intensely reared farm in Britain so I go where I know they are good quality. You have to be sensible."



Geraghty says TV programmes like *Great British Menu* and *British Food Fortnight*, which begins this month, have made people more interested in local food but they still expect to see foreign ingredients on the menu. So, alongside dishes such as its Old Bell garden salad, with the vegetables picked from its own gardens, or its British cheeseboard, sit ingredients such as pistachios and Iberico ham.

At The Northall restaurant at London's new Corinthia hotel, head chef Garry Hollhead takes sourcing a stage further with 90% of his menu made using British ingredients. While having a strong British offer is an intrinsic part of the restaurant's identity, like at The Old Bell, Hollhead isn't restrained by its approach. "We don't buy British just for the sake of it. There are things we've got to import, such as certain fruits during the winter months. We do use olive oil, but we predominantly use rapeseed oil for general purpose cooking."

Sourcing local also means restaurants need to be totally in step with the seasons, adds Hollhead. "You've got to be able to plan ahead. We order fish from day boats in Cornwall at 9am and we get it the following day so you really need to know your menu and how much you're likely to sell. If you're using British produce you also need to know what's coming ahead in the next month or two. I wanted to put nettle soup on the menu but the wet start to the year meant that nettles were four weeks late."

British and proud

Despite their significant use of home-grown ingredients, both The Old Bell and The Northall are careful not to play the British card too prominently. The Old Bell uses an approach taken by many restaurants of highlighting the fact that it uses local suppliers at the bottom of the menu and putting in the odd provenance descriptor where necessary.

The Northall, meanwhile, puts the name and location of the key supplier for every dish on its menu, but Hollhead is careful to go no further than that. "We don't put that much information on our menus. It lists the main elements of the dish and where it comes from, but it's very simple. People don't need a lot of words about why we've chosen a particular ingredient or supplier."

While different, both approaches ensure that customers are aware that the food is home-grown, tapping into the rising demand for British ingredients without appearing too worthy or diverting attention away from the dish itself. Only if diners want to know more about the ingredients are they told, and this means ensuring waiting staff have strong product knowledge. "If people are interested they are going to ask," says Geraghty. "We train our service staff to enable them to answer any questions about our ingredients. The garden salad changes daily. A lot of our guests are

People are interested in finding out about the food they eat

A very British approach to buying home-grown food

Do

- ✓ Shop around. The closest suppliers to you may not necessarily be the cheapest or the best
- ✓ Look for good quality British alternatives to common imports where possible
- ✓ Keep provenance descriptors simple and to the point
- ✓ Forge close links with suppliers and invite them to host dinners
- ✓ Train staff to have a good knowledge of provenance and seasonality
- ✓ Be proud of serving British food, don't hide it under a bushel

Don't

- ✗ Put too many unrecognisable British ingredients on your menu
- ✗ Give consumers chapter and verse of where every single ingredient comes from
- ✗ Buy British for the sake of it. If the quality is better elsewhere then that's where you should be sourcing from
- ✗ Get carried away with needing British-only ingredients - your menu's diversity will suffer
- ✗ Try to use too many suppliers. In an attempt to help small farmers restaurants can source from too many, making the process confusing

Alternative fuel:

British products giving their better-known foreign counterparts a run for their money

■ Air dried ham

Spain and Italy might lead the way but you can get good quality product much closer to home. Producers such as Oxprings in Worcestershire and Deli Farm Charcuterie in Cornwall sell air dried ham, including traditional coppa, pancetta and prosciutto. Visit www.cheese cellar.co.uk.

■ Olives

Britain's first-ever commercial crop of olives was produced last year on a farm in Sidlesham, West Sussex. Olives groves are also growing in Devon, Shropshire and Anglesey.

■ Tea

Forget Chinese, Indian and Kenyan tea, head to Cornwall and the Tregothnan estate for a top quality English cuppa.

■ Burrata/mozzarella

The Italian cheese of the moment is also produced at Laverstoke Park in Hampshire, and the quality is top-notch.

■ Rosé

English wine is on the up but it's home-produced rosé that leads by example. In particular Denbies Chalk Ridge 2010, recently judged the best still rosé in the world.

■ Summer truffles

The subterranean fungi is becoming more abundant in the UK.

residents and they see the chefs picking the leaves in the morning, but you don't have to put provenance on everything."

The popularity of local sourcing has also led directly to the rise of the forager and the appearance of less recognisable ingredients on menus, mostly herbs and salad ingredients. The use of foraged-for ingredients, as well as being significantly cheaper, adds to the local story a restaurant is trying to tell. But again, shouting about them must be done sensibly. "We have a rule that we never use more than two unusual names of ingredients on our menus," says Geraghty. "Once your menu becomes littered with ingredients people don't recognise they start asking whether they are going to like it or not." Geraghty even changes the name of certain ingredients to make them sound more palatable. "We use something called scurvy grass, but we call it horseradish grass because that's what it tastes of."

If you have the space in your restaurant, maybe the best way of engaging your customers with local ingredients is to host 'meet the supplier' dinners. The Northall has a separate cafe-cum-bar area at the entrance to its dining room where it hosts British cheese and wine tastings. Every month it gets suppliers down for the day to talk about their products. Hollhead is even looking to start a blog talking about what he is doing in the restaurant. "People are interested in British food," he says. "The more ways you can tell them about it, the better." **G**