

LOCAL FOOD HEROES



Jeremy and Alexia Benson

STEPHEN WHEELER, commercial manager at speciality food company Mise en Place, now part of Cheltenham-based Creed Foodservice, is responsible for sourcing the best food ingredients for top chefs across the country

THE old adage starts with 'an apple a day'.

At Bensons Simply Pressed Fruit in Sherbourne, in the heart of the Cotswolds, they use around 1,000 kilos a day of English apples to produce 300,000 bottles a year of deliciously natural fruit juices.

The Benson family has been farming for three generations, and it was on a visit to his father's farm in Northumberland that Jeremy and Alexia Benson first tasted apple juice pressed from apples grown in the farm orchard.

That was back in 2000, and from modest beginnings selling their juices at music festivals, they now market their products to the National Trust, pubs and restaurant chains, national wholesalers such as Creed Foodservice, delis and farmers' markets all over the country.

They use a simple process that has been around for centuries; the apples are pulped and pressed, then pasteurized and bottled. There are no added sugars, water or preservatives, and that simplicity comes out in the flavour – pure, crisp English apples.

It takes just 24 hours to turn fresh English apples into juice and 15 whole apples to fill a bottle. During the long hot summer of 2006 they started to freeze their juices, for healthy iced

lollies for their four children.

Commercial production of the Chilly Billy lollies began in 2007, and they have seen a 300 per cent increase in sales to the present day, so that they now sell more lollies than juices.

I asked Alexia what had been their biggest challenge since launching the business?

"Taking it from the farmer's market to a brand that has now been accepted by national customers," she replied.

"We wrote a business strategic development plan with the help of Business Link in Cheltenham; it gave us a clear vision of our goal, and the path to take." Bensons feel they can now take on the national manufacturers of juice and iced lollies with their recently re-designed packaging.

But it's the unadulterated, pure flavour that wins it for me, whether the apples are mixed with rhubarb, elderflowers or blackberries.

From the outside, the Bensons bottling plant is a traditional yard of Cotswold stone barns on the Sherbourne National Trust estate. At the core is a thriving Gloucestershire business, committed to selling a high quality product while supporting the rural community.

Field trips pay off for students

When James Mansfield and James Flower met at the Royal Agricultural College, in Cirencester, little did they know a few years later they would be delivering luxury meat boxes together. **LUCY PARFORD** hears all about their exciting new venture

As a farmer's son, James Flower always knew he wanted to carry on his family's long tradition.

And with his new delivery business he hopes to secure the farm's future by tapping into the niche luxury food market.

The 24-year-old has set up the company field&flower together with James Mansfield who he met at the Royal Agricultural College in 2006.

At the time, the two students spent long evenings in their damp, dishevelled flat in Cirencester, discussing their dream of getting great farm produce back into customers' hands through direct sale.

Now, armed with their agricultural BSc degrees, field&flower has launched, specialising in the delivery of luxury high

quality meat boxes locally and throughout the UK.

Their flagship product is superior grass-fed Hereford beef from a small traditional suckler herd reared on Home Farm in north Somerset, deep in the Gordano Valley.

The farm is run by John Flower and his son, now the fifth generation of the Flower family to produce beef.

James says: "James and I were convinced that we could combine his experience in upmarket catering with my family's long history in beef farming.

"We wanted to meet the growing consumer demand for high quality fresh farm produce with an environmentally friendly provenance – but firmly believed we didn't need to become a slave to the

supermarkets to achieve it."

The field&flower boxes contain a range of fast and slow cook prime joints, traditional thick cut rib-eye, tender sirloin and rump steaks, spiced beef sausages and speciality burgers that are made to a unique recipe using premium beef cuts and locally sourced ingredients.

James is proud of the time and care taken in raising their traditional Hereford cattle on the farm.

He adds: "Traditionally, we have reared Herefords due to their quiet temperament and the quality of their meat. Once the cattle are weaned they are fed solely on grass and forage and are slaughtered no earlier than 26 months, which results in a very flavoursome meat."



Traditional Hereford cattle on the farm