

Market Matters

with Clare Gerbrands



THE weather is warming up at last. We usually enjoy an average of 75 to 85 hours of sunshine this month, so it's an ideal opportunity to get out into the garden while the plants are still dormant and do any re-arranging before the sap starts rising.

Most garden plants don't mind being moved at this time of year.

February at the markets means Purple Love Week and a great opportunity to buy fresh quality ingredients for that special Valentine's meal.

At the farmers' markets in Gloucester on Friday and Stroud next Saturday, stallholders will be dressing themselves and their stalls in purple. Come along and vote for your favourite "purple lovely stall" and enter our free draw to win a Purple Love Box, full of fantastic farmers' market produce.

At Stroud, local digital artist "Vietnam the Movie" will have limited edition prints, cards and framed pictures of his Love Pigs on sale, and will also be making personalised Love Pictures for Valentine's Day and other artists and makers are planning special ranges for the event.

February brings Pancake Day on Tuesday 16, traditionally designed for using up all the sweet and fatty foods in the larder before fasting for the 40 days of Lent until Easter Sunday.

Apparently, in Gloucester, pancakes used to be made using suet years ago.

Nowadays, few of us fast for lent, but it is still a popular time for giving up a vice or extravagance, and Shrove Tuesday is always a great excuse to get the whole family around the table to enjoy home-made fresh pancakes with sweet and savoury toppings.

At home, we have a tradition of making a big pot of seasonal vegetables in cheese sauce. Everyone has a savoury pancake (or two) with cheesy vegetable sauce before moving on to the sweet course.

That was a great way of getting the kids to eat vegetables on Pancake Day when they were young. Selsley's vanilla syrup is very

good poured over hot pancakes with a dollop of Winstones Ice cream. And don't forget to make the most of the stored Gloucestershire apples to make apple sauce and serve with cream on your pancakes. Yum.

Jerusalem artichokes are now in season, (get them at Newark Farm stall in Stroud), great to make delicious soup, or for a three root mash with celeriac and swede.

Also, locally grown chestnut mushrooms are on sale at Stroud farmers' market on the first and third Saturdays. There are lots of varieties of potatoes available now, and all have different properties. Ask the growers for ideas on which potatoes are good for baking, roasting, and mashing. Some have up to eight varieties of potatoes on the stall.

After being cancelled because of the snow in January, Stow-on-the-Wold farmers' market returns on Thursday from 11am until 1pm. This makes a good day out with all the beautiful scenery, lovely tea shops to visit, and of course Cotswold producers including Donnington Trout Farm, Simon Weaver Organic Cheese, and Old Farm from Moreton-in-Marsh with old spot bacon and sausages. Cullimore's Organics will be cooking salt marsh beef and lamb burgers at Gloucester every Friday.

If you're looking for some cheaper cuts of meat to make comforting home-made meals this month, try using Cullimore's minced beef, braising steak or shoulder of lamb for outstanding value and great flavour. There are many recipes for slow roasted shoulder of lamb, so chose your favourite, use some fresh herbs out of the garden – rosemary works well – some fresh garlic, and a little olive oil. Serve with home made gravy; three root mash and curly kale for a true taste of February.

In season this month: Purple sprouting, cauliflower, January King cabbage, curly kale, swede, parsnips, celeriac, potatoes, onions, and red and white cabbage.

Ben's a master-mind in kitchen

From headhunter to cheese shop owner, and now private chef, Ben Axford is a man of many talents, as **LUCY PARFORD** finds out

It's been three years since Ben Axford reached the final of MasterChef, and he's thrilled to be finally following his dream of cooking for a living.

The former owner of the CheeseWorks in Regent Street, Cheltenham, sold his deli back in the summer and is now a private chef and food writer, having previously written witty food columns for WEEKEND.

With the private dining arm of his new business, Ben can organise canapé parties, three-course meals or a 10-course tasting menu and has come up with a very special proposition for Valentine's Day.

Ben, 36, says: "I'm not going to be tied up as my girlfriend is away, so I thought I'd come up with something completely different.

"If people don't want to go to a restaurant where there are set menus and want something really bespoke that's completely tailored to them in the venue of their choice, this fits the bill.

"As far as a Valentine's gift goes, it's pretty unique."

Ben's personalised seven-course tasting menu for two people in their own home costs £400 per couple. It could include mouthwatering dishes such as pan fried scallops, baby leeks, hazelnut and white truffle dressing with porcini gel or roast wood pigeon, parsnip purée, cassis sauce, coffee oil and winter greens, although everything would be devised on a one-to-one basis.

Coming up with new combinations of luxury ingredients is what Ben thrives on. "I don't think I will ever go full time as a chef but I do enjoy the private dining," he says. "It's a lot of fun, an opportunity to



Ben's pan-fried wood pigeon, parsnip puree, cassis sauce and coffee oil

wow people.

"There are only example dishes on my website but some people go for that. A lot of people do give me carte blanche but just say they don't want any shellfish or would like pork as a main ingredient, but then say 'the rest is up to you'.

"I think that's when people get the best out of the experience and it's what motivates me as well.

"I've had some really great feedback," he adds.

"My favourite quote was from a guest who went to the Manoir Aux Quat' Saisons the following week and said it was nice but pretty mediocre compared to what he was served by me."

As well as hosting private parties, Ben can also organise personalised cookery lessons or demonstrations for groups of friends. They can be arranged for a half or full day in the week or at weekends and start at £150.

"They can either be interactive where they are doing parts of it or just me showing them techniques as a group," says Ben, who lives in Pittville.

"They might have been given a pasta machine and have no idea how to make pasta, or maybe it falls to pieces, so I go round and show them where they're going wrong.

"It's great for birthday or Christmas presents, for people who you don't know what to get, why not a private cookery lesson?"

"I'm also going to be involved with The Foodworks Cookery School in Colesbourne and have an event in May." Ben, who cooked for Michelin-starred chefs on the BBC MasterChef show, says he doesn't regret leaving the CheeseWorks which he ran for several years (although he admits missing the Christmas buzz).

And while he may still open his own restaurant one day, he's not ready for the commitment just yet.

"It's well known that restaurant work is really, really hard and it's quite a risky business as well," he says.

"You've got all the wages and costs to cover and can't go and swan about on a Saturday if you don't fancy working.

"It's nice, with the private dining, to feel there is always time to do something ad hoc. If there's the Six Nations or a friend's wedding on one weekend I might decide I'm not going to take any bookings.

"It's still a fantastic opportunity to be creative with the private dining and show people dishes they wouldn't usually come across from a catering firm, but fine dining establishments instead, without it being completely over the top."

To book a personalised seven-course tasting menu for two people, cooked by Ben, for Valentine's weekend, call 07984 480446. Space is available next Friday, Saturday or Sunday and must be booked by Monday.

For more details, see the website www.benaxford.com



Private chef Ben Axford

Picture: Daniel Martino 195052_2

LOCAL FOOD HEROES



Leonie McIntosh

STEPHEN WHEELER, commercial manager at speciality food company Mise en Place, now part of Creed Foodservice, is in touch with a wealth of food producers. Here he shares some of their successes and challenges

FREE range, barn reared, farm assured, red tractor, organic, battery, local? Does anyone know what exactly any of this means? Is it based in actual regulation or are they just labels – misunderstood by many in the food industry, from producers to shops and restaurants?

At Great Farm, near Fairford, the chickens are very definitely free range. I pulled on my wellies and walked with farmer Leonie McIntosh to chicken houses in the middle of large green fields, with the chickens, ducks and guinea fowl running helter skelter around us.

While Leonie's husband Jonathan looks after their cattle and arable crops, she is busy rearing and selling around 500 chickens and 50 guinea fowl a week to Gloucestershire shops, farm shops, schools and restaurants.

A past gold-medal winner, Great Farm chickens have been used by Raymond Blanc at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons.

"I always take a sample of our chicken to chefs," says Leonie. "Once they've tried it, I usually hope to get an order, even though it's not the cheapest they could buy."

Leonie is passionate about her birds being genuinely free range.

"While battery and

barn-reared chickens are eaten after four to six weeks, we sell poultry that's been properly fed and aged to 12-16 weeks," she said. "The mature birds have fully developed muscle tissue, which comes out in a superior flavour and texture in the meat – chicken like it should taste. We feed them like it should, from the farm, and they peck around the fields for anything else that takes their fancy."

True free-range chicken accounts for only three per cent of all the chicken consumed in the UK – a surprisingly low amount given all the publicity in recent years.

Leonie takes delivery of her chicks from specialist hatcheries, and nurtures them in warmed sheds, deep in clean straw, until they're strong enough to withstand the outdoor life in an English winter.

"We do lose a few birds to predators," said Leonie. "Foxes sometimes get in, but we've had buzzards and rooks helping themselves in the past."

"My family tends to live on chicken," she adds. "One of our larger birds will do a roast on Sunday, sandwiches on Monday and soup on Tuesday."

One thing's for sure, if chicken's on the menu then Great Farm is bound to be high up the pecking order.

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