

In a nutshell!

Clarissa Porter remembers the nutty flavours of the old Kent countryside

Cobnut and lamb meatballs, with a cobnut salad

I've recently rediscovered meatballs, I thought I'd left them behind in my student digs. But the perfect meatball just takes a little care. And they're so cheap! The secret to a good meatball is, strangely, to go easy on the meat! The salad uses green cobnuts, I hope you can find them, they have a special taste. I wish they were available all year round!

Serves 4

675g (1lb 8oz) lamb, coarsely minced
2 cloves of garlic, crushed
1 tbsp of tomato ketchup
Pinch of chilli powder or finely chopped fresh red chilli
Small handful of chopped cobnuts, de-husked
1 egg, beaten
A few chopped mint leaves
Little flour
Oil for frying

For the salad:

Handful of green cobnuts, de-husked etc.
Quarter of red cabbage, finely shredded
2 carrots, peeled and cut into thin sticks
1 apple cored and sliced
1 pear cored and sliced
Baby salad leaves

For the dressing:

3 tbsp of plain yoghurt
3 mint leaves, chopped
Dribble of honey

METHOD

Combine the lamb, garlic, ketchup, chilli, cobnuts, chopped mint leaves and the beaten egg. Roll into small golf-ball-sized balls, then dust with a little flour.

Fry a few at a time in a pan, using any light oil such as vegetable, turning them quickly so they brown on all sides, fry for about 8 minutes.

Meanwhile mix the salad dressing by combining the ingredients and adding honey to taste. Mix the salad ingredients together gently, and toss in a large bowl with the dressing. Drain the meatballs on kitchen paper and serve warm, or cold, piled into a pyramid, and with the salad.



Growing up in the Kent countryside, the surrounding hop fields were my playground. Later, in my teens I rode ponies through the same fields, stopping to help myself to hazelnuts growing in the hedgerows. For generations of poor London hop-pickers, the nuts were a bonus, a special treat. At the height of the hop-picking bonanza, 80,000 Londoners would descend on Kent living in huts provided by the farmers, probably the only holiday any of them would ever know.

The hazel was one of the first trees to establish itself in these islands after the last Ice Age. Cultivated hazelnuts, known as Filberts, have been around since the 16th century. They are named after St. Philibert whose day is the 22nd August, and this is about the time when nuts become ready to eat. The Kentish Cobnut, also known as the Lambert Filbert emerged in the early 1800s. There are several other varieties, such as the Gunselbert, and the wonderfully-named Frizzled Filbert, which perfectly describes how I feel sometimes!

Filberts and Gunselberts

All very confusing, but luckily I have some old friends, Karin and Barry Craddock, who can help me out of my confusion! Years ago they decided that they'd had enough of London and bought Farnell Farm, 180 acres of beautiful Kentish countryside. The first crop they planted were Kentish Cobnuts, Filberts and Gunselberts, about 700 trees in all.

Any excuse to visit Farnell Farm, so I asked Barry: "Why cobnuts?" "Because of their historic relationship with Kent," he replied. "We wanted to plant something traditional and in tune with the landscape." Barry is a romantic like me, and he takes me back in time, to when hazelnuts were strewn on the floors of castles to dry for food in case of attack, and he tells me how they pollinate without bees, which illustrates their prehistoric link; about the ancient hedgerows and the link with St. Philibert, and how the traditional name for a cobnut orchard is a platt, still found in place names such as St. Mary Platt. Then Karin appears with some freshly-picked green cobnuts for us to taste.

Passion for green cobnuts

And the taste of the Farnell Farm cobnuts was a revelation, subtle and unique. Even the Lurcher had to be restrained as he discovered a passion for green cobnuts. "People become addicted to cobnuts," says Barry, "but you have to taste them at their best and freshest to really appreciate them. We sold all of last



Caption

Stuffed marrow with plums and cobnuts

This is a traditional country recipe from the Kentish Cobnut Association. Claimed to have Celtic origins, but I'm not sure about that. Stuffed marrow is one of my family's all-time favourites. Somehow it perfectly represents this time of the year, mists and mellow fruitfulness!

Serves 4

1 large marrow
 2 onions, sliced
 2-4 cloves of garlic
 350g (12oz) plums
 450g (1lb) cobnuts, (that is the weight in their husks)
 175g (6oz) mushrooms, sliced chunkily
 4 tomatoes, sliced

100g (4oz) butter
 30g (1oz) grated fresh ginger
 Some mixed herbs, fresh or dried
 Salt and pepper

METHOD

Clean the marrow and slice in half lengthways. Scoop out the seeds leaving a 'trough' in each half. Put the marrow halves into a suitable oven dish.

Halve the plums and remove the stones. De-husk the cobnuts and chop them chunkily. Take half the butter and gently fry the sliced onions. Then combine all the ingredients, I'll leave you to decide on the amount of garlic, according to your taste, and you'll only need a scattering of mixed herbs. You don't want to overpower the cobnuts! Divide the mixture in half and place equal amounts in each marrow. Dot with the remaining butter. Cover with tinfoil and bake in an oven heated to 180°C (350°F, gas 4) for 90 minutes, maybe a bit more if you've a giant marrow!



year's crop by the end of November," adds Karin, and Barry continues: "If you sell them green they're a better more subtle flavour. Once they've been chilled or cold-stored they lose that unique taste."

"I think they taste like raw fresh peas," laughs Karin, "but if you put them with a stronger-tasting ingredient, you'll kill their flavour." Green cobnuts are only available at their freshest for about a month, you can buy nuts that have been chilled and stored, but the flavour isn't the same. Dried Cobnuts turn brown. "The brown nuts are absolutely delicious roasted," observes Barry, "the problem is the nuts want to go brown, chilling prevents this natural process. If you try to store them green, chilled in their husks, they can go mouldy because they 'sweat'. Gonselberts are more closely related to the original wild hazelnut. They ripen later so we can sell them 'green' after the cobnuts."

Doubling the yield

Up until now they have managed to double their yield every year. "In a good year we can harvest two tonnes per hectare," says Barry, but Karin reckons that this year is the worst because of the atrocious weather. And it's not just bad weather they have to worry about. "You have to plant more trees because of the squirrels," says Barry, and he's not joking. "We lose up to half of our crop to squirrels, it's a constant battle. And we've put an electric fence around the platt to stop the badgers ravaging the crop." Ruefully, Karin notes how the badgers climb the trees and flatten them.

The whole family help with the harvest, the nuts having to be picked by hand. "We dehusk them and spread them out on tables, turning them everyday." My mind boggles at this devotion to the welfare of the Cobnut, but it is obviously a labour of love for Barry and Karin. "So our nuts are not cheap, compared to imported cobnuts, but ours are all perfect, at least as much as we can be sure they are," says Karin, adding: "We're lucky we don't have any insect pests to deal with, the pheasants from the surrounding woods take care of the insects. We've not gone down the route of organic certification because of the cost, but our production is organic. We don't spray the trees or use any chemicals at all."

The cobnut market has shrunk dramatically since the War, at its peak there were 7,000 acres devoted to cobnuts, now it is down to about 250 acres. People have lost the taste for cobnuts. The disappearance of individual greengrocers, the arrival of cheap dried nuts from abroad, and the refusal of supermarkets to stock fresh nuts has all contributed to the decline. All those hop pickers would have searched out cobnuts when they returned to London, but as the generations died out, along with them went the taste for cobnuts.

People like my friends, and other members of the Kentish Cobnut Association are struggling to preserve this piece of history. Watching Karin feeding their lambs, while Barry attempts to shoo off the squirrels, I'm as green as the husk on a Frizzled Filbert! ●

Farnell Farm Cobnuts available mail order from :
www.farnellfarm.co.uk

The Kentish Cobnut Association can be contacted via
www.kentishcobnutassociation.org.uk

The National Fruit Show, 15th and 16th October 2008,
at Kent County Showground, Detling, Kent.
www.nationalfruitshow.org.uk

More information about cobnuts from Produced in
Kent,
www.producedinkent.co.uk
and England in Particular
www.england-in-particular.info.uk

Cranbrook Food Festival is on 31st October and 1st
November, 2008. Contact Trisha Spencer, 01580
714086. www.cranbrookparishcouncil.co.uk

Poussin and roasted cobnuts

Roasted cobnuts are Barry Craddock's favourite, so this is for him. You don't have to use poussin, but whatever you use make sure it is juicy! This colourful dish will cheer you up on a dark wintry day, even better it's a one-pot meal.

Serves 4

1 or 2 poussins, each jointed into 4
6 carrots, scraped and cut into chunks
1 squash, peeled if you like, or not, de-seeded and cut into chunks
1 bulb of garlic, halved
Sage leaves
Olive oil
Large handful of de-husked cobnuts

For the sauce:

Handful of sliced de-husked cobnuts, pounded together with garlic, sage, honey, and pepper and salt.

METHOD

Place the carrots, squash, and halved garlic bulb into a shallow roasting pan adding a few sage leaves and a drizzle of olive oil.

Place a rack over a roasting pan and arrange the jointed poussin on the rack. Season the poussin with pepper and salt and a drizzle of olive oil. Place the roasting pan in your oven heated to 200°C (400°F, gas 6) for about 30 minutes, then remove the roasting pan and scatter a handful of cobnuts over the vegetables and smear the poussins with your sauce. Cook for a further 10 minutes and serve with a crisp winter salad.



Stacked cobnut and raspberry pastry

To finish the recipes, a spectacular pudding, dare I say rather continental, but still a proper pudding. You'd find pastries like this in Flanders, and there is a fine tradition of Flemish weavers coming to England and settling, particularly in areas such as Kent, which were once centres of the weaving industry. Tenterden takes its name from a place for drying cloth, and Cranbrook near to Farnell Farm was reknowned for broadcloth weaving.

You can vary the fruit, it works well with apple.

Serves 4

100g (4oz) cobnuts, de-husked

100g (4oz) plain flour
50g (2oz) caster sugar
75g (3oz) unsalted butter
1 egg
450g (1lb) frozen raspberries, thawed
300ml (1/2 pint) cream for whipping
75g (3oz) sugar for garnishing

METHOD

Roast the cobnuts in an oven pre-heated to 180°C (350°F, gas 4). Then take about a quarter of the nuts and roughly chop them. Grind the rest to a coarse powder in a food processor. Sieve your flour and mix in the powered nuts and 50g (2oz) of sugar. Rub in the butter so that the mixture begins to 'crumb'. Add the egg and mix together. Knead gently then place in your fridge for at least 30 minutes. Then in a cold environment, cold board etc., divide the dough into 4, and roll out each piece on baking paper.

Form a circle about 4mm (1/4 in) thick. Put

the circles on the baking paper onto a baking sheet and place in the oven set at 200°C (400°F, gas 6) for about 15 minutes until they are golden biscuits. Remove and place on a rack to cool.

Meanwhile, make the topping, take a small saucepan, and put about 150ml (1/4 pint) of water and 75g (3oz) sugar into the pan. Using a low heat, gently stir until the sugar has dissolved. Then increase the heat and bring to the boil, don't stir! Don't boil for too long. When the mixture turns brown take the pan off the heat and pour some of the mixture over 1 of your biscuits. Spread it evenly with a knife.

Then scatter the chopped nuts around the edge of the biscuit, and place about a quarter of the raspberries in the middle, then drizzle the remaining caramel mixture over the raspberries.

Whip the cream and spread onto your other 3 biscuits. Place more raspberries on top of the cream. Stack the biscuits on top of each other, finishing with the caramely biscuit. Wow!

