

A land for all seasons



Illustration: Andrew Lyons

Each month has its own character and significance for farmers and fishermen. Anna-Marie Julyan charts the rhythms of life affecting our food producers in 2018

If you want to tune in to the seasons, talk to a farmer. Every day brings fresh challenges, and Christmas Day is no different. The dairying sort rise very early without fail to milk their cows; those rearing meat always have animals to tend; growers of fruit and vegetables will rarely stray far from their fields for long; and when fish are in season, the boats go out. The rhythm of life in the countryside follows a time-honoured pattern, the subtlest details of which are perhaps only noticeable when checking a crop at dusk or calving a cow at 5am. Seasonal British produce is the fruit of their labours, worth noting in your diary, anticipating with pleasure, then enjoying when the time is right.

JANUARY The beginning of the year has a stripped-back, stark beauty to it along with a sense of renewal and sometimes loss, the razzmatazz of Christmas having been and gone. But as you snuggle down in your warm bed, have a care for sheep farmers, most of whom will be hauling themselves out during the night to lamb around now. January is one of the two wettest and

coldest months – ‘as the day lengthens, so the cold strengthens’. Luckily, the age-old arsenal of marmalade making, steamed puddings and sumptuous stews comes to our aid. Enjoy a piping-hot bowl of mussels, coaxed open with simmering cider and leeks, all squeaky and in season now. **FEBRUARY** Barbie-pink stems of forced rhubarb provide a flash of colour and palate awakening in this short, cold month. They come from an area of West Yorkshire known as the Rhubarb Triangle where growers use warm, dark sheds to trick the vegetable (yes, vegetable) into thinking spring’s come early. Pickers even work by candlelight, ensuring no photosynthesis takes place, as this can turn the leaves and stems bitter. Sweet and tender, roast it on a low heat so the stems hold their shape and serve with pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. Two other treats this month are Dorset lamb – the very first of the season, made possible because this breed lambs naturally early in the autumn. And chill British waters yield ample pollack (the North Atlantic is at its coldest now), an underrated fish

with snowy-white flesh like cod, perfect in a warming fish pie.

MARCH ‘March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb’ with snow just as likely as it was in February. This is the countryside’s hungry gap – a time when winter stores traditionally have run out and the new season’s produce is yet to appear. But by the end of the month parts of the countryside are green, daffodils nod their sunny heads and on the 25th we gain an extra

‘The beginning of the year has a stripped-back, stark beauty to it’

hour of light when the clocks go forward. Try baby leaf greens, a type of brassica called collard greens harvested early so the leaves are sweet and tender. Shred into stir-fries or steam, but don’t boil. ‘That’s the rule for all brassicas,’ according to grower George Read. ‘It keeps in all the flavour and the nutrients. They make a really good bubble and squeak.’ **APRIL** This year Easter Sunday falls on the first day of the month with lamb starring in the traditional roast. There is no more perfect partner than Jersey Royals,

their paper-thin skins encasing tender, nutty potatoes within. They’re only available from Jersey for a few months of the year where the warm growing conditions and use of local seaweed called vrac as a natural fertiliser all adds to the flavour. ‘The earliest crops are grown in the warmest areas, on steep slopes around the edge of the island, so we have to harvest by hand,’ explains Nigel Holliday of the Jersey Royal Company. ‘People here are passionate about the potato crop – it’s something special to the island.’

MAY Burgeoning into life, the countryside is frothy with hawthorn blossom, elder and cow parsley. Green spears of asparagus ripen during the short, much-anticipated English season, which traditionally starts on St George’s Day (23 April). Steam or boil, and dip into soft-boiled eggs, or serve dripping with salted butter. Watercress, radishes, sweet young peas still in their pods and broad beans are just some of the other bounty to be savoured. New-season lamb gets going in earnest. And thanks to the county’s mild maritime climate, Cornish Earlies are available now, around six weeks before the main British potato crop arrives at the end of June.

JUNE It’s the start of meteorological summer and the month that contains more daylight than any other. After Midsummer’s Day on the 21st the days

slowly shorten, but thankfully the warmest months are still ahead. Nothing smells and tastes of summer so readily as a sweet, ripe strawberry. Marion Regan’s family has been growing them on slopes above the Weald of Kent since Victorian times and has supplied Waitrose for 40 years. ‘At this time of year, we’re starting at five in the morning so we can get the picking done by lunchtime before it gets too hot,’ she says. ‘Then we’re packing all afternoon and looking after the plants that will crop later. To me, strawberries mean memories of summer.’

JULY Blink and you’ll miss two darlings of high summer: cherries and gooseberries. Cherry tree orchards were once a common sight in places like the south and west of England, but in the 20th century 90% of them were lost. The season only lasts eight to 10 weeks, but a shorter journey from tree to table than imported cherries means they spend longer on the tree, giving them an intense flavour. Enjoy as they are or bake into a clafoutis. Mouth-puckeringly tart gooseberries are available for just three or four short weeks. If you don’t fancy the necessary addition of sugar, look out for Xenia, a sweeter, red dessert variety best served with thick cream or yogurt.

AUGUST In the long, languid days of late summer, colours fade from green to gold

and time blurs. The wheat and barley have ripened, Cornish sardines are plump and plentiful, blackberries gleam in the hedgerows and the Glorious Twelfth kicks off the grouse-shooting season in England, Scotland and Wales. Once served in tins as pilchards, fresh Cornish sardines have made a welcome move to the fish counter. Throw onto the barbecue and serve with robust partners like lime, pesto or vine-ripened tomatoes. Sour Bramley

‘In the languid days of late summer, colours fade from green to gold and time blurs’

apples ripen in perfect confluence with the brambles, meaning there’s every reason to make a blackberry and apple pie. Meanwhile, sweetcorn, courgettes and sunflowers are all at their sweet prime. **SEPTEMBER** There’s a brisk, rousing air to the start of meteorological autumn that stems from the return to work and reaping of the harvest. Now is the time to gather, bottle and preserve the glut of fruit and vegetables at their prime. Recently there has been a revival in traditional British apple varieties – some

of which have wonderful names such as Blenheim Orange, Egremont Russet and William Crump. Snaffle small, sweet Victoria plums like candy or bake them into a frangipane tart. ‘You don’t get all the plums on a tree ripening at once,’ explains grower Michael Bentley. ‘So each tree has to be picked four or five times, and the pickers have to know exactly what they’re looking for. But that’s how you get a better plum.’

OCTOBER Only now does it usually feel like autumn thanks to the deciduous trees that display a glorious riot of colour, from copper beech to head-turning Japanese maple in fiery red, yellow and orange. On 28 October the clocks go back, fast-forwarding us into dark evenings and Halloween. Roast pumpkin or squash soup is a must, and all the necessary depth-inducing ingredients such as brown onions, garlic and shallots are in their prime. Try Fenland celery, a heritage variety unique to the flat fields of East Anglia that has Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status. Deep, peaty soils impart a nutty-sweet flavour and it’s harvested by hand using a specially shaped knife to retain plenty of the root, which is cut into a recognisable point.

NOVEMBER The Anglo Saxons called it Blotmonth because this was the time to slaughter animals fattened up over the

summer and autumn. While few people nowadays keep a pig for the table, porky sausages lend themselves beautifully to the season’s produce: Jazz apples, Savoy cabbage and nutty Jerusalem artichokes. The root of a sunflower species, the latter should simply be scrubbed, then boiled, steamed or roasted as you like. North Sea cod is also spanking fresh. Having been off the fish counter for many years thanks to overfishing, in July 2017 it was declared that stocks had recovered and MSC-certified sustainable cod is back.

DECEMBER When scurrying about of an evening, muffled from the midwinter chill (21 December), don’t forget to look up. During these long, dark nights the stars shine brightly. December is not the coldest month – there is still some warmth left in the sea and snow is more likely at Easter (sorry), but it is a joyful one. Poultry farmers are busily fattening their geese and turkeys, and as you place your order it’s worth focusing for a minute on the humble roastie. Inca Bella is a variety of potato that requires five minutes’ parboiling, then just 20 in the oven, resulting in a crisp and fluffy roast potato. Only available for a few weeks, they’re a bit of a new seasonal speciality. Don’t forget your sprouts either; roast, sauté or stir-fry – just whatever you do don’t overboil them!