



TOM'S TRAVELS



Tom Rains, Head Chef at The Daffodil in Cheltenham, shares his monthly gastronomic mission to seek out and enjoy the most interesting, unusual and just plain delicious produce available. Each month, Tom gives us the true story behind the food on our plate and the fascinating producers that make it. This month Tom has an egtastic experience that left him feeling sunny side up!

Photography by www.lushimaging.com

We're going on an Egg Hunt, I shout to the boss! Excitedly we jump into the car and tear off across Cheltenham heading for the sloped ridges of Coopers Hill, made famous for the madness that is the annual cheese rolling contest. 15 minutes later and 9 miles from The Daffodil we get to see exactly where the eggs we serve in the restaurant come from.

We love to buy local, supporting the shorter distances from farm to fork and when we originally met Ben from Coopers Hill Eggs, we were immediately keen to use him as a supplier. Ben is a true food fanatic, passionate about local produce and by coming together with experienced local farmers John and Fiona King at Abbotswood Farm, he has created a strong rural enterprise.

Ben has always been involved with chickens and started off with a small flock near his Gloucestershire home at Witcombe and as orders grew and the popularity of his eggs increased, he realised that a larger supply was needed. So, Abbotswood Farm with its purpose built hen house and 1,200 chickens was a perfect match, especially when all the eggs have the Lion quality mark, the highest standard in food safety production.

The farm is also extremely proud that it meets the prized Freedom Food standard, which confirms that the animals have been kept to strict RSPCA welfare standards.

Three generations of the King family have lived and farmed at Abbotswood, where farming is not just about supplying food but also about protecting wildlife within its natural habitat. It was inspiring to see how much care and commitment John has to his farm and reassuring to understand the true provenance of the free range eggs we buy each week.

It's now big business for free range egg producers like the King family, as last year's figures show that over 50% of the 9 billion eggs we buy are from barn, free range or organic farm hens. This figure is set to rise even more this year as shoppers and diners become more conscious of animal welfare and issues related to caged egg production.

Happy hens may seem an over sentimental phrase but the chickens were inquisitive and outwardly sociable birds and for me that counts towards happy. Basking in the late afternoon sun with bright coats and what seemed a genuine interest in a chef in full whites in the middle of a farm yard, they were keen to find out what I was



about to do. Naturally I acquired some freshly laid eggs and set to work in my impromptu kitchen, whisking and preparing the most delicious outdoor omelette known to Gloucestershire. This really was alfresco cooking at its best and on a par with preparing fresh shell fish plucked from the sea.

With a growing audience of chickens for company, I was interested to hear Ben talk about his business and excited when he said he was trialling keeping quails! Quails eggs are absolutely delicious and my creative juices started to gather speed when I pondered how I could tantalise our diner's taste buds



TOM'S TIPS

Fresh eggs have a rough feel to the shell, older eggs have a more smooth feel.

To determine if an egg is fresh, immerse it in a pan of cold salted water. If it sinks it's fresh, if the egg floats it's best to throw it away.

If the eggs are stuck to the carton, wet the carton and they will come out without breaking.

It is easier to remove the shells from hot, hard-boiled eggs if you rinse them in cold water first.

with new spring quail dishes on the menu at The Daffodil?

After all that fresh air, we decided to head indoors to the engine room at the back of the hen house. Here we found a basic conveyor belt system to sort the eggs which are then all hand packed ready for Ben to take to The Daffodil and other local businesses. Such a simple system with literally no more than two or three people involved in the whole process. The eggs we receive are all safely packaged in eco friendly plastic egg trays, which we then wash and return to Ben on his regular visits. It's a no brainer.

For centuries people have lived and worked on the land and visiting a working farm to see where the food we eat comes from is always a very rewarding and humbling experience. Eggs can often be overlooked but are an essential ingredient for a multitude of dishes and so from now on our eggs are most definitely top of the menu!

Back in The Daffodil kitchen I have begun to try different ways of working with our locally supplied eggs in my quest to source and use top quality local produce!

Have an egtastic Easter!

Coopers Hill Eggs on the menu:

Starter Warm Pigeon Salad, bacon, mushrooms, poached egg, red wine dressing

Main Course Wild Mushroom Risotto, crisp hens egg, parmesan foam

Pudding Tom's Bread & Butter Pudding (with thanks to Anton Mosimann!)

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Next month...

Next month I'll be finding out about another key ingredient and meeting a long standing supplier. I'll share with you the difference between a cutlet and a loin.....any ideas where I'm off to?