

In with Indigenous Ingredients

"If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday" – so the saying goes. There's no place that these words ring truer than in British kitchens. After a half century of futurist cooking – the advent of freezer food then ready-meals; microwaves then water baths; fluorescent jellies then the gels and foams of molecular kitchens, and an ever-increasing bounty of imported ingredients – the pendulum is swinging back the other way.

'Local' has replaced 'exotic'. 'Seasonal' has replaced 'available'. Britain's pastoral history is increasingly becoming the driving force in kitchens nationwide: historic ingredients, historic techniques and historic recipes. Never before has the past been so fashionable.

Many cite Fergus Henderson as a founding father of the movement which embraces honest British ingredients. The movement which put offal back on menus, the movement which made bone marrow a signature dish, and the movement which remains wholly unapologetic about a bowlful of buttermilk pudding or a slab of treacle tart.

Henderson's Spitalfield restaurant, St John's, has now been serving the likes of pheasant and trotter pie, and roast Middlewhite for twenty years. Like a loud wake-up call, the reverberations of his approach are echoed in restaurants nationwide. At The Gilbert Scott, Marcus Wareing boldly embraces some of Britain's more taboo ingredients: Herdwick mutton, crispy pig's heads and Kendal mint cake moulded reconstituted as choc ices. At Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, the menu lists British dishes alongside the year of their creation: roast marrowbone (1720), spiced pigeon (1780) and tipsy cake (1810).

There has been a recent spike of interest in native breeds and heritage vegetables. More participation in artisanal pursuits: cheese-making, home-brewing and smoking. And more enthusiasm for indigenous ingredients which fell out of fashion. Tom Kerridge is using smoked eel in breakfast recipes, the Hairy Bikers are cooking braised beef cheek with crisp ox tongue, and Nigel Slater is putting devilled kidneys atop of a slice of toast. While chefs and consumers spent decades searching for the exotic, they are now revisiting the once-overlooked vegetables of British allotments, fruits of British hedgerows, and meat, fish and game once feasted on by Britain's Celtic tribes.

The movement isn't unique to Britain though. Countries' reasons for shying away from indigenous ingredients all vary. But reassessment is a widespread trend. In Australia, the use of traditional Aboriginal ingredients waned round the late eighteenth century when Europeans started settling, bringing with them new crops, livestock and cooking techniques. Now the country is seeing a big resurgence in native ingredients: quandong desert peaches, lemon aspen, lemon myrtle, dorrigo pepper, aniseed myrtle, goolwa cockles and coorong mulloway fish.

When it comes to meat though, the enthusiasm isn't as widespread. On a trip to Australia, food writer Fuchsia Dunlop found that many Australians steered clear of eating kangaroo because of 'The Skippy Factor' – which deems the country's national symbol too cute to cook for dinner. As a result, 70 percent of kangaroo meat is currently exported. "Kangaroo is a bit of a novelty meat, like

crocodile and emu," suggests Adelaide chef, Nick Finsell. "Most local people wouldn't have it at home."

It mightn't be a supermarket staple yet. But to suggest that kangaroo is a gimmick is to dismiss the weight of the movement back toward native ingredients. Kangaroo, wallaby and emu aren't restricted to tourist trap, bush tucker joints. These indigenous proteins now grace the menus of some of the country's most-respected restaurants.

Adelaide restaurant Orana serves 'kangaroo with mountain pepper and ox eye daisy', and 'sapphire risotto with smoked roo tail'. Nearby burger joint, Street ADL, slow-cooks the roo for 'pulled kangaroo' burgers, with 'sandalwood nut and berry sundaes' to finish. Melbourne restaurant, Charcoal Lane, has 'wild harissa spiced wallaby loin', on the menu. Vue de Monde, another Melbourne restaurant, has 'kangaroo, beetroot with munthari berries' on its (£80) four-course taster menu, followed by a tonka bean soufflé.

The movement is still in a nascent phase, but Australian chef Alla Wolf-Tasker, widely-cited as a pioneer of Australian 'localism', has been plugging away for three decades. Back in the mid-eighties, she founded Lake House – a retreat in rural Daylesford – and was shocked by the absence of local ingredients and local produce in a country then dominated by monocultures. Wolf-Tasker planted a kitchen garden, cultivated an orchard and planted stringybarks which are now populated with rosellas, currajongs, gang gangs, cockatoos and kookaburras.

Wolf-Tasker remains loyal to the indigenous ingredients showcased on her menu. At the time of writing, a dish of 'kangaroo fillet, tartare, heirloom beets, mountain pepper, elderberry' is being served for lunch at Lake House. Far from being a 'novelty' meat, Wolf-Tasker explains the widespread benefits of this indigenous meat, and how it naturally compliments other local ingredients.

"Kangaroo is wonderfully lean, flavoursome and gamey. It is truly food from the wild." Wolf-Tasker says. "There is also an abundance of kangaroos, to the point that they are often a real pest for farmers. This is one of the most environmentally sustainable meats we can offer on our table."

"Being a gamey meat, kangaroo pairs well with spice and even fruit. When I forage for mushrooms in the local forests I'll often find that kangaroos and wallabies have grazed on the mushrooms earlier. Pairing some of those mushroom varieties with the kangaroo meat offers a nice synergy." Wolf-Tasker explains. "Utilising some of the indigenous plants we do have locally with this native meat also offers a good pairing. Hence the use of our wonderful indigenous mountain pepper – both the berry and the leaf. It's a beautiful aromatic spice – hot but with a broader flavour spectrum than ordinary black pepper."

Just as the future of Australia's cuisine lies with meats, herbs and spices which have rarely graced tables for hundreds of years, so Mexican chefs are looking to the past for inspiration: "A new reading of something that is quite old" explains Pujol chef Enrique Olvera. His Mexico City restaurant is famed for taking pride in authentic Mexican ingredients which – until recently – would have never been plated on best-china and served on white linen tablecloths: chicatana ants, bocol huasteco (a corn dough with cheese and lard), tejocote (Mexican hawthorn) and huitlacoche tamal (a corn fungus).

"If you ask a Mexican what his last meal would be, the probable answer would be either a quesadilla or a mole or a cabrito" says Olvera. "You'd never hear 'onion soup' or 'smoked salmon', because what you're fed as a child will forever dictate your appetite." The implication is that the honesty of indigenous ingredients is not only an honesty to the land, but an honesty to self.

Indigenous ingredients suggest a nostalgic return to the past. A simplification, perhaps. Yet the return to indigenous ingredients has not restricted chefs to historic recipes: "Being true to a tradition doesn't necessarily mean using all the same ingredients and putting them together in a prescribed way" explains Adam Goldberg, food writer and frequent visitor to Pujol. "It means understanding the essence of what makes a dish special; figuring out how to capture that magic and integrating it into something new."

For Olvera, and many other chefs, a country's culinary history provides a springboard to rediscover once-forgotten flavours, as well as honouring long-loved ones. Indigenous ingredients inspire new readings, such as Vietnam-based chef Richard Wilson's banana blossom salad. And they inspire traditional readings, such as Provençal chef Christophe Martin's Lurs pigeon and pear poached in lavender honey.

The trend toward localism, and the reassessment of native ingredients is more than a simple exercise in flavour-development and culinary innovation though. A forefather of the movement, Noma chef René Redzepi describes the bigger, global shift: "We ourselves need to learn much more about issues that are critical to our world: culinary history, native flora, the relationship between food and food supply systems, sustainability and the social significance of how we eat." Indigenous ingredients are just the start.