

# The apple

## DOESN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE

**M**ichelin-starred chef Raymond Blanc has expressed his dismay at the lack of British apples on supermarket shelves.

The acclaimed cook, who runs Manoir Aux Quat Saisons, said on Twitter it was “shocking” to see high street stores laden with imported fruit, which is currently in its prime harvesting season in the UK – and he’s embarked on a personal mission to make Brits fall back in love with local fruit.

Even though British growers are expected to harvest around 148,700 tonnes of apple and pears in 2020, this country still imports just over 476,000 tonnes of apples per year.

As we approach British Food Fortnight in a week’s time, why not make it your mission to support local, and sample the extensive and delicious array of apples and ‘top fruits’ grown right here in Suffolk.

Hidden in the county’s rural depths in Kenton is Moat Farm – which takes great pride in its homegrown fruit.

The family-run orchard, which supplies its apples to 50 East of England Co-op branches across Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex, plants a number of niche apple varieties – and hopes to get people eating something different this season.

Henry Dobell, who first took on the 26-acre orchard 15 years ago, explains how he fell into the world of apple cultivation after spending years in the coffee industry.

“I spent many years working in east Africa, where I used to grow sisal and coffee in Tanzania and Kenya. I then came back with a young family, and we thought it would be best to come back to this country. I was fairly unemployable, but I recognised the idea of growing trees, so thought I’d give that a go – and that was how I got into it.”

Raymond Blanc backs British farmers and implores shoppers to buy local apples and pears this autumn. **Danielle Lett** investigates

Henry, who was brought up between Newmarket and Cambridge, soon got to work, and quickly began choosing the apples he’d like his farm to specialise in – taking a number of factors into consideration.

“When we bought the farm, there were quite a few varieties being trialled here, so we were very fortunate to be able to select the ones that we liked the flavour of the most, and the ones that grew without too many diseases or other problems.

“There were other apples that I was familiar with, and really like the flavour of, and then there were ones that I don’t like and think are rather dull. For instance, I did have quite a lot of Gala at one stage, but I pulled all of those out.”

Moat Farm ensures it makes the most out of the harvest period by planting a range of apples, in order to have a succession available.

“We’ve already harvested our Discovery, Early Windsor, Worcester, Charles Ross, Lord Lamborn and James Grieve apples. Then the main picking for our Cox season starts in early September. We’ve got a few pears coming off this week, and then we’ll harvest the Russets and Bramleys, and then a lot of our heritage varieties, such as Blenheim Orange, Melrose and Kidd’s Orange. The last one we pick is a variety called D’Arcy Spice, which doesn’t come off until after we’ve had some frost.”

Once the picking is finished in

October, the fruit is then stored before it is packed and distributed all the way up until the end of January.

With so many heritage apples grown at Moat Farm, what exactly are they, and what sets them apart from other varieties? “My definition of heritage apples would be ones that aren’t really grown commercially any longer, but have had a long history of being cultivated in this country.”

Boasting an orchard of around 400 to 500 trees per heritage variety, these favourites from years gone by have proven particularly popular with some of the local farm shops and independent greengrocers that the Dobells supplies to. “Heritage apples give people a chance to try things they may remember from their past, such as when they may have had an apple tree in their garden, but you rarely see them sold commercial now.

“There’s a fairly good reason for this though, as they tend to have much lower yields. Heritage apples are more prone to biennial cropping – so they’ll crop one year very heavily, and then produce absolutely nothing the next year.



they’re more subtle and interesting.”

As well as being an advocate of celebrating the more unique apple varieties, Henry is a firm believer in shopping locally, especially during the current season when Suffolk’s apple yield is at its highest.

“In this country we produce around 40% of our own apples – and the rest are imported. At certain times of the year, that’s quite understandable as we don’t have much of a crop, but at this time of year, it’s very disappointing to see so many imported apples on the shelves. Raymond Blanc is absolutely right – but he ought to move to Suffolk,” added Henry.

“The French have a fantastic

Some of the old-fashioned varieties do that, whereas the more modern varieties have had those annoyances bred out of them.”

“The apples we all see in the supermarkets, year in and year out, tend to be bred for their long shelf life. They’ll have crunch and juiciness, but very little flavour. Whereas a lot of the older varieties will have a lot more flavour. They may not be so crunchy, or last as long, but

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Above: Henry Dobell and his partner Kate at the Moat Farm orchard

Left: A variety of apples ready to be distributed around East Anglia

Inset: Apples at Moat Farm  
Pictures: HENRY DOBELL



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Henry's partner Katie picking apples at Moat Farm's orchard in Kenton. Inset: One of the farm's pickers during harvest  
 Pictures: HENRY DOBELL

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system – once their apple season starts, they stop selling imported apples, and there's a ban on them. So guess what happens to all the stuff that isn't sold in France? It comes to us, meaning we're not even getting particularly good imported apples at this time of year - they tend to be what nobody else wants. But people get set in their ways and just want to buy the same thing time after time - and it's a difficult habit to get people to break."

So just how can people break the habit of sticking to what they know, in favour of trying something a bit different and more flavoursome? Henry suggests that you keep it seasonal, in order to enjoy certain apples at their peak. "Unfortunately, the right apple at the wrong time can be very disappointing, and I think the varieties we see can come from all corners of the globe - but it doesn't necessarily make them special to eat. But if you eat something that is right for its season, it's wonderful."

"A strawberry grown in the sunshine is going to taste a whole lot better than one grown in a glasshouse in the winter - and our apples are the same. There are times to eat the right varieties, and it's all about getting those relationships with our shops and customers so they know what we are recommending is really good

and at the right time. There's certainly an apple for everybody."

And for Henry? "When it's right, I love the first Discovery of the season, as it's the first English apple you've had for six months, and it's lovely. But as you go through, every one is my favourite. My partner Katie is a big fan of Early Windsors, whereas I'm probably a traditionalist and would either go for a Cox or a Russet. When they're right, they are just so delicious and there is nothing like them. They've got subtly, acidity, sweetness, and there's a reason why Cox was the best grown apple in the country - because it tastes jolly good. But it does need looking after, and as a grower, it's not the easiest one to grow."

With a bountiful selection of unique apples available right here in Suffolk, it's unsurprising that there's a plethora of uses for them beyond eating them as they are - and as autumn approaches, there's no better time than now to try your hand at baking some scrumptious apple-based dishes. Pies, crumbles, tarts, cakes, puddings - the possibilities are endless.

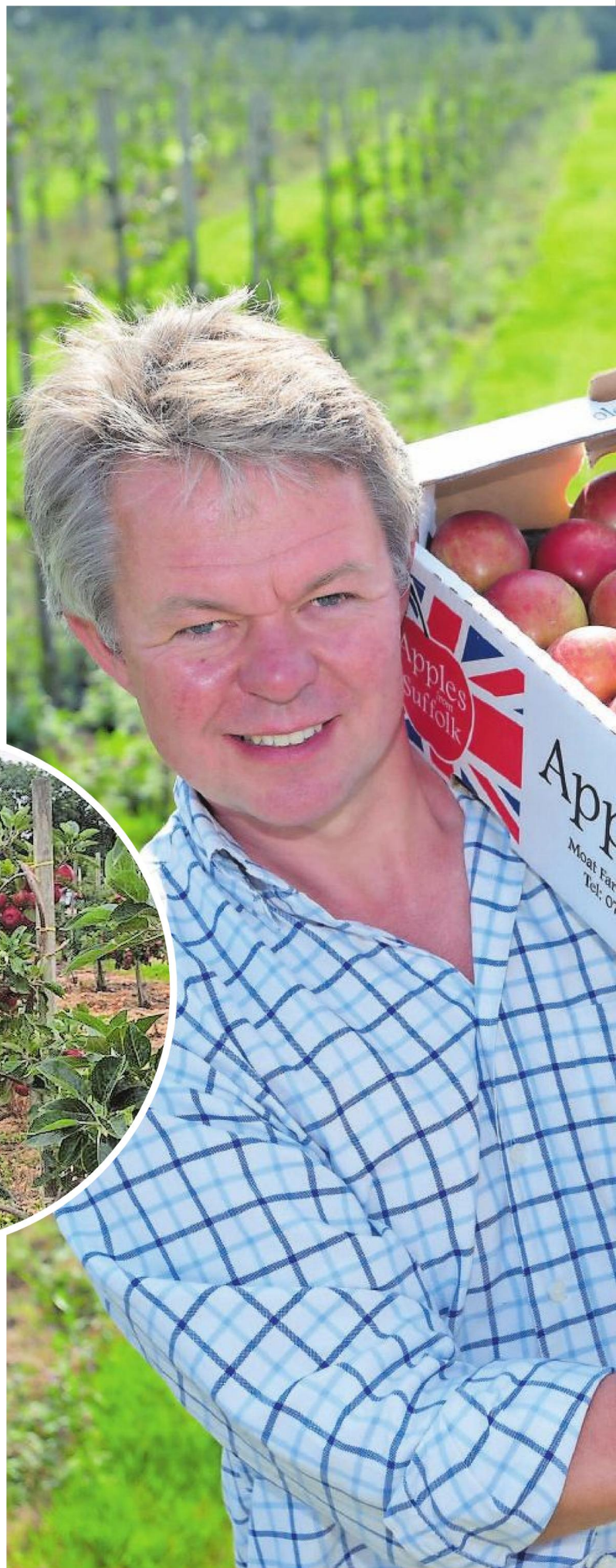
"I always say 'As long as there's an apple in a pudding, it counts as one of my five a day.' It's amazing what you can do with them - add a bit butter and sugar to some



apples and there's not much you can't do with them."

With all of that in mind, it's a no-brainer why Henry is so passionate about regional produce, and introducing people to what Suffolk fruit can offer. He hopes that this season, people step outside of their comfort zones and sink their teeth into something they might not have gone for previously.

"Rather than picking up a bag of what you've been able to eat for the last six months, try something that's seasonal and local - I think you'll be pleasantly surprised that it's really rather delicious."





Henry Dobell, who has been at Moat Farm for 15 years



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