

COUNTRY ESTATE

THIS MONTH'S HIGHLIGHTS

ART & ANTIQUES p137

Garden sculpture

GUN REVIEW p146

William Powell Marquis

SPORTING DOG p148

Moors marvels

MOTORING p151

Jeep Grand Cherokee V6

THE BEST GUNS, DOGS, BOOKS, ART, WINE, FOOD AND EVERYTHING ELSE THAT MAKES LIFE WORTH LIVING

LIVING LARDER NUTTERS, THIS WAY

As squirrels sharpen their claws at the start of the hazelnut season, head to your local farm shop or nearest hazel tree and get cracking, says **Hattie Ellis**

A NUT is not just for Christmas. The time is ripe in late August and early September to seize your crackers and enjoy British hazelnuts fresh from the tree. In hedgerows and on the edges of woodland, beside streams and in gardens, the squirrels are sharpening their claws. Professional and amateur pickers are ready; I've long had my eye on a tree in my local park in London.

Most hazelnuts in the shops are imported from countries such as Turkey and the US. In Britain, we grow two kinds of cultivated hazelnut: filberts and cobnuts. Oval filberts have a husk longer than the nut while cobnuts are rounder and have a shorter husk. To make matters a touch confusing, the most common kind of filbert is called a Kentish cobnut.

Filberts and cobnuts had their heyday in the Victorian era when nuts were part of a dessert course with fresh and dried fruit, accompanied by a glass of port or Madeira. Now, you can eat them young, milky and crunchy, with a touch of sea-salt and perhaps a glass of sancerre or tawny port. They are best bought in farm shops although some supermarkets also sell fresh nuts for the short six-week season from the end of August through September. This type of fresh green nut is best kept in the fridge.



Some connoisseurs like their nuts even better picked in September, when they have passed from green to gold and the flavour has matured.

Dehusked, the nuts keep all year – ask the squirrels – and are sold through farmers' markets and online.

The growth of the specialist food market has heralded a revival of cobnuts. At the start of the 20th century, there were 7,000 acres of hazelnut plantations (or plats). This dropped to just 250 by 1995. The chairman of the Kentish Cobnut Association, Alexander Hunt, reckons we now have around double that.

A number of companies have created British hazelnut products.

Not in a nutshell: if dehusked, cobnuts (above) will keep all year

Alexander Hunt's are the most varied, such as a toasted cobnut fudge and a nut brittle with a touch of sea-salt.

Hunt's neighbour, Richard Dain at Hurstwood Farm, has developed a cold-pressed cobnut oil that, last year, beat more than 6,000 products to be Supreme Champion in the prestigious Great Taste Awards. Dain is an engineer and keen pianist who loves the Kent countryside. After the 1987 storms knocked down his 10,000 apple and pear trees he

GO NUTTY ONLINE

www.cobnutoil.co.uk

www.kentishcobnuts.com

www.kentishcobnutsassociation.org.uk

prospered because they loved the environment – it was a natural fit.”

Richard's various skills are evident on his plantation, where he hosts concerts and makes and sells pianos alongside his nut production. He has devised a deshelling machine and a press to extract the oil without heating it so that its qualities are kept intact.

Cobnut oil can be used instead of extra virgin olive oil. It is superb to dress an autumnal salad with apples or pears and cheese, drizzled on grilled chicken or fish, or as a golden swirl in a bowl of soup. Nuts of all kinds are even more delicious when roasted in a medium-low oven but watch them carefully as they go from delicious to bitter ruin in minutes.

Nuts destined for dessert keep best of all in their shell. Alexander Hunt found a collection of 1,200 Victorian and Edwardian crackers, most of which he has now sold on the internet (a few remain). There are many other decorative kinds, such as a notorious pair that cracks the nuts between the thighs of Margaret Thatcher.

The hazelnut is one of our most ancient indigenous trees, among the first to spread across the land once the ice had retreated. Apparently, prehistoric gourmets roasted their nuts, presumably to make them easier to eat in quantity.

Cultivated nut trees have been grown here since at least the 16th century. One of the most eccentric nutters was the 19th-century breeder, Richard Webb. Webb didn't believe in pruning and his 12-acre walled garden near Reading was thick with nut trees and patrolled by some 60 cats to keep away pesky birds and mice. Gertrude Jekyll, grand dame of British garden design, visited Webb, intrigued by his methods and reported that it was the only nursery where she could imagine seeing fairies on a summer's night.

To learn more about this and the distinguished history of cobnuts, read *In a Nutshell*, a history by Meg Game, shortly to go on the Kentish Cobnut Association website. Her story can now have a more optimistic update chapter, not least thanks to the efforts of the Association to promote one of our glorious national foods. ■

'SHROOM BOOM

Chanterelle mushrooms are taste explosions, say **Xa Milne** and **Fiona Houston**. Sauté them in butter with garlic and parsley

CHANTERELLE

What One of the most delicious mushrooms. Has an undulating trumpet cap with a central dip and ridges which run underneath from cap to stem. It's the colour of egg yolk and smells faintly of apricots. About 3cm to 8cm tall.

Where Found commonly under birch, beech or pine trees. They favour damp shade and sometimes hide under bracken, leaves in ditches or in moss.

When August to October.

Why Easy to identify.

Favourite fact If you find them yourself you will save up to £25 per kilo.

THE chanterelle is one of the most flavoursome mushrooms of them all and can be confidently identified if you follow the checklist. It needs minimal preparation and won't disappoint on the taste front.

Looking for chanterelle is synonymous with adventure. For the past couple of summers we have accompanied professional forager Dave (not his real name) who supplies a well-known Michelin star chef in the south of England. Our tip-off came this year in the shape of a Facebook bulletin, "The Reverend Dave attended the chapel of fungi this morning. He was down on his knees. There was a great response in the collection plate."

We went to meet our friend at a vast area of woodland, which covers over 700 hectares. We believed the owner when he said that there were more than enough mushrooms for many a fungi lover. On our way there, we saw groups of cars parked in lay-bys along the three-mile straight, including

those belonging to an Italian restaurant famed for its food. It seemed that everyone apart from us was already out picking. "Don't you go telling anyone where I find them... I have friends who could do things," Dave warned. Making sure we cut the stem three quarters of the way down, leaving the mycelium in the earth, it took us about 10 minutes to fill our baskets. We left the small ones and the older, soggy ones behind. We went to four locations, taking a few at a time.

What we learnt from the expert: chanterelles like growing near Roman roads. Why? We have no answer. Look for chanterelles after a full or new moon. Dave swears by this. He is a great cook and after he's picked and brushed them (he never washes them), parcelled them up in fruit boxes and driven the surplus to his local post office, his absolute favourite way of eating them is with chopped radishes and chicken liver. Our favourite is simply sautéed in butter with chopped garlic and parsley and a little grated parmesan and cream on toast. ■



Full of flavour: the chanterelle mushroom (right)