



For a croissant or hot-butter-and-toast session try handmade marmalade with whisky, cobnuts and Seville oranges. £6.50 from [www.kentishcobnuts.com](http://www.kentishcobnuts.com)

# Coming out of its shell



**Health nut:** The cob has many good qualities and the harvest is about to begin

Picture: Corbis

**W**ill you be turning into a nutter this September? No insult intended but as our appetite for local and hyper-seasonal food flourishes, a long under-valued crop, the cobnut, is enjoying a revival.

For those who aren't aware of this British delicacy, the green husk encases a milky white, crunchy yet creamy kernel; it was first noted as a delicacy by medieval gourmets.

Its harvesters – gearing up for a bumper season of hand-picking in the coming weeks (or 'shaking' as it is known locally) – are traditionally referred to as 'nutters'.

One such 'nutter', Richard Dain, of Hurstwood Farm, who is quite the English eccentric inventor, is a champion of the cobnut's potential. A retired engineer, Dain designs and hand-builds pianos, holding recitals at his Kentish farm. He turned to cobnuts after he lost his apple orchards in the storms of 1987.

Rather than merely selling the fresh green cobnuts, as greengrocer Tony Booth does under the arch off foodie-centric Maltby Street in Bermondsey, south London, each Saturday, and Allens Farm, in Kent (by post), Dain invented his own machine for cracking and shelling the more mature golden product.

Ever curious, after drying the cobnuts for three days to ensure they retain their

## An ancient British gem:

The cobnut brims with vitamins and calcium, it is naturally low in cholesterol and it's in season now. Here's how to become a cobnut convert **BY SUDI PIGOTT**

nutty intensity, Dain experimented in pressing the kernels into cobnut oil. On a whim, Hurstwood Farm entered the Great Taste Awards and scooped last year's coveted Supreme Champion accolade. A year on, the world's first and only extra virgin cold-pressed cobnut oil is selling at Fortnum & Mason and Selfridges (a 750ml bottle costs £12.95 and takes more than a kilo of nuts to produce).

Catherine Robinson, a friend of Dain and who also helps out on the farm, says cobnut oil can be heated to higher temperatures than olive oil which makes it great for basting chicken or roasting vegetables (the flavour is less intensive yet still robustly nutty when cooked). Then there are salads: pear, watercress, rocket, Parmesan and cobnut is a winner.

Never one to rest on his platters (the Kentish term for cobnut plantations), this autumn Dain is introducing the first cobnut flour (gluten-free, naturally)

working with a local miller and is collaborating with The Lighthouse Bakery, in East Sussex, on bread recipes. They're looking into skin products, too.

Meanwhile, other Kentish cobnut producers are being inventive. Alexander Kent, of Potash Farm and chairman of the Kentish Cobnut Association, has created savoury biscuits using Kentish Ashmore cheese and cobnuts, as well as shortbread, rhubarb, ginger and cobnut chutney, and outrageously moreish cobnut brittle and fudge.

Also irresistible is Marc Demarquette's three-star Great Taste award-winning cobnut caramel praline – inspired when he discovered that the cobnut was used to cure coughs when eaten with honey.

Demarquette says: 'I love the sweetness and juiciness of the cobnut, which has a lot more nutty

depth than the more common hazelnut.'

Former chef for Gordon Ramsay, Madalene Bonvini-Hamel, of The British Larder, in Suffolk, offers further advice: 'Dry roast them at 150C for 20 to 40 minutes depending on ripeness. They go soft first, before hardening. Don't allow them to burn. Sprinkle with a little sea-salt for a moreish accompaniment to English champagne.'

Of course, the best way to feed a cobnut convert's habit is to grow your own. Three-year-old trees are £30 from [www.kenthampers.co.uk](http://www.kenthampers.co.uk) which will prosper in pots too, so you too can become a nutter.

Go to [www.cobnutoil.co.uk](http://www.cobnutoil.co.uk) for details of the Hurstwood Farm oil. Allens Farm cobnuts, priced £12.50 for 1kg, are available from [www.kentcobnuts.co.uk](http://www.kentcobnuts.co.uk)

## Try this at home:

### Cobnut and damson meringues by Sam Petter of Allens Farm

Whisk 2 egg whites to a soft peak, then gradually whisk in 110g castor sugar. Chop 110g cobnuts (shelled weight), dry roasted as above and fold in. Drop spoonfuls on to a baking sheet lined with baking parchment. Cook at 140C/275F/gas mark 1 for about an hour, until the meringues are dried. Heat 6 tbsp



### damson jam ([www.teatogther.com](http://www.teatogther.com), jam

made from damsons picked at Allens and sold at Whole Foods is excellent) with enough water to make a pouring consistency. While the jam cools a little, whip 275ml double cream until it just holds its shape and use to sandwich the meringues together. Go to [www.allensfarm.co.uk](http://www.allensfarm.co.uk) for more about its produce.