



## GROWING TALES

# Alexander Hunt, Potash Farm

INTERVIEW: LINDSEY HARRAD

As nature's offerings diminish from late autumn, nuts become even more important for adding their unique flavour, texture and nutritional value to meat-free meals. Most of the nuts we eat in the UK are imported, but in the pretty village of St Mary's Platt in Kent, Potash Farm is our leading producer of homegrown nuts, supplying everyone from the Ritz Hotel and Selfridges to regional farm shops and food festivals.

Farmer Alexander Hunt has lived in the village for 53 years and this autumn is his 33rd nut-picking season. 'It all started when I was a student, and during the holidays I grew and sold a few vegetables in the village to help pay for my rent,' he says. 'Someone mentioned that they had 100 cobnut trees by their house and they offered the crop to me and it has grown from there. For the first 12-15 years we sold all the nuts fresh on the wholesale market, but in recent years we've developed a wide range of products too.'

The cobnut has a long history in Kent, mainly because of the county's proximity and connections to London, and also links to the textile industry of the Midlands and the North, where cobnuts were used throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s to help fix dyes before chemicals came along in the 1930s and 40s. Cobnuts were also enjoyed by the Victorians, who typically served them

after a meal with cheese and a glass of port.

Although the cobnut had fallen out of favour for many years since then, Alexander has seen interest growing steadily in recent times and now even offers farm walks for nut enthusiasts. But what exactly is a cobnut? 'They are a cultivated variety of hazelnut, just like a Bramley is a variety of apple. You can find a native species of wild hazel in pretty much every hedgerow, which produces a small nut. Cobnut trees were cultivated from a wild species and bred specially for the size, quality and flavour of the nuts.'

There are around 60 varieties of cobnut, of which Potash Farm grows three commercially, but Alexander says the most well-loved variety with the best flavour is undoubtedly the Kentish cobnut. These nuts can be eaten in their fresh green state when first picked and then in their brown dehusked form. 'You can pick them fresh from the tree when they are green and slightly golden in September, and they are so succulent and the flavour gets stronger and nuttier as the month progresses,' says Alexander. 'But at the end of October we dehusk the nuts, as they naturally start to go very dark and mouldy, and then sell the rest of the crop all year round in dehusked form, when the nuts naturally become dryer and sweeter.'

While fresh green cobnuts taste delicious

in all kinds of savoury dishes, dehusked nuts are perfect for baking too. Potash Farm now produces a range of products using the dehusked nuts, from chocolates to fudge, biscuits, preserves and soap.

With Christmas coming up, Alexander is hoping people will consider buying local this year. 'I would encourage people to think of using English nuts,' he says. 'The great thing about our homegrown nuts is that they are fresh with a lovely flavour and the quality is so much better than imported nuts. Our little gift bags of cobnuts are very popular at Christmas and they go very well with our teak and brass nut crackers, made locally here in Tunbridge Wells.'

● To find out more about Kentish cobnuts and buy Potash Farm products online, go to [www.kentishcobnuts.com](http://www.kentishcobnuts.com) or to buy your own nut tree go to [www.walnuttrees.co.uk](http://www.walnuttrees.co.uk).

### How to enjoy cobnuts

Cobnuts taste wonderful in everything from marmalade to shortbread, but if you can get hold of the fresh green nuts, Alexander says you can't beat them sprinkled with a little salt and eaten with a glass of chilled Sancerre or a gin and tonic!

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