

Robert Hocking

Delicate microgreens, heirloom tomatoes and French heritage strawberries ... it's no wonder that some of the South West's most prestigious restaurants can't get enough of produce from Buttervilla Growers.

Ismay Atkins met its champion of small-scale horticulture, Robert Hocking.

You used to work in digital media, how come you're now growing vegetables for a living? We've got 15 acres here at Buttervilla, and I have always grown produce organically for the family and lived in a fairly self-sufficient way – as has my business partner Sean O'Neill, who lives on an organic farming community (www.keveral.co.uk) near Derry. But it was only in 1996, when I said a few words at a Soil Association event in Watergate Bay about the importance of artisan growers that things moved up to the next level. The executive chef of Fifteen Cornwall grabbed me afterwards and said, "We're interested in anything you can grow," and that's where it all started.

How does artisan farming differ from large-scale production?

To grow the finest fruit and vegetables, you've got to do it on a small scale. Our number one priority is to get a really good soil and to achieve this we use things like three-year-old cow compost, seaweed, and even more wacky methods such as biodynamics, which involves stuffing cow horns with manure and burying them. Next is the seeds. Most of the commercial producers – for obvious reasons – go for seeds that give a very good, disease-resistant crop. But this doesn't take into account the matter of taste. Taste has disappeared from so much produce, in particular fruits and tomatoes.

What's planned at Buttervilla for 2010?

The most important area of development for us is our microgreens and microherbs. They were used by Heston Blumenthal in his *Feast* TV series – for chefs, using microgreens is like sprinkling a little bit of gold dust on top of the dish.

You supply top kitchens – which of your vegetables do chefs rave about?

Our tomatoes. We grow small ones, big ones, yellow ones, black ones, green stripey ones and purple ones. Without giving away too many of our secrets, I'll say that we've developed very different growing methods to everyone else – the way the plants are treated, fed, watered ... it's all about developing taste.



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Any top tips for people growing-their-own?

Type "heritage tomatoes" into Google and you'll find lots of sites where people can tell you anything you might need to know. One of the best is *Gardeners' Delight* – it's been around a long time and you can buy it everywhere.

Buttervilla Growers

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Bite-sized

Where in Cornwall do you like to eat out?

My favourite place to eat is Fifteen – and I'm not just saying that because I supply them! I love to get a big plate of antipasti and nibble away. More locally, my favourite place is the Rod and Line pub in Tideford, run by Michael Jones. He does great fish and chips, scallops in a wok and crab claws – and it's all super-fresh.



What's your secret food vice/guilty pleasure?

I love a good plate of chips – not run-of-the-mill chips, mind. We hunt out very specific types of potatoes, such as the catriona, a floury second early with a purple eye – it's the Beamer of potatoes. Then to make a really great chip you need to parboil the potatoes slowly and then chill them to tighten them up – then cook them twice in a good oil.

Fine dining or pub grub?

Gastropub. I love fine dining but what I hate sometimes is the service – people looking down their noses at you.

What would you happily never eat again?

Believe it or not, I hate mushrooms. I'd be very happy to never eat one again.



Who is your personal food hero?

I admire Keith Floyd for what he's done over the years. He's the one that really kicked off the "chefs as stars" thing and pushed things on. I also admire Jamie Oliver to bits for what he's done for schools and at Fifteen – he's a sweetie.



Photo: Peter Berry