

CAMBRIDGE ORGANIC GAZETTE

courgette



Take a walk with a
local grower

Eat variety for vitality

A seasonal pakora recipe

Our BEST referral offer yet!



A word from Duncan

Founder and owner of Cambridge Organic

I'm delighted to see Brownsfield Farm featured in this, the latest edition of our newsletter. Every time I go to Brownsfield Farm to collect produce, without fail, Geoffrey gives me a bunch of whatever is being collected for my own personal use. I'm sure he does this for whoever turns up, not just me. The produce itself is very welcome (and if it's a punnet of their delicious greengages they have normally been eaten by the time I've reached the farm gate), but it's the gesture itself that means the most; you drive away with happy feelings and it really makes your day. It's little acts of kindness and generosity like this that make the world a better place. We could all learn from Geoffrey's example.

Reading that article also brought to mind the apple orchard where I grew up in the 1980s, and which played a vital role in the origin story of the Cambridge Organic Food Company. Thanks to an intervention from my father, that orchard escaped the fate that befell the vast majority of English apple orchards in the latter half of the twentieth century. My father later converted the orchard to organic, and it was through the channels used to sell the apples that we were first introduced to the emerging concept of box schemes.

As we move into the summer months, we are approaching that wonderful time of year when an abundance of local produce comes into season. What better time to let your friends and family know about the delights of being a member of your local organic box scheme? That's why we are running an excellent refer a friend promotion. For every new customer you refer **you will receive £15 credit** to use against a Cambridge Organic delivery, and so will your friend! So if you know of anyone who might be interested in our scheme, now would be the time to mention it to them. Check out the back page for further details.



Spinach Pakoras: A guest recipe from Jools Abraham of www.eatlikeyournana.com

Pakorras are the simplest thing! The one essential ingredient is gram flour, also called chickpea flour or besan flour. This is a high-protein flour that's excellent for vegetarians. Gram flour is found in the World Foods section of larger supermarkets or in any South Asian grocer. You can make pakoras from many kinds of vegetable, including spinach, chard, onion, potato, or a mixture of vegetables. They're an excellent way to encourage children to enjoy vegetables. To cook these you need a deep frying pan or saucepan for the oil. Makes 6 to 8 pakoras.

- 110g gram flour
- 55g kale, spinach or other vegetable
- About 90ml water
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon garam masala or curry powder
- 1/2 teaspoon chilli powder (optional)
- Oil for cooking

Finely chop the kale or spinach. Put the gram flour, spices and salt in a bowl. Mix in the cold water little by little until you have a thick batter. If it gets too runny, sprinkle in some extra gram flour. Add the chopped vegetables and stir well. The mixture should be mostly vegetables, evenly coated with a thin layer of batter.

Heat the oil to medium-hot (about 170 degrees C). A deep-fat fryer is best, but a deep frying pan with a thick layer of oil will also work. Test the heat by throwing in a piece of bread. It should brown in about one minute.

Use two desert spoons to put the pakoras into the oil. Scoop up a spoonful with one spoon and use the other spoon to gently push it off into the oil. It's best not to make them too big. Fry for around 4-8 minutes until nicely browned, depending on the size of your pakoras and the temperature of the oil. The batter in the middle of each pakora should become firm. You may need to cook the pakora in batches. If you're using a deep frying pan, turn each one over gently when the under-side is browned.

Drain on kitchen roll. They're delicious and crispy served warm but are also good when cold or briefly reheated in a microwave. You can eat them with bread, pickles, or a salad, and they are great with locally made *Nikki's Mango Chutney*, available at Cambridge Organic.



Over the fields to Brownsfield Farm

Fruit growing in Cambridgeshire has a deep-rooted history dating back to medieval times, when abbeys like Ely and Thorney had 'paradise' gardens filled with apple bearing trees. Villages such as Swavesey, Over and Cottenham formed part of a significant fruit-growing belt that thrived between the mid-19th and late 20th centuries. This region was known for intensive plum, pear and apple cultivation, heavily driven by the expansion of the rail network and the rise of local jam factories like Chivers in Histon.

Once a major industry in the area, most orchards (around 90%) were cleared (grubbed up) between the 1950s and 1990s due to various factors such as the rise of supermarkets and their demand for uniformity and appearance over taste, the increased cost benefit of converting to arable, and the decline of the fruit canning industry. One remaining historic orchard, however, is Brownsfield Farm, an organic grower of apples, plums, pears, rhubarb and asparagus and one of our local heroes whose produce you will often find in your boxes.

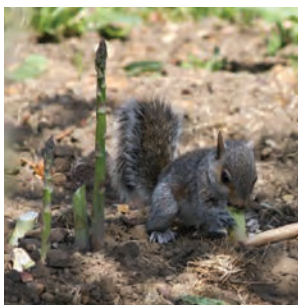
I met with Clare, who is steward of this 120 acre farm alongside her husband Geoffrey and five children (now grown but still part-time helpers). It's a biodiverse paradise. I have arrived on a particularly beautiful May morning, with the sun flickering through the fruit trees and birds hopping between branches. During our walk-around I encounter baby squirrels, roe deer, and many busy insects. I spy the church tower of Swavesey across the vista, past the buttercup fields and a herd of cows with calves at



their sides. It's all very picture perfect and I'm reminded of how fortunate we are to have access to food that is very local and grown in harmony with the nature around it.

Brownsfield Farm converted to organic over 20 years ago. This was a time of UK government schemes for organic farming and stewardship, driven by the need to increase domestic organic production and address environmental concerns. For Geoffrey and Clare, who had been seeing a decrease in demand for their produce, it seemed like the obvious choice.

"The choice was to cut it down, plough it up, and put cereals in, which would have meant it (the ancient orchard) would be gone. We thought it was sensible to not do that with the government schemes available"



We walk along the south-facing lightly sloping land, where the rhubarb is still growing strong. Two long strips of bare earth proudly present their asparagus spears, whilst young plum trees are planted neatly alongside. A baby squirrel bustles out of the hedgerow and starts nibbling on a half stem of asparagus, seemingly oblivious to our presence. Clare laughs and comments that it's usually the rabbits that they have to contend with when it comes to asparagus, but they are happy to share it. Between the wildlife, wholesale orders, and the weekend markets in Cambridge, Ely and St Ives, there is enough to go around.

Asparagus is the household's favourite crop to eat and when preparing, Clare loves the classic, retro dish of boiled asparagus wrapped in brown bread with butter, salt and pepper. After trying this out ourselves in the office, we can confirm, it's delicious!

Part of the farm is set aside for stewardship and the lush meadows are cut for hay when the ground-nesting birds have finished. There are a few redcurrant plants, grown for the weekend markets, two apricot trees and one prized nectarine tree. The main crops consist of 'top fruits', which are tree fruits such as pears and greengages. The ancient orchard produces up to 20 varieties of apples and a yearly bumper crop of plums which you will undoubtedly find in your boxes this season. This means summers are very busy times and the whole family gets involved, with grown up children and



Redcurrant plants



Rhubarb Field

grandchildren returning to the farm for the harvest.

Brownsfield Farm is a place shaped by a lifelong passion for growing and caring for the natural world. The farm takes its name from a field near the house, originally purchased in the early 1900s by Jefferson Brown, a respected daffodil grower. Today, that same land is home to a newly planted orchard of local heritage apple varieties, including Cottenham Seedlings and Chivers Delight. It is wonderful to see the area's rich fruit-growing traditions continuing here, alongside such thoughtful stewardship of the organic land. We look forward to another season of outstanding 'top fruit' from this dedicated local grower.



Why food variety matters by Jools Abraham of www.eatlikeyournana.com

Many of us grew up knowing that we should eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. That useful advice reminds us that plant foods are a vital part of our diet. More recent science has added an important refinement: variety matters enormously.

Including carrots in a meal is far better than eating no vegetables at all. Adding cabbage, beetroot, lentils, herbs, pumpkin seeds and a few interesting salad leaves brings much greater benefit. Each type of plant contains different fibres, minerals, pigments and natural compounds. This variety helps us obtain a wider range of nutrients and gives our gut microbes a much broader menu.

Professor Tim Spector and other gut-health researchers have explained the importance of the gut microbiome and how strongly it is influenced by what we eat. They have popularised the idea of aiming for 30 different plant foods a week. This can sound ambitious until you consider what can be included. The total includes vegetables and fruit, but also beans, lentils, chickpeas, nuts, seeds, herbs, spices and wholegrains. Drinks such as coffee, tea and herbal teas can also add to the tally.

Older food habits often included far more variety than most modern diets. Before industrialised farming and national food distribution, many households grew food in gardens, orchards, allotments or small fields. People also foraged for a wide range of wild plants. The result was a broader seasonal diet, shaped by what grew locally.

Our current food system produces a relatively limited range of foods very efficiently. To reach supermarket shelves, fruit and vegetables must have a consistent shape, size and colour. They must be robust enough to withstand harvesting, grading, packing and transport. Once on the shelf, they must stay looking good for days or weeks. Modern industrial farming has provided affordable food all year round, while also narrowing our food choices.

Fresh mulberries are a great example. They are glorious when ripe, but they bruise easily and do not survive mechanical picking, packing and long-distance distribution. They flourish in gardens, but do not fit easily into a supermarket logistics system.

The same applies to many older or unusual varieties of vegetables. Some have

awkward shapes, such as skirret, a root vegetable that was once widely eaten before it was displaced by the potato, which is much easier to store. Other crops are less predictable in yield or need specific growing conditions. Yet these are often the foods that make meals more interesting and increase the range of nutrients in the diet.

One of the strengths of Cambridge Organic Food Company is the wonderful variety it can supply, especially in the summer months. A veg box can bring varieties rarely found in shops: purple carrots, cavolo nero, rainbow chard, unusual squashes, celeriac, fennel, kohlrabi, broad beans, different cabbages and wonderfully flavoursome salad leaves.

Variety also means eating different kinds of carrot, cabbage, bean, leaf and root. Even within a single vegetable, varieties differ. Orange carrots are rich in carotenoids. Purple carrots contain anthocyanins, the pigments also found in blackberries and red cabbage. Red, yellow and white carrots each bring their own plant chemistry.

The same principle applies across brassicas. Kale, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, kohlrabi and cavolo nero are related, but each offers different textures, flavours and combinations of compounds. Our gut microbiome and our bodies benefit from a broad mix of real, fresh plant foods.

For most people, the easiest way to improve diet quality is to try the occasional unfamiliar plant food when it appears. Celeriac, for example, is often treated as something to add to a stew, but thin slices dressed with a little

parmesan and olive oil, then grilled, are delicious and a firm favourite in my household.

Small additions help too. You can add a few lentils to a soup. Sprinkle sesame seeds onto roasted vegetables. Add herbs to a salad. Roast mixed roots instead of just potatoes. Braise greens with olive oil and garlic. Add cooked beans to stews. Scatter nuts onto a salad. Bake that strange-looking squash that arrives in the autumn. Some varieties even have delicious edible skin.

A weekly vegetable box helps because it interrupts our shopping habits. It gently forces the question: "What shall I do with this?" That question is good for the kitchen, good for the gut, good for health and good for the food system as a whole. A quick search online often reveals useful recipes and tips.

To improve the variety in our diet, we do not need to count every plant obsessively. A little curiosity and a sense of adventure when an unfamiliar item arrives in the vegetable box may be the start of an excellent meal. That unfamiliar item may soon become a new favourite.





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organic love*



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