

A sliver of the action

From perfect pancetta to succulent salami, British charcuterie is every bit as delicious as Continental smoked and cured meats, finds Nick Hammond



A HUNK of freshly baked bread, a slice of homemade terrine, some pickles, a selection of chutneys and a chopping board overflowing with wafer-thin slices of oily, smoky, herb-infused meat. This is my sort of lunch. Sunshine splashes across the tablecloth and, if the scene before me included a glass of chilled wine and the studied indifference of a nearby waiter, I could be in Provence or Puglia. But I'm not; I'm in Shropshire. And the spread before me has been brought to the table from the acres surrounding us in the shadow of Wenlock Edge. It's a tangible example of the extraordinary rebirth of British charcuterie.

'I have no doubt that the charcuterie made in the UK is up there with the very best in the world,' says Sean Cannon. It's quite a claim, but Sean, co-founder of Cannon & Cannon of Borough Market and a major retailer and distributor of British cured meats, has the proof. 'We have the finest quality meat in these islands. And some of the artisan producers we've met in recent years are doing some truly remarkable things with it.'

Take Anja and Jan Jacob Baak of Great Glen Charcuterie as an example. From their lofty eyrie near Fort William, they're producing wild-venison charcuterie from locally sourced red deer. Or from the other end of the country, Richard and Fionagh Harding of Cornish Charcuterie, who make Cornish seaweed and cider salami from traditional local ingredients and sell it from their farm—which will soon also boast a bakery, a distillery and cider-production facilities.

A golden thread of entrepreneurship and an unshakeable belief in British farming run through this new wave of cured-meat producers. 'We bought our farm in 1987—and the following week, the great storm blew it flat,' recalls Sue Whitehead with a wry smile. Together with husband, Ian, and daughters, Sarah and Rebecca, she runs Suffolk Salami from Lane Farm near Brundish. 'We knew we needed to do something different if we were to survive, so we converted the old dairy, went on a sausage-making course and, not long after, on a trip to Italy, a local butcher showed us how he made his salami. We began to learn by trial and error, using our own pork, and it's grown from there.'

Jon and Charlotte Clarkson from Beverley, in East Yorkshire, received their first Berkshire pig as a wedding present. These days, they own a free-roaming herd, which has given life to Three Little Pigs. 'Provenance is everything,' states Charlotte. 'Our customers come to us because they

Hamming it up: a new wave of British artisans are producing tasty cured meats

want to know what they're eating, but also that the animal has had a good life.'

Self-confessed charcuterie geek Mat Leaver loves experimenting with curing and fermenting to create 'interesting food for interested people'. Such as his Umami Salami, for instance: 'We like to be different, for sure,' he laughs from his Curious Foods base in Tring, Hertfordshire.

'One of my first experiments was with goat's cheese and cacao. There's an amazing chemistry that goes on during curing and fermenting, with all these moulds and penicillins and enzymes and sugars,' Mat explains. 'And, not surprisingly, there are some incredible flavour combinations as a result. That's what I'm so engrossed in finding.'

At Wenlock Edge Farm, Alison and Peter Themans give me a guided tour of the farm shop, the smokehouse, butchery and curing sheds. Their pigs live and forage nearby and are slaughtered just 20 miles away, then brought back to be carefully butchered, salted, cured, smoked and presented.

'My family has a Swiss background,' Peter reveals. 'I grew up eating strange cured meats. I used to get teased at school because no one knew what I was eating.'

Peter and Alison started experimenting with dry curing and smoking in the 1990s when they realised how little return they were getting for their pigs. 'We kept back a couple for joints and sausages and began selling them to friends. And it didn't take long to realise we were making more money out of those few pigs than all the others. It changed the way we ran our business.'

Wenlock Edge now sells salami, pancetta, bresaola, coppa, chorizo, lonza and prosciutto—as well as seriously good air-dried bacon and sausages from its little farm shop, at farmer's markets and online. And we sample all the above, in Peter and Alison's sunny farmhouse kitchen in Ape Dale, laughing over their earlier mishaps and his obsession with getting things just right.

A sense of provenance is everywhere here—and the result is simple cuts of meat being turned into mouth-watering, pepper-encrusted works of oily wonder. 🐷

Know your charcuterie

Salami

Traditionally pork, beef or a mixture of both, salami is mixed with a range of herbs and seasonings, fermented, smoked and air-dried for up to eight weeks, losing nearly a third of its weight in the process



Chorizo

Made to similar principles, but from pork only. Key ingredients include paprika and chilli. Small chorizos are now hugely popular in cooking and can be ready in as little as 3–4 weeks



Coppa

Pork shoulder, cured with spices, smoked and air-dried. Has a very high fat content. Ready in 10–12 weeks



Pancetta

Pork belly, cured in aromatic spices, smoked and air-dried to give great depth of flavour. Ready in 4–5 weeks



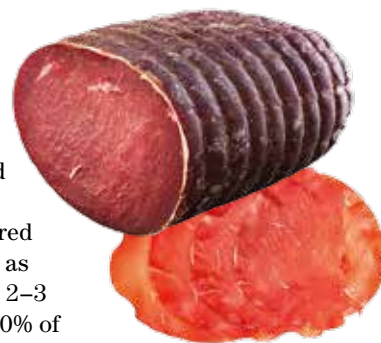
Lonza

Pork loin, cured with spices, air-dried and smoked. This is a leaner cut of meat, with a finer, more delicate flavour. Ready in 2–3 months



Bresaola

Individual muscle taken from the beef rump. All fat and sinew carefully removed and cured in the same way as coppa. Ready in 2–3 months. Up to 40% of weight is lost during this time, which is why it's relatively expensive. Its deep-red colour sets it apart from other cuts



The best of British charcuterie

Suffolk Salami Company's Suffolk salami

A light, fragrant salami with a delicious finishing note of rosemary. Perfect for lunchtime snacking (01379 384593; www.suffolksalami.co.uk)

Three Little Pigs' Yorkshire salami

Made from rare-breed Berkshire pigs that have grown up with the sun on their backs. A meaty, palate-tingling treat (www.threelittlepigschorizo.co.uk)

Curious Foods' quinoa, beetroot and caraway salami

The tastebuds start murmuring as soon as you pop a sliver in your mouth and, by the time you're mid-chew, they're yelling blue murder. Simply sensational (www.curiousfoods.co.uk)

Great Glen Charcuterie's chilli chorizo

This chorizo stick is rich, dark and soft to the touch and I'm slightly nervous of just

how pungent it might taste, but the first bite reveals a meaty sweetness combined with a savoury wash before a hit of heat brings a welcome surprise (01397 712121; www.greatglencharcuterie.com)

Wenlock Edge Farm's hunter's salami

A deep, spicy and earthy salami that's just perfect to nibble accompanied by a light ale or perhaps a splash of sherry (01694 771893; www.wenlockedgefarm.co.uk)