

The chairman of the boar

Adam Edwards
on the secret life
of a farmer who
found wild success

Isolation was what farmer Simon Gaskell wanted. Escape from the madding crowd was what he sought. Acres of space to rear his wild crop were what he needed. That, oddly, is why he chose to settle down within walking distance of a Burger King.

Gaskell is a wild boar farmer. He lives, sleeps and, let's be honest, eats wild boar. Furthermore his business, The Real Boar Company, provides the beast's meat to a dozen Michelin-starred restaurants as well as Harvey Nichols food hall and the Hotel George V in Paris.

And yet, surprisingly, this rare and exclusive product hails from a tiny 20-acre mixed woodland west of Heathrow Airport, a smallholding where the roar of 21st-century living drowns out the rooting of the boar.

"We have to be discreet about the exact location of the farm because of vandalism by animal liberation activists," says Gaskell who lives on the edge of the remote wood that houses his sounder, or group, of boars in a mobile home.

"The motorway completely isolates us. We are very difficult to find. We live in the middle of nowhere. Yet, ironically, Burger King is our nearest local."

It was four years ago that Gaskell, who spent a year at the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester, returned from a Jackaroo tour of the Antipodes with his wife, Louisa, and a hankering to farm livestock. But the only land available to him was the cluster of trees by the six-lane highway.

"I came to the conclusion that the only way to make a living out of the acreage was to find a niche market," says Gaskell. "I had always adored pigs and wild boar was the logical solution."

He takes me on a tour of the wood that allows



Herd and seek: Simon Gaskell and his sounder of boars at his hidden farm near Heathrow Airport

me to glimpse a score of the camouflaged creatures, which warily watch us before scampering into the darkness of the trees. Later I manage to get up close enough to scratch one of the hairy quadrupeds, but I take off when Gaskell points out that its hackles are up.

"The hardest thing about boars is getting them to trust you," he says. "When the first crop went to slaughter, it took me nine days to get them out of the paddock."

Gaskell's waders, which he needs for the mud the boars create, are peppered with tusk holes and his legs bear the scars of his trade. A further sign of mistrust is the attack by his stud boar, Julian, 400lbs of muscular alpha male with four 2½-inch

tusks. "Within 15 minutes of his arrival I knew I was in trouble when I found myself caught with him right in the middle of a paddock. When he put his head down and ran at me, there was only one thing I could do: I put my own head down and charged right back. Fortunately, we both stopped."

In Britain, wild boar was effectively hunted to extinction by the end of the 17th century. It did not return to the wild in this country until the hurricane of 1987 allowed domesticated boars to escape from a farm in Devon and from John Aspinall's wildlife park. Today no one is sure how many are at large, but they are spotted regularly in small family

groups in, among other places, the Forest of Dean, the New Forest and on the South Downs. It was recently reported that one farmer in East Sussex got so fed up with the wild boar impregnating his free-range organic pigs that he hired a local stalker to hunt them down.

Gaskell keeps 30 female boars in two family groups, each with a strong male in charge – Julian is one, Sparky is the other. His sows breed three times in two years, according to the amount of food and light available. The boarlets take 18 months to mature (three times more slowly than domestic piglets) before being taken off to an abattoir in Dorset that specialises in killing "dangerous wild animals". The meat is butchered into loins, haunches and, most successfully, salami that is made with a red wine recipe.

"It's a good old-fashioned taste," says Gaskell, slicing off a fat chunk of his English saucisson that he says is currently being bought as an unusual house present by the sporting set. "If you think about the difference between mutton and lamb, then wild boar is of that ilk. It's a flavour from the old days," he says. Unlike, say, a flame-grilled Whopper with cheese.

For further information on The Real Boar Company, email simon@therealboar.co.uk or see www.therealboar.co.uk.

C'EST LA FOLIE

Michael Wright



It's good weather for canards, but not for Frogs

As in Blighty, so in France: the rain continues. We are in the grip of English weather. "C'est un temps anglais" is how the French sniffily describe anything less than wall-to-wall sunshine, in the same way that Brits will talk of Dutch courage, Spanish practices and a German sense of humour.

While we're on the subject of making fun of foreigners, the Frogs – as we, *les Rosbifs*, have fondly referred to them since the 18th century – also use the phrase *filer à l'anglaise* to describe the heinous crime of slipping away from a gathering without saying goodbye. Funny, that. For, in a linguistic tit-for-tat, we Brits call it "taking French leave". If only all foreign phrases were so easy to convert. I am obliquely reminded of how troubled I felt, as a child, when I discovered that a *cor anglais* was not the same as a French horn, and that *un coup de grâce* did not mean a lawnmower.

You will be aware, I'm sure, that *crème anglaise* is what the French call custard and that boiled vegetables are sometimes described as cooked *à l'anglaise* – ie, to within an inch of their lives. But, being slow by nature, it took me a while to discover an adjustable spanner is called *une clé anglaise* in French. Or that crutches are known as *les cannes anglaises* – introduced, no doubt, by all those gouty English aristos who hung out, limping and pimping, in Paris before the Revolution.

This makes me wonder if French estate agents will one day coin the phrase *renovée à l'anglaise*, to describe the way an old house has been renovated. On a good day, this might mean "in keeping with the period"; on a bad day, "done by cowboys".

But I digress. I was meant to be talking about all this rain. I'd love to pretend that H₂O is exactly what the *potager* was needing – that ancient consolation for feeling housebound, dank and miserable – but at the moment the rain is watering

only weeds. Things have got so bad that I've left open the gates of my weed-bed (*le jungle anglais*, as I fear it may soon be known) to allow the egg-squad to go in there to peck at whatever *mauvaises herbes* they fancy. But even they are too ashamed to be seen dead in there. Last year's wild rabbits, ditto. As for the dreaded doryphores, they've all packed their bags and beetled back to Colorado. So you can see why this ceaseless deluge is so welcome. The fact that even Jolibois's hardest gardeners have whipped off their wellies in disgust finally gives me a chance to catch up.

This time of year, every year, takes me by surprise at La Folie, as Nature starts accelerating towards high summer. I cannot say I ever noticed this in East Dulwich, where I never felt in danger of being swallowed up by my own shrubs. No, even the weeds seemed to struggle in London SE5. Something to do with being south of the river, I presume.

To cheer ourselves up in a brief lull between storms, Alice and I decide to take Wright Minima for lunch at the café in the square at Mortemart, which happens to be one of the prettiest villages in the region. Madame, who runs the place, knows us by now. She peers up at the leaden sky, extends an upturned palm to feel for rain and grins.

"Do you prefer to sit on the French side?" she says, chuckling as she gestures into the café's gloomy interior, where leather-faced *paysans* in blue overalls are already slurping their soup, "or on the English side?" Now she waves at the tables in the delightful square, where over-bronzed ladies in sleeveless white tops sit opposite grinning chaps with digital cameras, all shivering and happy and in love with the world, for – never mind the weather, as long as we're together – are they not sitting at umbrella'd tables in a beautiful square in France, sipping wine and waiting to be fed?

"*Côté Anglais, s'il vous plaît*," I reply, with a glance at Alice, amused at madame's simple analysis of a national difference that often seems to me too subtle to put into words.

"It's what I love about the English," she says, her tired eyes sparkling. "You always believe that the rain will pass."

C'est La Folie by Michael Wright is available for £6.99, plus 99p p&p, from Telegraph Books (0870 428 4112).

www.lafolie.co.uk

BOAR FACTS



- ❖ The wild boar is Britain's largest mammal. It is common in broadleaf forests across Europe, Asia and North Africa.
- ❖ Wild boars are ancestors to the domestic pig but, unlike their descendants, are covered in dark, bristly hairs.
- ❖ The young have distinctive, pale stripes, which they lose at around four months old.
- ❖ They're omnivorous creatures, though mainly vegetarian, rooting

for nuts, fungi, small animals and carrion.

- ❖ Boars can live up to 25 years.
- ❖ Males and females reach sexual maturity at around 18 months, but the males only mate when they reach a certain size and dominance – achieved through fighting – which is often around four years old.
- ❖ They communicate via a series of grunts and chirrups, and squeal when in danger.
- ❖ The hair of the boar was often used to make toothbrushes, until a synthetic replacement was found in the 1930s.

Recipe: Wild boar in cider (serves 4)

2lb/1kg wild boar shoulder
 1lb/500g seasonal vegetables, including potatoes
 6oz/180g shallots/onions
 ¼ pint/450ml cider
 ¼ pint/450ml stock
 Seasoning and mixed herbs
 Oil or butter to seal

- ❖ Seal the boar in a large casserole dish. Add everything; bring to the boil; cover and put in the oven at 180C/350F/gas mark 4 for 2 hours.
- ❖ Thicken the stock, if necessary.