



Wild thing

They may be mad, bad and dangerous to know, but their meat is high in protein, low in cholesterol and fat, and really rather delicious. Katie Jarvis has a close encounter with Simon Gaskell and his sounders of wild boar.
Photography by Mike Charity

JULIAN is your ultimate alpha male – powerful, confident, and perfectly formed – 180 kilos of solid muscle.

For sure you wouldn't want to challenge him: he's impressive, and he knows it, confidently strutting round his estate, surrounded by a gaggle of adoring females. Yes, the girls all love Julian.

But don't panic too much about the competition, lads. For the fact of the matter is, Julian is a boar.

(And that really is spelt correctly.)

Farmer Simon Gaskell might be a towering six-foot himself, but he still views him with an extremely healthy respect... and he has the scars to prove it. "I have to watch out for Julian. He has the tusks and the attitude," he says, a mite ruefully.

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

Two years ago, Simon and his wife, Louisa, swapped a



house 400 yards from a sun-drenched beach in Australia for 20-odd acres of mixed woodland on the family farm in Wiltshire. There are times when even they struggle to explain why.

But the fact of the matter is, Simon has always adored pigs – right from the time when he kept his own Gloucester Old Spots as a lad growing up on the same spot more than 25 years ago. When homesickness kicked in, he and Louisa decided to return to Simon's Cotswold roots and make a living as boar farmers. Considering the excellence of the product, there are surprisingly few of them around.

"Try some of our salami," Simon offers, holding out a plate covered with rich, delicately patterned slices of the dried meat. Cured in red wine and interwoven with peppercorns, it has the feel and flavour of the finest quality charcuterie.

Usually, the trim and the belly go into salami but Simon puts in the best cuts of boar meat too, which is why it tastes so good. Even The Fat Duck at Bray has a regular order. "I can't stop eating it myself," Simon admits. "Breakfast, lunch, dinner..."

Salami is only one of the products Simon's business – The Real Boar Company – produces. You can also buy the usual cuts – chops, loin, fillet and so on –

but boar meat has its own unique and delicious flavour, quite different from pork. When it comes to 'delicious', there's often a sting in the tail. Not so here. Boar meat is high in protein, low in cholesterol and fat.

Take a look at Julian, his wives and children running round their woodland home, feasting on acorns and berries, and you'll begin to see why. Healthy meat comes from happy, well exercised animals: and this is boar paradise.

If you stare through the sturdy fence, (wild boar are covered under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act), separating them from us, it can take a while to spot them, sturdy though they are. We crouch down, watching, while Simon calls alluringly, a bucket of damsons at the ready. Suddenly, there's a shape moving between the dark trunks of the oak and ash. As one boar gains courage – and smells the offering – the others follow suit. In amongst the curious females that make their way over towards us, there's a gang of bouncing boarlets – like members of a nursery school outing – complete with the stripes they're to lose as they grow.



The boars are kept on two-acre stretches, and rotated onto fresh ground throughout the year. Much of their food they find themselves: hips, seeds, fungi, lots of tasty earthworms and grubs. Their diet is supplemented by locally-produced pignuts (without hormone additives or growth promoters) and vegetables.

Looking after them is both relatively easy and extremely frustrating. Although the boar demonstrate an admirable degree of self sufficiency, Simon would like more involvement than he gets. "I'd love to be able to help them with their young, but they won't let me," he says. It once took him nine days to get them all out of one paddock into another. Relations have improved since then, but there's still room for arbitration.

That's the reality of rearing creatures that are far removed from domestic farm animals. In an England of more than 300 years ago, boar would have been a common sight in the wild. But their downfall lay in being such fun to catch and even more fun to eat, and they were hunted out of existence... Or were

It's a boar – 10 things you never knew:

- Britain's largest mammal, the wild boar, is a widespread species, common in broadleaf forests across much of 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
- Boar 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

they? There are some who think that boars – Britain's largest mammal – never truly disappeared from the forest. Others claim they escaped from a farm in Devon in the late

chirrup, 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. Although popular because the bristles were soft, they weren't the best material for oral hygiene: the hairs are slow to dry and often full of bacteria
- In medieval England, boar were trained as pointers and retrievers for illegal hunting in areas like the New Forest. This was because the commoners living in the New Forest were forbidden to keep large dogs – they could only keep dogs capable of passing through King Rufus' Stirrup, an iron stirrup 26.3cm high by 11.3cm across
- The Old English word for boar, 'eofor', even occurs as a personal name of a nobleman. Simon and Louisa briefly considered the name for their first-born – thankfully, they settled on William instead

1980s, or possibly from John Aspinall's wildlife park. Whatever, the first modern sightings of wild boar in significant numbers was on the Peasmarch estate in East Sussex. That in ►