



SPUDS you like

We discover a local potato farm with an unusual heritage.

Lucy and Anthony Carroll describe their heritage potatoes as 'Potatoes like they used to taste...' But for those whose experience of potatoes is limited to bullet-like new potatoes or those enormous yet frequently flavourless spuds that are usually marketed as 'baking potatoes', the Carrolls' offerings are barely recognisable as the same vegetable.

There are no bland labels here. Instead of 'new' or 'baking', why not try an Edzell Blue, a Highland Burgundy Red, a Pink Fir Apple or Mr Little's Yetholm Gypsy? Instead of the familiar creamy shade, the Carrolls' crop comes in a rainbow of colours, from the red, white and blue skin of Mr Little's Yetholm Gypsy and the peachy hue of the aptly named Peachbloom to the almost magenta of the Roseval. The Shetland Black's flesh has an attractive blue ring which makes unusual crisps,

while the Salad Blue's skin and flesh are both a startling shade of blue, perfect for novelty blue mash. In fact, the Carrolls are frequently asked 'Do you add any food colouring to your potatoes?' The answer is, of course, no. The colours are a natural result of antioxidants, and makes the potatoes especially good for you.

Delve a little deeper and the stories that go with the varieties are as colourful as the potatoes themselves. The Highland Burgundy Red dates back to at least 1936 when it was used to add colour to a meal for the Duke of Burgundy in the Savoy, and the Arran Victory was named in 1918 in celebration of the end of the war, while the Yetholm Gypsy was developed in the village of Yetholm, the Gypsy capital of Scotland, and grown by the Little family. Many heritage potatoes date from Victorian times when there was a fashion for breeding coloured varieties. The oldest variety the Carrolls produce is the Pink Fir Apple which dates from 1850, but they also grow more modern types such as the Blue Kestrel from 1996.



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Potatoes are helpfully divided into seasonal selections – first earlies, second earlies and main season, and whether they are floury, i.e. good for mashing, or salad. Most have suggestions for how to use them to get the best flavour: 'boil whole in skins', 'cook completely unadulterated (with no butter!)' There are also recipe suggestions on the website from top chefs and restaurants: Terry Laybourne's Hot Pot Potatoes, The Witchery's Anstruther Crab Salad with Salad Blue, or Epicurus Catering's Sausages and Blue Mash. You can buy the potatoes from the online shop in 1.5 kg bags or 12.5 kg boxes, or through retailers across the country. Regional retailers include supermarkets, farm shops, delis, and many more. Keen gardeners can even buy the potato seed and grow their own.

So what made the Carrolls decide to produce these rare varieties? The Carroll family have farmed at Tiptoe since the 1930s, and Lucy and

Anthony have been at the farm since 1986. They originally grew modern potato varieties in large quantities and sold them through a co-op scheme. 'We didn't know where the potatoes were ending up,' Lucy shrugs, 'and to be honest, they just weren't bringing in much money.' Many of the potatoes that dominate the market now were produced mainly for their high yields during the Second World War. Flavour was less important. Anthony wasn't passionate about the bland varieties he was growing, and after hearing a talk about heritage potatoes he thought he would give them a try.

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The family started growing unusual varieties in their own kitchen garden to cook and eat themselves, and in 2002 they decided to experiment with selling them. They set aside an acre for a few heritage varieties and sold them directly to the public at the Farmers' Market in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Lucy and Anthony weighed the potatoes on an old set of kitchen scales and bagged them by hand at their stall. They didn't know what to expect: would the unusual colours and flavours put people off? But chatting to customers made it clear that they liked the heritage potatoes. Soon Lucy found herself selling potatoes from her kitchen table, and the business grew until Carroll's Heritage Potatoes had a dedicated office and a website. They now produce 17 varieties, their potatoes are stocked in delis, farm shops and supermarkets across the region, and they even have international customers. One customer has a weekly delivery sent to Singapore!

'When we started,' Lucy says, 'we assumed that most of our business would be retail. We do supply a lot to shops and individual customers, but actually, the largest proportion of our sales are to restaurants.' The Carrolls have a close relationship with chefs in the region and further afield. When they first started, chef Terry Laybourne was extremely supportive, and developed dishes using their heritage potatoes for Cafe 21.

'We don't just sell potatoes though,' Lucy explains. 'We see our role as far more than that.' The Carrolls are dedicated to farming in an environmentally responsible way. There is a large variety of wildlife on the farm, and ancient and semi-natural woodland which the Carrolls nurture and add to. Tiptoe Farm has just been launched as a Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) demonstration farm. This means that they are able to offer visits to a range of people who are interested in farming and food production, such as environmental, wildlife and consumer groups, and of course chefs, who can learn about where the produce they use comes from.

A recent group of student chefs visited to go on a foraging expedition around the farm and on the riverbank below the potato fields, accompanied by London-based environmental chef Arthur Potts Dawson and North East forager James Burton. The Carrolls are passionate about local produce and so a chefs' visit to their farm also includes a tour of other local producers such as Heatherslaw Mill, Chain Bridge Honey, Sunny Hill Eggs and Piperfield Pork. A group from Jamie Oliver's restaurant Fifteen came to visit several years ago, and were amazed at the care and time that went into producing the ingredients that arrived in their kitchen.

'We see it as a two-way process,' Lucy says. 'Yes, we do try to educate the chefs who visit us, but we're also learning a lot. It's important that the people who work with these ingredients know where the food comes from. And of course, when we eat out, we appreciate that a lot more too!'

The Carrolls' efforts have not gone unrecognised. They won the Observer Food Monthly Award for Best Producer 2009, and Seaham Hall's Head Chef Kenny Atkinson's winning starter on the BBC's Great British Menu included Shetland Black crisps, a heritage potato grown by Carroll's. You can find his winning recipe on Carroll's website.

If your appetite for heritage potatoes has been whetted, Sharpe's Express 1900 and Royal Kidney 1899 can be purchased from Carroll's Heritage Potatoes now, and should be available until September. From September all Carroll's other heritage varieties will be available to order. You can order online, by telephone, or look out for the distinctive orange bags at stockists across the region. Potato seed will be available to order direct from Carroll's from November for delivery from January 2010.

Stockists include Tesco in Hexham, Blagdon Farm Shop in Northumberland, Fenwick in Newcastle, Moorhouse Farm Shop near Morpeth, and Booths in Ilkley and Settle. For a full list of stockists please see www.heritage-potatoes.co.uk, or phone 01890 883060.

Carroll's Heritage Potatoes, Tiptoe Farm, Cornhill-on-Tweed, Northumberland 01890 883060 www.heritage-potatoes.co.uk



courtesy of Duncan Davis