

Finding and filling a niche market, and then trying to preserve its 'niche status', has been an almost all-consuming process for one Northumberland couple. **TIA RUND** was bowled over by their enthusiasm for the not-so-humble spud.

# 'Special' potato varieties offer increased choice

Growing spuds wouldn't normally rank as the fourth emergency service.

But for the keen gardener who had promised his daughter Pink Fir Apple potatoes for her wedding breakfast, and whose own crop had failed, finding an alternative source was a virtual lifesaver.

Fortunately for Lucy and Anthony Carroll who supplied him, it is just one of a loyal but growing band of enthusiasts who really know their onions when it comes to potatoes.

Anthony took on the family's 500-acre arable farm at Tiptoe Farm, near Cornhill on Tweed, about 13 years ago but only started growing potatoes in the late 1960s, in response to the advice at the time to start growing unsupported crops.

"With good access to irrigation, we could achieve a good skin finish but, even in the few short years that we

were growing modern commercial varieties, the bag market plummeted and we were faced with fewer and fewer outlets," he explains.

"We ended up sending our potatoes hundreds of miles to packhouses down south. Not only were we crippled with haulage costs, but also we never knew whether the ultimate consumer ever actually enjoyed them."

Anthony was just about ready to turn his back entirely on the potato crop when he spied an exhibit of traditional varieties at a BPC event at Newark.

"The thought of producing something a little 'special' festered for a while before he made the decision to try growing some of them, back in 2002.

"His initial approach was, nonetheless, cautious. "In the first year, we tried five varieties on just one acre. Looking back, it sounds pathetic. I know," he says.

"But it meant that we had to find a home for about 6,000kg which isn't so easy when you're grading and bagging by hand, selling by the kg and not entirely sure of the market."

But Anthony's hunch was a good one and the spuds that year were a sell-out.

In the subsequent seasons, the number and acreage of heritage varieties has increased exponentially to the point where the farm now boasts no fewer than 13 different varieties, from vintage Fortyfold to the popular Rattle, with every shade of red, white, blue, black and partly-coloured between.

"They're all wonderful. They're like children - I'd hate to have to lose any of them now," says Lucy.

But, adds Anthony, there have been a few along the way that have been just too downright difficult to grow, such as Sherry Blue, which is particularly prone to viral

infections. The door is still open, however, for other varieties to join the sales list, providing they meet the criteria of good taste, texture, shape or general interest, he adds.

While the overall potato area still only extends to about 32 acres - modest by any standards - such is the specialist attention that these varieties require to be grown and marketed that Anthony now employs full-time potato manager Andrew Bainbridge.

"My friends and neighbours thought I was nuts to take on someone for such a small acreage," he says. After all, Andrew had in the past managed a 2,500-acre farming business including 180 acres of potatoes.

But his new responsibilities extend way beyond actual production. At the weekend, for example, he can be found manning the company's stands at farmers' markets in

Edinburgh and Glasgow, which can mean a four o'clock start in the morning.

Local deliveries to farm shops, garden centres, delicatessens and restaurants are made in the Carrolls' own vehicle. But, by using the services of a courier, their sphere of influence now has no limits.

The company's list of stockists already reads like a foodies' 'who's who', from Harrods and Harvey Nichols and London's trendy Borough Market, to Glenaeles Hotel, to the farm shops at Chatsworth and Windsor (where British Queen is an appropriate favourite).

Needless to say a polished web site is also an essential part of the marketing 'suite', which also includes rubbing shoulders with buyers at national and, indeed, international trade shows. It was while exhibiting at such a show in London earlier this year that the Carrolls first met Chris Toxle, the fresh produce buyer for the 26-strong chain of Booths supermarkets on the Newcastle, Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria.

Much to their delight, that contact is already bearing fruit. Just last month, the store launched a special promotion whereby it will be stocking a different heritage variety each month for eight months, starting with the early variety Sharpe's Express, grown for the first time this year on lighter land at nearby Milfield, which became available after Anthony formed a farming company with a neighbour about five years ago.

"It was a great idea of Chris's to have a monthly 'guest' potato," says Lucy, who is the human dynamo that drives the marketing of the potato business, which is separate from the combinable crop farming business. It will keep the promotion fresh for the shoppers, and makes the job more manageable for us.

"Booths has come up with some great-looking in-store promotional material using the 'straw' invite a different one for dinner every month". The deal is a fantastic boost for our business.

From Booths' point of view, it underlines its own philosophy of taking a fresh approach towards building its reputation as a regional

food specialist.

"As well as looking really different and attractive on the plate, these varieties do offer our customers increased choice and the chance to find out more about our different native potatoes," says Chris.

Of course, apart from coming to terms with the agronomic complexities of more than a dozen

'challenging' varieties, cultivating relationships such as this is just one aspect of a learning curve that Anthony describes as not so much steep as vertical.

"Packaging design, advertising, setting up distribution channels, installing computer software for processing delivery notes and invoices, dealing direct with customers - we've been thrown into all the things that, like most farmers, we had never done before in our lives," he says.

Help, at least, was available. A Rural Enterprise Scheme grant helped offset some of the marketing costs in the first three years and the staff members from the Newcastle office were "fantastic", says Anthony. "The scheme has been good for us - it's definitely helped to 'pump prime' our business - but we've delivered on our side, too, by providing more employment locally."

Farm business consultants Buewells' invaluable experience was also called into play with the branding exercise.

Anthony also praises what he learnt about potential off-farm earnings at a three-week advanced farm management course run by the Worshipful Company of Farmers at Wye College, which was very intensive, but a real eye-opener. I would recommend anyone who has the chance to attend one," he says.

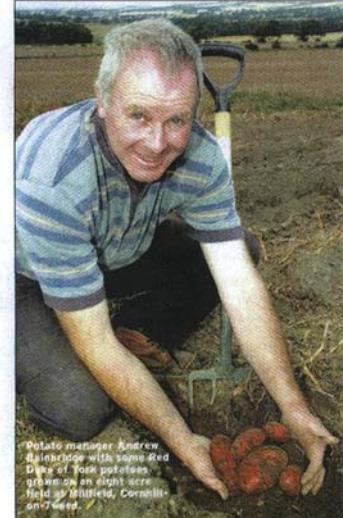
Commanding a higher price for his produce might make his potato-growing methuen glyco-alkaloid green with envy, but Anthony is also keen to point out the downsides. Seed is more expensive, for a start, though he has, at least, secured a consistent supply by becoming a director of specialist breeding company in Fife.

Yields are typically 8-14t/acre, compared to the 24t/acre he was able to achieve with more modern varieties.

Then there is the expense of



Lucy and Anthony Carroll.



Potato manager Andrew Bainbridge with some 600kg of Pink Fir Apple potatoes, grown on an eight acre field at Milfield, Cornhill on Tweed.



Rattle potatoes grown on an eight acre block at Milfield.



labour-intensive hand grading with a "zero tolerance" for imperfections, plus the inherent inefficiencies of handling so many varieties.

"Our cold store would normally house about 700 boxes. But now, because we need access to individual varieties, which are often also split-graded, its size is effectively halved."

"The costs multiply up a terrifying rate," he says. "We're also pretty exposed because there is no bottom to the market. If we can't sell our produce, there's no alternative. If you're producing cereals or livestock, you may not like the price you receive, but at least there is a market outlet."

Progress to date has not been made without personal

sacrifice either. "Our social life has definitely had to go on hold," says Lucy. "If it all doesn't work out, at least no-one can say that we didn't try!"

"Even our teenagers Thomas and Rosie get roped into helping."

But the compensation is that everyone involved thoroughly enjoys their work.

"It's tremendous fun," says Lucy.

"It's so much more interesting. I get a real buzz from it," says Andrew Bainbridge.

"And it gives me enormous pleasure," says Anthony.

"Even if I do have a soft spot for little old ladies at farmers' markets and end up handing out free samples when they claim they can't manage to carry a kg bag."

**ABOVE:** Harvesting Rattle potatoes on an eight acre patch at Millfield, Cornhill-on-Tweed, Northumberland.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Grading potatoes after harvesting.

**RIGHT:** Filling directly into boxes.

**FAR RIGHT:** Bagging potatoes after the grading process.

**BELOW:** Local deliveries to farm shops, garden centres, delicatessens and restaurants are made in the Carrolls' own vehicle.

