

Wild about the boar

With 20 acres of woodland in the heart of the Cotswolds, Simon Gaskell has turned a fondness for the ancient ancestor of the domestic pig into a thriving artisan business

WORDS BY RACHAEL OAKDEN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MONTGOMERY



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE While they are not able to forage over hundreds of miles like their ancestors did, the

boars live as natural a life as is possible; Simon can get close to the animals each morning when he feeds them



An adult male wild boar can weigh up to 250kg and run at 30 miles per hour. That is extremely fast when the creature is barrelling straight towards you and its five-inch tusks are heading for your thigh. The only thing to do in such a situation, as farmer Simon Gaskell knows from

personal experience, is to run as fast as you can towards the animal while waving your arms and yelling. "I was crossing a field and he charged at me; I couldn't outrun him," Simon says. "We both stopped in the middle, about an inch from one another." The founder of The Real Boar Company has a hair-raising repertoire of stories about his experiences of Julian, the implacable beast whose likeness adorns every pack of Simon's home-grown wild boar salami, including those that have left him with a three-inch scar, a broken hand and a finger that was bitten and will never be quite the same.

Such violent incidents have, thankfully, become rare: the current boar, Bert, is a gentler giant whose easy temperament has rubbed off on the 12 breeding sows and associated offspring that Simon keeps in woodland in the southern Cotswolds: "Now I've got a male I can even pat." It's easy to understand why he might feel the urge to fuss the prehistoric-looking animals whose wiry grey-brown coats are so well-camouflaged beneath the canopy of young poplar, oak, ash and cherry trees. With their cartoonishly long noses and black button eyes, they have something of *The Clangers* about them. "They're folk heroes, almost," says Simon, whose own fondness for wild boar owes a debt to the Asterix comics. "When I'm selling my salamis at food fairs, people often come up to me with a boar story: they've seen one trotting across the road in France or been surprised by them on a campsite in Corsica."

The ancient ancestors of our domesticated pigs died out in Britain during the 13th century due to overhunting and forest clearance. Reintroduced into Royal Forests 300 years later, history repeated itself and they were extinct here until farmers brought them back in the →



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Simon diversified into charcuterie when he couldn't sell cuts of boar meat for twice the price of free-range pork



1980s. Simon's own relationship with the animals began in 2004, when he and his wife Louisa returned from Australia to live nearer their relatives. He'd spent 15 years working in corporate events, but had studied agriculture at college and even kept pigs as a teenager on his family's holding in the Cotswolds. "We came back to the farm and had 20 acres of the woodland to use, which wasn't enough to rear other livestock commercially," he explains. "I knew I needed a niche product if I was going to make a living from it."

Wild boar seemed ideal. Hardy and slow-growing, reared outdoors on a natural diet of brambles, worms and wild fruits (supplemented by a daily bucket of pig nuts), the animals yield fine-textured meat with an old-fashioned depth of flavour. Armed with a business plan and a bank loan to cover his considerable start-up costs - including £15,000 on fencing alone, as a high-securing barrier is an essential condition of Simon's dangerous wild animals licence - Simon bought 25 breeding sows, two boars and 30 weaners from a retiring farmer in Dorset. But he discovered that people weren't willing to pay a fair price for meat that takes four times longer to produce than that of commercial pigs. "Within 18 months, I saw I would have to change tack or go under."

Salami proved to be Simon's salvation. He took a few joints to a local butcher's, who turned it into a wild boar and red-wine variety. "That first one, which we've only tweaked slightly, is still our most popular product. I sold 1,400 in the first full year," says Simon, who drew on the marketing skills honed in the events business to promote it to local restaurants. The Real Boar Company range now also includes chorizos and air-dried hams that have been served at some of the world's top restaurants - a chef at the George V in Paris said of it: "I can't believe this was made by an Englishman." The secret is in the quality of the ingredients, Simon says, pointing out that close-grained, dark wild boar meat is higher in protein and lower in fat and cholesterol than pork, beef or lamb. "We do a lot of tastings at events and people are

always amazed by the intense, fully rounded flavour," he says. The boars mature after 18 months and are dispatched in early autumn. This leaves plenty of time for making, fermenting and air-drying enough cured sausage to satisfy salami aficionados all year round.

Simon spends around 50 days at food fairs between September and Christmas. The seasonal appeal of his product - wild boar and sloe gin salami is a favourite - is a perfect match for the farming cycle. Wild boar have litters just once a year, in spring after the sows build nests out of sticks or earth beneath pig arks or in the open air. They stay on their mother's milk for the first six months of life, weaning at around the same time their stripy coats darken to a muddy brown. "The little ones are enchanting and inquisitive," Simon says. "They walk towards me, sniffing the air, and I play grandmother's footsteps with them." But

even the grumpy old girls who bite the backs of his knees when he jumps over the fence to deliver their food have earned his admiration: "I watch them rooting around for cherries and acorns, and when the sloes and wild apples are out, I pick them off the hedges, as I can hand-feed some. It's a pleasure to be in the environment of an ancient animal. When I'm walking in the woods and I see this giant creature covered in mud, looking at me, I feel as if I've stepped back 1,000 years."

CL readers can receive a 15% discount on orders for 400g boxes of wild boar salami with red wine, and sloe gin, game salami, wild boar and venison salami with red wine, and wild boar chorizo with red wine, until 5 August 2014. Visit therealboar.co.uk and quote 'claug14'. Orders will be sent out from late July.



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