



THE REAL BOAR CO.

Simon Gaskell, founder of The Real Boar Company, describes the ins and outs of farming wild boar in the woods of north Wiltshire...

Simon Gaskell's amusing description of the background to The Real Boar Company goes along the following lines: "My wife and I were enjoying life living 400 yards from the white sand coastline in Western Australia and then the urge to live half the year knee-deep in mud, farming wild boar kicked in." However, he admits that both he and his wife were also missing their families back in the UK.

This combination of a desire to spend more time in England and a distinctly adventurous spirit led to a very unusual farming venture. Many years previously, Simon had studied agriculture at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester and he had also kept pigs as a child, so, as he says, "It

seemed like a natural progression to start farming wild boar.

"My wife and I returned home, encircled 20 acres of woodland with six foot fencing and a very powerful electric fencer, brought in the water, put a up a barn and set out obtaining a dangerous wild animal license from the council. That, of course, requires no end of diplomacy. Rather amusingly, my license stipulated requiring two handlers and a collar and leash per dangerous animal if taken from the enclosure – which would, of course, involve a bus load of mad people accompanying me to the abattoir! That stipulation was subsequently amended as it was put in place for a local tiger owner.

"Then we took possession of the first recruits. The first morning, I went looking for them and felt the panic rise as the woods looked empty. An ominous start, but a lot of searching found them sound asleep in the brambles. You might well say that my boar are not really wild as they are behind a fence but you'd be wrong. No attempt to tame the majority of them has ended in success. They remain unpredictable and unruly and my scars and broken bones lay testament to this. I have only one ally, aptly named Itchy, who does like a scratch!"

The Real Boar Company now has around 200 wild boar living in the Wiltshire woodland, foraging for their grubs and fungi, seeds, apples and acorns, earthworms and beetles. They are also fed every day with locally produced pignuts of wheat, barley and oats. This helps Simon to lure them into new paddocks and try to keep them friendly, which is apparently a never-ending battle.

They live in sounders (family groups) with one boar per ten or so sows all year round. Wild boar tend to farrow only three times in two years at best, whereas a pig will farrow five times. The boarlets are gorgeous, small, stripy creatures which emerge after a week or so from their mother's nest. It is impossible to know how many

each mother has as it is a no-go zone when this occurs – some of the sows when disturbed by humans have been known to eat their own or other boarlets.

Simon adds, "At around five or six months, we begin to wean the boarlets. At this time, they lose their stripes and the sows will have naturally dried up. In the wild, this is the time that the young would disperse but ours go into a barn for a little while, enjoying Radio 4 and a bit more contact with me for some humanizing before they go back into the woods."

The decision to make salamis and chorizos from the boar meat was based on the economics of the venture. "On such small acreage, we needed a product that would sell at a price that we could survive on and though we do sell the meat as it is, it was after lots of experimenting we began our collection of different game salamis and chorizos as well as some free range pork ones."

The flavours of these products are immense. Boar take up to three times longer than pigs to grow and are very low in saturated fats and cholesterol as well as high in protein, which makes boar salami healthier. For the company's game salami, Simon mixes the boar meat with ▶



Clockwise from below: Wild boars in the Wiltshire woods; the company's Salami tubes; Simon with one of his wild boar.





Simon feeding one of his wild boar

venison and pheasant to get an even leaner salami. As Simon states, "You do not need to eat much: it is as meat should be – tasty and filling. Our wild boar chorizo has an edge with paprika but we do not include chilli as we believe this masks the quality and taste of the boar meat.

"We make the salami here in the Cotswolds the old fashioned way: they air dry for up to six weeks in the Wiltshire air. Occasionally, we also produce wild boar bacon and prosciutto which have a cult following. We always have wild boar haunch and loin available, which are very popular at festive occasions. Wild boar was always the dish of preference before turkey came along. If you are feeling adventurous yet daunted, don't worry – we do provide recipes."

Charcuterie has seen a recent rise in interest in the UK with a number of artisan companies now producing salamis. Simon jokes, "We had a rather lovely anecdote regaled back to us from the chef at The Cinq at the George V in Paris. He reputedly said he could not believe our salami was made by an 'Engleeshman!'"

All of The Wild Boar Company's charcuterie products have won awards, with the highest award being a Gold 3 star in the Great Taste Awards for the Wild Boar with Red Wine. This salami has also proved to be the company's best seller. Simon believes that the Game (with boar, venison and pheasant and a dash of port) is up there, too. "The only problem", he says, "is that it has such a full, rich flavour, it's the

only one I can't stop continually grazing!"

The company sells to a mix of trade, from local farm shops to top hotels and restaurants including The Hinds Head, Lucknam Park and Jamie's Italian. "We also sell direct from our website and are at a number of pre-Christmas fairs such as Wellchild, Mary Howard and Westonbirt," Simon adds. "This allows people to get hold of our latest (and some say best yet...) Wild Boar with Sloe Gin Salami. It proved so popular last year that we sold out of this one, which as yet has not been available at the shops.

"Did I mention that for my birthday, my dear wife gave me a Kune Kune? That's a pet pig originally from New Zealand and, though I was sceptical at first, she is irresistible. She's also a better pet for the children than a dog – and we have piglets to sell! These do not go into salami. Although I am sure they would taste good, we didn't fancy trying to market them."

Simon sums up, "The business is continuing to grow even through these troubled times, probably due to the nature of the beast – fine, slow grown and flavoursome. Wild boar are a magical animal to work with, certainly not the easiest but they are a fine part of English heritage which we are privileged to spend time with. It has been a busy time but worth it. The proof, as they say, is in the eating." **P**

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