

## FARM FEATURE

# Wild boar venture aims for top end of the market

Despite their dangerous demeanour, a passion for pigs led farmer Simon Gaskell to establish his own wild boar business. **William Surman** meets the man, and the beasts, behind the Real Boar Company.

**W**hat do you do if you have a spare 27 acres of pretty woodland nestling on the edge of the Cotswolds and want to find a way of making a decent living from it? For Simon Gaskell the answer was to start a wild boar farm.

His decision came about as he contemplated life after living in Western Australia, having returned to his family's smallholding in Wiltshire.

A love for the English countryside and a passion for pigs convinced him that wild boar were not only the best option to make some money but would provide him with the wild and solitary lifestyle he admits to thriving on. "My wife and I wanted to come

home and wondered what we could farm on the woodland. Bison? Woodpeckers? There really isn't much you can do in it and we really wanted animals," says Simon. "Boar naturally live in the woodland so it seemed the natural choice in the end."

## 'A boar bore'

He spent his final few months in Australia researching wild boar and their idiosyncrasies (although nothing, he says, would prepare him for the reality) before arriving back in England to start The Real Boar Company.

Today, he is four years into his new occupation and already a consummate boar expert. He even offers an advice service to any budding boar farmer.

"I am a boar bore," he says, while dozens of stripy wild boarlets charge around and the sows slide over to inspect what's going on.

The stud boar, Julian, surveys us from a safe distance but is close enough to see his sharp, three inch tusks.

"Don't turn your back on him – he will go through you and not round you," Simon warns, a lesson he learnt through several painful knock-downs.

The wild beasts roam around the woodland and it is a rare site since wild boar were hunted to extinction in Britain (the last one felled by King James I according to legend) in the 17th century.

The history adds to their attraction and mystery and despite



Simon Gaskell with some of his 200 wild boar.

their best efforts to injure him, Simon is hooked by 'the wonderful creatures'.

After returning from Australia it took six months to prepare for his first boar, which required applying for a dangerous wild animal licence, putting in water, a collecting barn, high voltage electric wires and 6ft high fences.

"They can jump 6ft and can be pretty brutal if they want to."

## Lifespan of 30 years

His 27 acres are now home to around 200 boar of Polish and German origin. The European wild boar has an approximate lifespan of 30 years with the males weighing up to 250kg and able to stand taller than one metre at the shoulder.

The 30 sows that breed around three times every two years, producing between four to nine

boarlets each, are managed in two sounders (family groups) each with its stud boar – Julian, 'a brute' and Sparky, 'a lover not a fighter'.

"Approximately a week before farrowing the pregnant sow will begin nest building, a process which involves her gathering sticks, grass and some straw which Simon provides, into large nests usually located in a sheltered place away from the main sounder."

The boarlets lose their distinctive stripes at four months, just as they are weaned, sexed and separated which, says Simon, is not an easy task.

While wild boars are the ancestors of the domestic pig, their skin is definitely not and each animal is covered in dark, bristly hair.

After 18 months, the boar are mature enough to go to a specialist wild animal abattoir in Dorset.

"The first time I had to get some to slaughter it took me nine days to get them out of the paddock."

## Marketing strategy

"I had to feed a trail of food out of the gate at night, with a torch and a 30ft bit of rope attached to the gate so that when the last one got through I could close the gate. From there I had to get them along the race and into the barn. It was pretty tiring," he says.

They are slaughtered at about 60kg deadweight and will hang for a minimum of 10 days before being sold off.

The marketing strategy for his meat produce has evolved over time.

"Initially, we sold off wholesale but soon realised that we couldn't make enough money like that. We now sell cuts direct to hotels, restaurants, delicatessens and

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The Real Boar Company aims for the top end market with products like wild boar chorizo with red wine, wild boar salami with red wine, wild boar and venison salami with red wine.

The salamis come in 800gm tubes (£30), 375gm tubes (£16) or 200gm vac packs (£10).

The meat is high in protein and low in cholesterol and fat and Simon says it has a rich, old fashioned taste.

"We use some of the prime cuts to make the salami to help set it apart from our competitors," he says.

The salami with red wine has made a particular impression on the competition circuit after recently scooping a Gold 'Three Star Award' at this year's Great Taste Awards.

## Finding new clients

Making sales is very labour intensive. "I spend a lot of time trying to find new clients and I am constantly phoning people up. When I see articles about new restaurants I get in touch with them."

"I have discovered that is the only way to run a small business – you have got to be able to market yourself and get your product direct to the end user."

His buyers now include 12 Michelin-starred restaurants in the UK and Europe, including the Fat Duck in Berkshire and Hotel George V in Paris. More recently, Simon has secured his product onto the shelves of the Harvey Nichols deli in London.

The boar are kept in as natural an environment as possible. They are rotated onto fresh ground throughout the year and forage for their food, which in-



The boarlets stay close to the sow, which breeds around three times every two years. They lose their stripes at four months.



One of the products – wild boar salami with red wine. The meat is high in protein and low in cholesterol and fat.



cludes acorns, fungi, cherries and other spoils which, over 18 months all helps to make up the 'Real Boar' flavour.

The land is essentially organic having been free of any pesticides, herbicides or fertiliser since 1990 and the foraging has helped open up the woodland for insects and wildlife to thrive.

Birdsong has increased markedly since he farmed the woodland and it is clear that each little detail like that adds to the charm of the product and to his enthusiasm for it.

The company is on an upward spiral – it supplies over 50 top hotels and restaurants, another 50 delis and farm shops, and the list is constantly growing. Demand is so high that Simon now has to buy in wild boar from

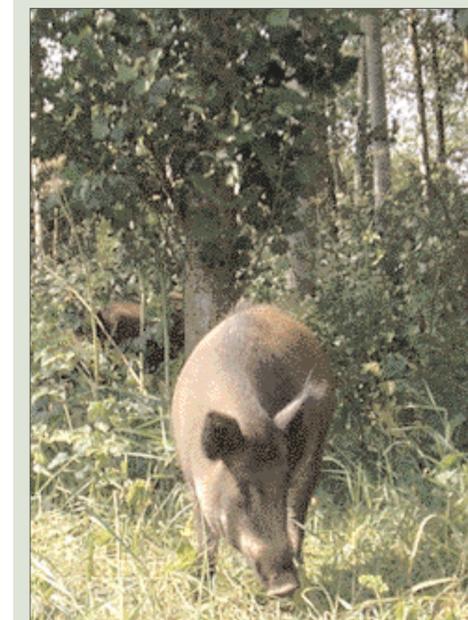
other farmers to fill his orders. Yet in his modesty, he says he hasn't quite found success. "I will tell you if we are a success in two or three years time but I feel like we are making good progress."

"The business has been rewarding physically, mentally, emotionally but not yet financially. When I can update my 18-year-old Land Rover, then I will know I have made a success," he says.

Over the next few years he is keen to expand the business and while he is near capacity for the number of boar he can fit onto 27 acres, he hopes to add other quality local foods to his mark ("maybe olive oil or ice-cream") and to further sur the British local food renaissance.

"We are as good as the French, Italians and Spanish now, which is great for the industry."

## FACTFILE: The wild boar



The wild boar roam around 27 acres of Wiltshire woodland.

■ Twenty seven acres are home to around 200 boar.

■ The 30 sows, that breed around three times every two years, are managed in two sounders (family groups) with two stud boars.

■ At 18 months the boar are slaughtered at 60kg deadweight before being hung for at least 10 days.

■ They are rotated on to fresh ground throughout the year and forage for their food; this

includes acorns, fungi, cherries and other spoils.

■ It is a red meat containing 70 per cent red fibres and 30 per cent white fibres compared to domestic pigs which are 80 per cent white fibres and 20 per cent red fibres.

■ It is an extremely hardy animal capable of growth during the hardest winter. Unlike the domestic pig, says Simon, wild boar are not prone to illness or disease.



The wild boar range is popular with hotels, restaurants, delicatessens and farm shops.



With the help of their local butcher, Simon makes chorizo and salami to add value to the business.