

The Ten Best Vegetable boxes

Chosen by **SAMUEL MUSTON**



- 1. Farmaround**
From £8, farmaround.co.uk
A rainbow of natural lovelies on offer here. Luxury boxes, standard, big, mini, Mediterranean and also a juice pack and salad bag. Top notch taste-wise.
- 2. Hello Fresh**
£39 (serves two per night), hellofresh.co.uk
More like a weekly groceries service. The pack is mainly fruit and veg but supplemented with meat, pasta and bread and the like.
- 3. Riverford**
From £10.35, riverford.co.uk
A family-run company with five farms around England delivering local veg to local folk, by a veg man/lady – not a courier – so they're happy to chat.
- 4. Damhead**
From £10, damhead.co.uk
The big family boxes on offer here are the real draw. Salad boxes, too, are good quality, though not exotic – think lettuce, tomato and the like.
- 5. Doorstep Organics**
From £5, doorsteporganics.co.uk
Instead of boxes, brown paper bags, which end up lending your kitchen a certain 1950s feel. Produce of the highest quality.
- 6. Welsh Food Boxes Company**
From £8.95, welshfoodbox-company.com
Boxes positively groan with greens and seasonal fruits and even its largest is just £20.
- 7. Organic Delivery Company**
From £9.95, organicdelivery-company.co.uk
Unlike some delivery companies, packs the food on the day of delivery, so your lettuce and tomatoes aren't left hanging around. Fruit boxes are hale and hearty.
- 8. Graig Farm**
From £13.31, graigfarm.co.uk
Graig say it's "muck and magic" that makes its boxes so good. Not sure about the magic part, but muck is certainly the only fertiliser they use.
- 9. Slipstream Organics**
From £6, slipstream-organics.co.uk
Offer a bespoke service where you can pick just the ingredients you fancy, which they will deliver at no extra charge.
- 10. Abel & Cole**
From £9, abelandcole.co.uk
14 boxes in various shapes and sizes. Both fruit- and veg-filled boxes are available – as mixed boxes, too. The gourmet selections are particularly good.

The true cost of a PINT

With dairy farms closing as they're forced to sell milk at a loss, how can we use our spending power to bring about a better deal for farmers? **Clare Hargreaves** investigates

When I meet dairy farmer James Crowden in his farmyard, he's been up since 6am helping his wife milk their 60 cows. He tells me he won't get to bed until at least 10 or 11pm as he has to clean out the milk tanks after his milk is collected by the First Milk tanker at 9pm. That's the routine every day of the year. The last time he took a couple of days off was a year ago, when he and his wife attended his daughter's graduation. Working a 100-hour-plus week is nothing new – Crowden, now 54, has been doing that since he was 16. "We don't see it as hardship. We've always done it," he says. But what is hardship is that Crowden (not his real name) is working those hours at a loss. At the start of the year he was being paid 27p per litre for his milk by the processor First Milk. In June First Milk cut 1.85p off the price, arguing that it was being squeezed by the supermarkets and a drop in world cream prices.



knows that if he packs up, his farm will be just one more statistic. Already the number of dairy farmers in the UK has dropped from 34,570 in 1996 to 14,700 today as the dairy industry moves towards industrial-scale "mega" farms with up to 8,000 cows. But it doesn't mean that for him and his family it's not heartbreaking. "I can't imagine living here without hearing the cows," he says. "I've heard their bellowing since my father bought the farm in the Sixties and I was a lad, so it would seem eerily quiet." In Gloucestershire, I visited another small-dairy farmer, Jess Vaughan, who has already taken an alternative path to that of most farmers by bottling 70 per cent of her own milk and branding it under the name of Jess's Ladies (as she calls her 80 Friesian cows). It's hard work as bottling alone takes up two full days a week – and then there's the job of distributing it to independent shops or selling it at farmers' markets. That's all on top of milking twice a day, seven days a week. But it does make her less vulnerable to sudden price cuts by milk processors. And with the milk she sells direct to the public, she gets a higher percentage of the proceeds. In the case of Vaughan, if we consumers buy milk direct from her or from an independent shop – at around 10p more than in the supermarket – that helps ensure the future of her farm and its cows. But only a tiny percentage of farmers have taken the DIY path. So how can consumers also ensure a fair price for the vast majority of farmers like Crowden who sell, via processors, to supermarkets – which is, in reality, where most of us shop? We need to move fast, though – in 13 months' time it'll be too late," Crowden

"WE CAN BARELY BREAK EVEN AT 27P A LITRE. IT'S HARD TO SEE HOW WE'LL BE ABLE TO CONTINUE"

Then in July it knocked off an additional 2p as a penalty because, as a result of the dreadful weather, Crowden's cows were producing less milk than usual. So he's currently getting just 22.1p a litre – nearly 8p less than the 30p a litre the National Farmers Union says it costs to produce. "We were barely breaking even at 27p. Anything less is a disaster," he tells me with a smile that thinly veils despair. "It's difficult to see how we can continue." It's hard to see any way out, either. Under a dairy contract, the processor can slash the price it pays Crowden when it wants, yet he can't break free of his contract for 12 months. Some processors have minimum contracts as long as 18 months. "We're looking at bottling our own milk and selling it direct to the public, although we'll have to see if we can afford the equipment," he says. "We need to move fast, though – in 13 months' time it'll be too late."



WHAT SUPERMARKETS ARE PAYING FARMERS

What supermarkets pay farmers for a litre of milk

How much they sell a litre of milk for*

M&S
32.46p
52p

Waitrose
31.05p
52p

Sainsbury's
30.56p
52p

Tesco
29.56p
52p

Co-op
27.53p
52p

Asda
26.93p
44p

SOURCE: DAIRYCO
Prices are average prices over a year

*Prices based on 4-pint bottles (=2.27 litres)

NOTE: the cost of production of a litre of milk is estimated by the NFU at 30p

WHAT CAN CONSUMERS DO?

Dave Handley, chair, Farmers for Action: Boycott any stores, such as Iceland, Farmfoods, Spar, Lonsis and Nisa, that pay dairy farmers below the cost of production. Favour supermarkets such as Sainsbury's, Waitrose, M&S and Tesco, which each have a pool of dedicated farmers supplying them. At present Sainsbury's is leading the way in developing a flexible cost-of-production model as the basis for paying its dairy farmers.

Rob Newbery, chief dairy adviser at National Farmers Union: Ask your MP to ensure that the Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill becomes law quickly to help protect suppliers and some farmers against abuses of power in the supply chain, and also to keep pressure on government to ensure that the draft voluntary code brings about fair milk contracts.

Nick Everington, chief executive of Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers: Drink more milk. It's fantastically good for young mothers and for teenage girls, for instance. Contrary to common perception it's not high in fat – even whole milk is only 4 per cent fat.

Jess Vaughan, dairy farmer: Buy as directly from the farmer as you can so that they get a fairer proportion of the proceeds. Some farmers, like me, bottle their own milk and sell it at farmers' markets or through farm shops and independent shops. If you have a small local dairy near you, support that. Consumers can vote with their shopping habits for the sort of production system they want to see. If they care about the welfare of the cows and the farmers they should shop at outlets that support these values even if means paying a

few pennies more.
theladiesorganicmilk.co.uk

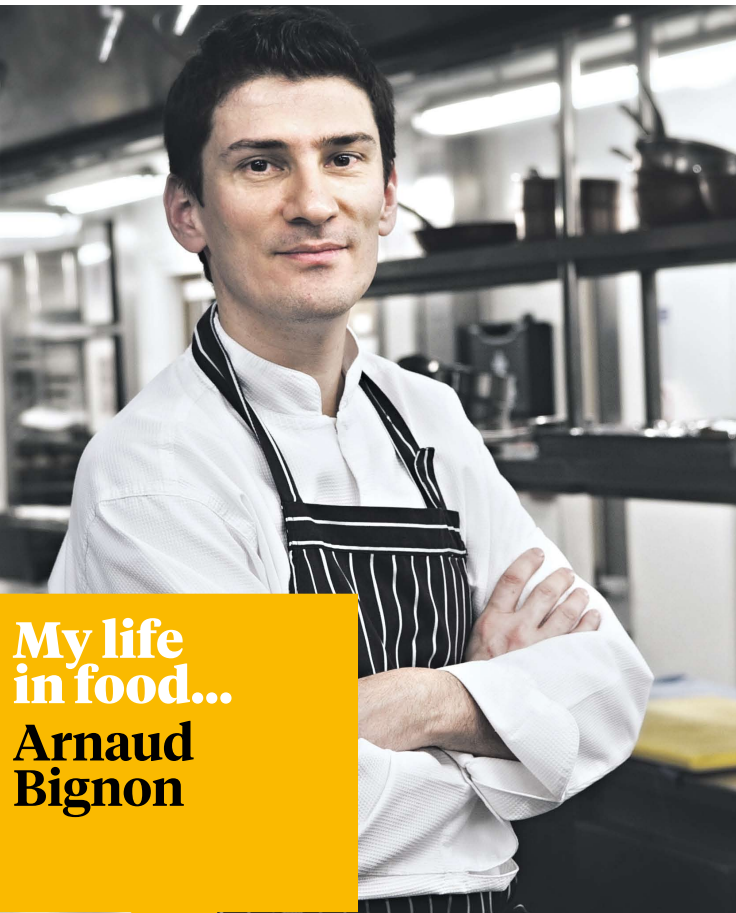
Ian Woodhurst, senior farming campaigner for Campaign to Protect Rural England: Support British dairy farmers by shopping at stores that pay them above the cost of production. Unless we do this, we will lose thousands more of the smaller farms that are an essential part of the British countryside. As they shop, consumers need to consider if they want our countryside to be populated purely by a few industrial-scale farms or also by the small farms that give it the unique character we know and treasure.

Calum McQueen, of McQueens Dairies in Scotland: Sign up for a doorstep delivery like ours that sources milk from local family-owned farms. That way you know where your milk comes from, and that the farmers, by selling almost direct to the consumer, are getting a sustainable price. Don't confuse doorstep deliveries like ours with those run by milkmen who buy from the big processors, which offers little security to farmers. Quiz your milkman before you sign up. To find a milkman go to findmeamilkman.net; mcqueensdairies.co.uk

Thomas Cowley, son of ex-dairy farmer and former dairy consultant: Use social media to express your views, put pressure on MPs, retailers and processors, and to find out what it's really like being a dairy farmer. Sign the government e-petition and 38 Degrees' petition supporting a fair deal for UK dairy farmers, and catch up on the latest news on Twitter by searching the hashtag #SOSdairy. The pressure needs to carry on – many farmers are still not being paid for their milk at a sustainable level, and shamefully low prices for more than a decade have stifled investment.



Down on the farm: dairy herds are increasingly becoming a rarer sight. Above left: own-brand milk at Tesco BLOOMBERG, GETTY IMAGES



**My life in food...
Arnaud Bignon**

'AFTER A LONG DAY TASTING, I EAT YOGHURT TO FRESHEN MY PALATE'

Although born in France, Arnaud Bignon made his name at the two-Michelin-starred Spondi in Greece, which ranked at 69th in the San Pellegrino top 100 restaurants list last year. In spring 2012, he made the move to London and is now chef/partner at The Greenhouse in London's Mayfair.

What are your most and least used pieces of kitchen kit?
I constantly have a little Japanese knife with me. I use it to test everything – the fruit, the veg. I want to make sure everything I use is fresh, and this is how I do it. It has a folding blade so I keep it in my pocket. One thing I never use is a microwave. I don't find them very interesting – I don't like what it does to the food, it is quite uncontrollable.

If you had only £10 to spend on food, where would you spend it and on what?
I would go to Pierre Hermé and would get some macarons. You can do some very interesting things with the macaron because of its structure. The black truffle macaron is wonderful.

What do you eat for comfort?
After a long day, what I like to eat is yoghurt. It is freshens the palate, which is what you need when you have spent the entire day tasting lots of food, which is often quite salty. I buy it at Waitrose.

If you could only eat bread or potatoes for the rest of your life, which would you choose?
For me, it would have to be bread. Why? Because I think you cannot have a meal without bread. In France, we eat bread with every meal. It would be too difficult to be without my crunchy baguette.

What's your desert island recipe?
A rocket salad with slices of Serrano ham and some dried figs. Then I would just put a simple dressing of balsamic vinegar, good oil and some salt. You have everything in that salad.

What's your favourite restaurant?
The Square is my favourite restaurant in London. It has a very clean cuisine, very focused and with a pleasing ambience. It's nice looking, too.

What's your favourite cookbook?
I like the books of Escoffier. We may have lots of hi-tech equipment these days, but I think it is important for everyone to learn the classics.

Who taught you to cook?
I've worked in some of the best kitchens in Europe and under some great chefs, but my mother is the person who really taught me to cook.