

Minding the gap with all things British

Clare Hargreaves has pledged to eat only food from these shores in 2021. Four months in, she faces her hardest challenge yet

April is the cruellest month, said TS Eliot, and as a food lover following the seasons I reckon he's spot on. The handsome veined plumes of cavolo nero are losing their verve as their plants begin to flower; spuds, carrots and onions stored over winter are starting to sprout; leeks are on their last legs. The keen wait for spring's first crops, from asparagus to radishes and new potatoes, begins. Welcome to the Hungry Gap.

The hungry what? As most of us now shop in supermarkets where seasons scarcely exist, the comings and goings of individual vegetables isn't something that troubles most Brits today. When I mentioned the Hungry Gap on Instagram, many were mystified. In earlier centuries if you got your husbandry wrong, or the weather was unkind, the Hungry Gap could mean starvation. It's no coincidence it overlapped with Lenten abstinence.

So why am I subjecting myself to the ravenous rigours of the Hungry Gap? I've set myself the challenge of eating only British food for 2021. When it comes to veg, that mainly means embracing the seasons. There'll be no cheery peppers or tomatoes to brighten my plate; if I want those this year, I'll have to wait until high summer.

I've written here before about the reasons for my experiment. It's spurred not by a dislike of foreign foods. I adore cinnamon and currants, as Easter's tantalising wafts of hot cross buns reminded me; we've imported spices and dried fruits for over 500 years, after all. No, it's more because the first lockdown introduced me to local food producers, and as I got to know them, I relished the connections and knowing where my food came from. I also wondered if sourcing directly from regenerative British farms I knew, rather than buying anonymous produce from anywhere, could be better for climate change and biodiversity. Maybe for flavour and nutrition, too.

It's been an interesting journey so far. When I announced it, the reaction was a mix of enthusiasm, bemusement and pity. How would I survive without coffee, tea and avocados, people asked? A friend offered to grow me ginger, while a Cotswold farmer posted me barleypup, made from his home-grown barley, as a substitute for coffee.

Have there been foods I've missed? Hell, yes. Chocolate cake as a pick-me-up, morning cuppas, breakfast toast slathered with thick-cut marmalade, to mention just three. When it comes to veg, it's aubergines, meltingly soft in a comforting moussaka.

The trick, I soon learned, was to focus on the foods I had, rather than those I didn't. Yes, I've had to devote time to planning my meals, shopping and cooking – but I've had plenty of that

in lockdown. Eating just from Britain's larder has forced me to seek and celebrate some great home-grown produce. I eat very little meat, mainly as a treat, so British vegetables have been the backbone of my meals. But almost right from the start, I discovered that sourcing these from supermarkets or corner shops was going to be tricky. Even though some veg was home-grown much came from Spain or Netherlands – if its origin was declared at all.

My findings were perhaps not surprising when you look at the stats: we grow only around half of our vegetables. According to Defra, just 118,000 hectares (out of a total 17.3 million hectares of croppable land) were used to grow vegetables in 2020. It's a minuscule area compared to those devoted to grains (many for animal feed), sugar beet and oil seeds, whose production – unlike horticulture – gets substantial government support. During a pandemic, when the nation's dietary health has never been so vital, this makes uncomfortable reading.

There are other arguments for growing more veg, too. Being so heavily dependent on imports makes us susceptible to disruptions of our fragile supply systems. When it comes to fruit and veg, the countries we import our more "exotic" produce from tend to be the most vulnerable to climate change and to water scarcity.

Food policy experts such as Professor

How would I survive without coffee, tea and avocados, people have asked me?

Erik Millstone believe this demands urgent government intervention.

"The Government boasts 'public money for public goods' in its Agricultural Bill, but extraordinarily, this is interpreted so narrowly it fails to include ensuring a safe, healthy and affordable food supply," he says. "We need to invest in horticultural training so that growing vegetables can be a secure job with decent career prospects, rather than something that's left to casual, largely imported, labour."

I realised I'd have to look hard if I wanted interesting, sustainably-grown British veg. Alongside my food writing I'm currently studying horticulture part-time, so I've had fun seeking vegetables and varieties you rarely find in the shops. A favourite has been Radicchio 'Variegata di Castelfranco' – an Italian cross between a lettuce and a chicory, with purple-splodged leaves.

I signed up to a weekly organic veg box with Riverford. Once you might



▲ Clare harvests broccoli from the greenhouse as part of her experiment to eat only British food this year

have expected to receive just what the farm produces that week, and many Community Supported Agriculture schemes do just that – so boxes are sparser, or even non-existent, in the Hungry Gap. But as Riverford grew, it found some customers tired of eating just roots and brassicas in the hungry months so it supplemented its boxes with a few imported vegetables. Happily, though, Riverford still provides a UK-only box for dihardards like me.

During the first lockdown I also discovered Natoora, an online greengrocers which started supplying domestic customers after its normal clientele, chefs, were forced to close their restaurants. You just order the veg you want via Natoora's app. An exciting development has been the launch last year of Natoora's first regenerative farm in partnership with chef-grower Dan Cox, who used to work at Simon Rogan's L'Enclume in Cumbria. The company hopes the 120-acre Cornish farm, called Mellilot after a soil-nourishing sweet clover, will be the first of many.

Getting a weekly veg delivery has forced me to be inventive. I now cook around what's in my box rather than to recipes, which has been liberating. Pocket-friendly too – I'd say most meals have cost no more than two or three quid. So I've made everything from beetroot and walnut hummus, to frittatas, and stews of vegetables. Potato mountain? Time for a creamy gratin, topped with crispy breadcrumbs, lemon thyme, and Cornish gouda.

For puddings, forced Yorkshire rhubarb has been a godsend, providing vital colour and citrusy bite to crumbles, cakes and tarts. If I can't find it locally, I order it direct from growers in Yorkshire's Rhubarb Triangle including Oldroyd's, who still harvest the traditional way, by candlelight. Apparently we're seeing a rhubarb renaissance: Janet Oldroyd says forced rhubarb sales have quadrupled this year. "People have needed treats during lockdown," she tells me. Now the Hungry Gap looms, though, I wonder if this will be crunch time, the point at which my Eating British diet becomes unviable. So far I'm still enjoying a decent range of veg, although Riverford's development chef Bob Andrew admits "it definitely helps

if you love brassicas". If I find leeks, I combine them with herbs like lovage or tarragon, already blooming in the greenhouse, to make fritters or a tasty topping for toast. But my Hungry Gap hero has to be Natoora's purple- and white-sprouting broccoli, which I serve (a tip from Dan Cox) with wild-garlic butter and Colston Bassett Stilton.

Outside in the woods, there's already a veritable glut of wild foods there for the picking. I never tire of wild garlic pesto made with Somerset-grown walnuts from Sharpham Park and Devon-

produced Venus hempseed oil, drizzled over Sharpham's spelt pasta or a jacket potato. I'm also watching for the first shoots of sweet woodruff, a brilliant substitute for vanilla. For my companion, I take *Forage*, a guide by Liz Knight.

Personally, I enjoy anticipating crops; somehow, waiting makes them more special when they finally arrive. Traditionally the British asparagus season kicks off on St George's day (April 23), but this year the race between supermarkets to be first saw spears going on sale in Waitrose as early as Feb 24. Hot

on asparagus' heels will be Jersey Royals, and radishes with playful names like French Breakfast and Ping Pong.

Then I can look forward to the summer gluts, which this year I'll be sensible enough to preserve for next winter.

As I salivate over thoughts of what's to come, I thank my lucky stars (and Britain's veg growers) that this year's Hungry Gap is not as hungry as I'd feared. At least not yet.

Follow Clare's journey on Instagram @larderloutUK

Eat shoots and leaves... plus 'it also definitely helps if you like brassicas'

To see you through the Hungry Gap, seek these out in your local supermarket, greengrocers or farmers' market; or online from Natoora, or from Riverford and other veg-box schemes



Cauliflower

Like kale and spring greens, this overwintering brassica can last through until the end of April.

Green Garlic

Also known as "wet garlic", the immature garlic bulbs and edible green stalks of garlic plants are milder and lighter than fully matured garlic cloves, with a nutty-oniony flavour. Eat it fresh or cooked, as you would spring onions, chives or leeks. Lovely roasted too – bulb, leaves and all.

Rhubarb

Buy forced Yorkshire rhubarb until mid-April; after that you can find outdoor rhubarb. It's easy to grow, too.



Spring/salad onions

We may be used to buying these all year round but at Mora Farm, which supplies Natoora, organic grower Oli Baker likes to produce them in spring, true to their name. He grows a variety called Troy, planting it in autumn to ensure his soils aren't left bare in the winter months.

Hungry gap kale

Rudely known as cow kale as it was often grown for winter cattle feed in the past, this kale has tender and lightly frilled leaves on a robust rib with a deep mineral taste and a classic bitter edge.

Kale shoots

The tiny shoots of kales just before they go to flower are utterly delicious. Chloe Blackmore, who co-runs Little Bishops Organics in Devon, sells them as a treat from her stall at Cullumpton Farmers' Market.

Spinach and Swiss Chard

Both can be grown over winter. For spinach, no-dig salad guru Charles Dowding swears by a variety called Medania, while his favourite overwintering Swiss chard is Bright Lights, with its rainbow of coloured stems.

Cardoon

A relative of globe artichokes, cardoon's long leaf ribs taste like a cross between celery and artichoke hearts. Sublime baked in a creamy gratin or fried as fritters.

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▲ Foraging for plants like wild garlic has helped Clare supplement her British-only diet

LEEKS AND BEANS ON TOAST

Serves two

INGREDIENTS

- 1 large leek
- 1 tbsp hempseed oil
- 100ml warm stock
- 1 garlic clove, finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 x 400g tin of cooked beans, drained, or around 230g home-cooked beans (you can buy British ones from Hodmedod's)
- Small bunch parsley, finely chopped
- Small bunch tarragon or lovage, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp creme fraiche
- Splash of cider vinegar
- 2 slices of bread
- Butter, for spreading



METHOD

▶ Trim the root end away from the leek. Separate the darker tops from the lighter body. Wash and slice everything but keep them in two separate piles.

▶ Warm 1 tablespoon of oil in a medium saucepan. Add the darker leek leaves and a pinch of salt. Cook over a very gentle heat, stirring often, for 8-10 minutes until starting to soften. If they look like catching at any

point, add a dash of stock as and when needed.
▶ Next, throw in the rest of the leek along with the garlic and bay. Cook gently for a further 5 minutes.
▶ Now add the beans to the pan, along with the remaining stock. Simmer gently for 6-8 minutes, until the leek is tender and the beans have warmed through and absorbed most of the stock. Remove from the heat and pluck out the bay leaf.

▶ Stir in the herbs and creme fraiche. Taste and tweak the seasoning with salt and pepper and a tiny splash of cider vinegar.
▶ Toast your bread, then spread with butter. Pop on a plate and top with the warm, beany leek mixture.

Recipe adapted from riverford.co.uk