

The Sunday Cook



Clare Hargreaves stocks up on British ingredients to fulfil her pledge for 2021, including hemp oil to make her squash risotto, below

away from the grain), grown in Lincolnshire for Hodmedod's (hodmedods.co.uk). The result is nuttier than rice risotto, but it's good. I washed it down with another Christmas gift, this one a bit more useful to my challenge – some of Will Davenport's Diamond Fields pinot noir, from grapes grown organically in Kent. Its cheery berry notes reassured me that when it comes to booze, sticking to my pledge isn't going to be too great a hardship.

I assumed Asian-style dishes might be impossible. I was wrong. Yes, limes, soy sauce and ginger are out, but I can still enjoy spring onions, seaweed, chillies and coriander – all of which flourish in this country. I've even found fresh wasabi grown in Dorset by The Wasabi Company (thewasabicompany.co.uk) and a treacly fermented fava bean umami paste made by Hodmedod's that gives any Japanese miso a run for its money. The dish I created out of some of these, combined with Chalk Stream Hampshire trout (chalkstreamfoods.co.uk), reassured me my year won't be short on flavour.

Speaking of fish... for all the talk about UK fishing rights, an irony that's rarely mentioned is that we Britons seem set on eating imported species and ignoring our own. Industrially caught tuna and warm-water prawns are imported from the Indian Ocean while seafoods that abound in our waters, like langoustine, are exported straight from the boats so are virtually impossible to buy (as anyone who's holidayed in Scotland knows). So now I'm enjoying the lottery of seeing what species land off the local day-boats on to my



My 12-month challenge has begun, and I'm already getting a taste for it

Food writer Clare Hargreaves has pledged to eat (and drink) only British produce for a year – but how easy will it be?

For most of us, 2021 will be the Year of the Vaccine, and dare we hope, the Year of the Hug, too. For me, it will also be the Year of Eating British.

As someone who has spent their professional life sampling and writing about food, and who loves a fragrant mango or the scent of star anise as much as the next person, why am I choosing to limit my palate to the contents of Britain's larder?

It's certainly not for flag-waving nationalistic reasons. But this pandemic has made me think – hard. The empty supermarket shelves at its outbreak, and the recent lorry jams at Britain's ports, starkly highlighted how wafer-thin our distribution systems are. We currently import more than a third of our food, which makes us uncomfortably vulnerable to disruptions.

The first lockdown provided time to take stock, smell the rosemary and appreciate the simple things – like making meals from scratch. My shopping and eating habits changed. Since it felt risky to visit shops, I joined a local organic veg-box scheme and foraged free foods such as wild garlic. I started ordering directly from small farms, the connections with them providing reassurance about where and how the food on my plate had been produced.

I was not alone. A recent survey by Waitrose found that three quarters of those questioned said they wanted to support British producers, and it's clear that many of them have benefited. Flour mills worked around the clock when we started baking our own bread. Alexander Hunt, who grows cobnuts and walnuts in Kent (kentishcobnuts.com), says sales tripled during the pandemic. "I don't believe there's ever been more interest in UK-grown produce," he adds. Even Aldi has announced it plans to boost its spending on home-grown food and drink by £3.5 billion a year.

I've also had time to reflect on the link between what I eat and climate change – an even more formidable challenge than Covid-19. Given the carbon

emissions caused by transportation alone, could my eating-British diet help? Can it really make sense, for instance, that between January and October 2020, we exported 70,455 tonnes of lamb and imported 49,100?

When we have fantastic produce here, it is surely madness that we're trucking, shipping or worse still flying food around the world. So I really won't miss South African grapes, and asparagus airfreighted from Peru. Perishable foods like these need refrigeration and protective packaging, which contribute still more emissions. I don't mind waiting until May to drizzle British butter over my first emerald spear of British-grown asparagus.

The other game-changer is Brexit. Who knows how it will affect our food supplies and standards? One thing most experts agree is that the added bureaucracy will make EU imports more expensive. So might our departure from the single market actually nudge others into joining my journey?

How bumpy my road will be has yet

With Italian arborio rice off the menu I looked for replacements, and to the rescue came naked oats

to be seen. How will I manage if I eat out (you never know, it could happen one day)? What will feel the greatest sacrifices? There'll be no Ghanaian chocolate to nibble through dark lockdown evenings; no bananas from the Caribbean for an easy snack; no lemons to slice into a G&T – except the solitary specimen hanging on a tree in my conservatory (how long can you make a single lemon last, I wonder?).

But could there be upsides? Will I discover new flavours and producers? Will my food be fresher and more nutritious from being transported over shorter



BUTTERNUT SQUASH RISOTTO

Serves four

INGREDIENTS

- 1kg butternut squash, peeled, deseeded and cut into 1cm slices
- 3 tbsp British-grown hemp oil or tallow (beef dripping)
- 1 bunch of fresh sage leaves, ½ roughly chopped, ½ left whole
- 1.5 litres vegetable or chicken stock (for shop-bought, try pegotyhedge.co.uk or pipersfarm.com)
- 60g unsalted British butter
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 300g Hodmedod's organic naked oats or Sharpsham Park's naked oats or Sharpsham Park's naked oats
- 125ml UK wine or cider
- 50g mature Cornish gouda or Old Winchester cheese, grated

METHOD

- ▶ Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan/gas 7.

- ▶ Toss the squash with 1 tbsp hemp oil (or tallow) and the chopped sage on a baking tray. Roast for 30 minutes until soft and starting to colour.

- ▶ Meanwhile, bring the stock to a low simmer in a pan, and in another large pan melt 25g butter over a gentle heat. Stir in the onion and cook for eight-10 minutes, until soft. Add the oats/spelt; stir until coated.

- ▶ Add the wine/cider and simmer until it has evaporated. Add the stock a little at a time, allowing each addition to be absorbed before adding the next, stirring continuously over a low heat for 35-40 minutes or until the oats/spelt are cooked.

- ▶ Fry the sage leaves in 20g of the butter until crisp. Mash half the squash to a purée and stir it into the risotto with the cheese and remaining 15g butter.

- ▶ Garnish with the remaining squash and the crisp sage leaves.

distances? Looking wider still, could supporting regenerative British farmers help our landscapes, even the planet?

TWO WEEKS IN, HOW AM I DOING?

My first challenge came as I shuffled out of bed on New Year's Day (no party hangover this year, sadly), reaching for my caffeine fix. Coffee is obviously out. I can buy British-grown tea, from Cornwall's Tregothnan estate (tregothnan.co.uk) – but at £39.50 for an 1lg caddy of its Single Estate, I won't be able to feed

that addiction for long. Breakfast of porridge from Scottish oats, drizzled with honey from a friend's bee hive in Herefordshire, was a breeze, but elevenes brought me up short as I reached for the biscuits I'd been given for Christmas and looked at the ingredients list: palm oil, rice flour, cane sugar syrup... it looks like processed foods will be out.

Lunches are easy: usually homemade vegetable soup with bread, and some of the super cheeses this country produces, from creamy Baron Bigod (crafted at Fen Farm in Suffolk using milk from its own grass-fed Montbeli-

arde cows) to blue-veined Stichelton (created on the Welbeck Estate in Nottinghamshire by Joe Schneider), or honey-golden Hafod, an unpasteurised cheddar made by the Holden family on their west Wales dairy farm.

Suppers are more challenging. One evening, I had a butternut squash from my veg box to use, so wanted to make my usual risotto. With Italian arborio rice off the menu, I looked for replacements – maybe a good move anyway given that rice is a major methane emitter. To the rescue came naked oats (so called because the hull falls naturally

fishmonger's slab – this week, dab, whiting and black bream.

Winter stews, pies and bakes should be easy, with British-grown pulses coming in handy to provide protein and bulk. If I include meat, as a treat, I'll buy it directly from high-welfare wildlife-friendly farms I know feed their livestock on grass (for me, eating British includes buying animals that have also eaten British, not imported grain). I grow some of my own vegetables and get a weekly veg box, but in the shops British vegetables can be harder to find (as a country we grow only around half of our veg). And labelling can often be non-existent or misleading – as with a bag of "British carrots", recently on sale at Tesco, which revealed its contents were "grown in Spain".

Another challenge is cooking fats. Normally, I cook with olive oil, so what will I use now? Butter, like the French? Beef dripping? Ghee?

I'm unhappy about using oil from rapeseed, as it needs constant spraying with pesticides to keep the flea beetle at bay, but I've found a promising alternative in the form of hemp oil grown without pesticides by hempwholefoods.co.uk and venushemp.co.uk. At between £7.50 and £9 for 250ml, it's not cheap, but it's a premium worth paying if I want biodiversity.

The hardest food of all to find seems to be fruit, another irony given how ideal our climate is for growing it. We produce just 18 per cent of our fruit. Many British varieties of apple, if stored properly, last until Easter, but the offerings in my local supermarket this week were French and German. On a brighter note, forced Yorkshire rhubarb, pink as sticks of seaside rock, is just hitting the shops, then it'll be frozen foraged blackberries until summer's fruits arrive. I've had to bust a gut to track down home-grown nuts; Britain now has just a few dozen growers. It seems a shame Boris Johnson's recent 10-point green recovery plan didn't include measures to boost sustainable fruit, nut and vegetable production, and bring back some of the training and research centres that got mothballed two decades or so ago.

The verdict so far? Eating British isn't difficult provided you avoid processed foods, eat seasonally and cook from scratch. Perhaps because I'm doing this, so far it hasn't proved any costlier either. Above all, I've learned to celebrate the foodstuffs I have rather than hanker after the ones I don't – but making the most of what we have around us is a skill we've all had to hone over recent months. So far, so delicious – although having said that, I might shed a quiet tear when the final drop of my single lemon has gone.

Follow Clare's Eating British journey on Instagram @larderloutUK

SAVVY SWAPS

PARMESAN
British hard cheeses such as extra-mature Cornish gouda (cornishgouda.co.uk) and Old Winchester (lyburnfarm.co.uk) do the job just as well as the Italian classic.



RICE
Substitute with Hodmedod's naked oats or Sharpsham Park's pearled spelt (sharpshampark.com).



LEMON/CITRUS
For a hit of sourness and tang, try sea buckthorn berries. You can buy the juice in health shops, forage the berries, or grow your own.



FOREIGN VINO
Explore some of the super wines produced here by makers like Davenport in Kent (davenportvineyards.co.uk), Ancre Hill in Monmouthshire (ancrehillestates.co.uk) and Dunleavy in Somerset (dunleavyvineyards.co.uk); or the artisan ciders and perries crafted by Once Upon a Tree (shop.haygroveevolution.com), Gregg's Pit (greggs-pit.co.uk) in Herefordshire, and Oliver's (oliversciderandperry.co.uk).



OLIVE OIL
Replace with British butter or ghee (happybutter.co.uk), grass-fed beef dripping (ossaorganic.com), or hemp oil (as mentioned above). For salads, try Kentish Cobnut Oil (kentishcobnuts.com).



AVOCADO
When they're in season, smash broad beans into a "guacamole". This tastes fabulous on sourdough toast with Westcombe ricotta (westcombe dairy.com).



PINE NUTS
Replace these in pesto and other dishes with British-grown walnuts (sharpshampark.com) or cobnuts, a type of hazelnut (kentishcobnuts.com).

