

Movers, bakers & shakers SUSSEX

Locally grown yuzu, new-wave ciders and caramelised goat's cheese are just some of the culinary surprises hidden in this region's rolling hills and beech woods

Words and photographs CLARE HARGREAVES

They're rebellious, inquisitive, sometimes bolshy and their pet hate is fresh air. No, not your stereotypical teenager but the 220 coffee-and-cream milking goats belonging

to Kevin and Alison Blunt of Greenacres Farm in East Sussex. Neither of the Blunts hail from a farming family – he trained as a biochemist, she as a nurse – but in the late 1980s the couple decided to apply their expertise to a different science: making an exquisite soft mould-ripened goat's cheese, which they christened **Golden Cross** after their hamlet (goldencrosscheese.co.uk).

I meet the Blunts on their six-acre farm, north of Eastbourne. Kevin is herding the goats from their straw-bedded barns out into the fields, where they make a beeline for the hawthorn hedges. "Goats are browsers not grazers so they find hedges a lot more interesting than grass," says Kevin. "They hate the wet and cold, so after a few minutes outside they're usually asking to go back in."

In the dairy, Alison and son Matthew ladle raw goat's milk curds into log-shaped moulds, following a recipe bequeathed to them by a French cheesemaker. Once salted and dried, the cheese logs are dusted with charcoal, which creates a pleasing border between the pure white cheese inside and the velvety penicillium mould enveloping it.

Golden Cross is not just making awards judges and cheese-lovers happy but also local chefs. One of them, Matt Gillan, has just set up shop in nearby Slaugham (pronounced Slaffam) following a successful crowdfunding campaign. Previously head chef at The Pass at South Lodge hotel, near Horsham, where he won a Michelin star, Gillan's latest venture is **Heritage**, a gastro-pub-with-rooms hidden among the thick beech woods of the High Weald, West Sussex (heritage.restaurant).

Matt is best known for goat's meat rather than cheese, having featured the meat in »

LEFT: SUNSET OVER DITCHLING BEACON ON THE SOUTH DOWNS

his winning dish on *Great British Menu* in 2015. But he's smitten by Kevin and Alison's goat's cheese, which for one of his starters he whips up into a mousse and partners with discs of raw, earthy beetroot, a dollop of beetroot sorbet and ruby pearls of raspberry vinegar.

"It's hard to find a goat's cheese that isn't either young and citrussy, or pungent and farmyardy, but Golden Cross is bang in the middle," says Matt. "It's fresh, but not too fresh, and it's robust enough to stand up to other ingredients. It's one of the few British goat's cheeses I really like."

Matt also uses the cheese in a 'cheeseboard' dish that substitutes the usual mixed platter for a serving of Golden Cross that's sprinkled with demerara then grilled to make a sort of fromage brûlée, and paired with cubes of pickled Bramley apple and fuschia-edged coins of radish.

Matt hit lucky with vegetables, too. South of Slaugham, in a dip in the South Downs near the market town of Lewes, Robin Williams and his Japanese wife, Ikuko Suzuki, are growing mainly Japanese vegetables and herbs according to the principles of what they call "natural agriculture" – which broadly means using careful inter-planting to pull in native predators and parasites instead of deploying artificial fertilisers or pesticides. "We grow the majority of our crops outside for nutrition and flavour," says Robin. "Although our slow-growth methods mean a shorter growing season, they also concentrate their taste." Chefs at restaurants ranging from Heritage to London's The Ledbury, Koya and Lyle's are all regular customers of **NamaYasai**, which translates as 'raw' and 'vegetable' (namayasai.co.uk).

I ask Robin if I can watch his crops being harvested. "Sure, just get here at one," he says. I'm a little surprised that harvesting starts so late in the day but he means 1am (ensuring customers receive produce that is only two to 12 hours from being picked). So I twist through ink-black country lanes, then bump up a track into the woods to find his young balaclava-clad team harvesting NamaYasai's fields by headtorch. It's eerily quiet as each gets on with the job in hand – wrestling pink or white daikons (Asian radishes) from their beds of soft Sussex earth, or plucking armfuls of zig-zag-leaved shiso. Inside coriander-fragrant greenhouses,



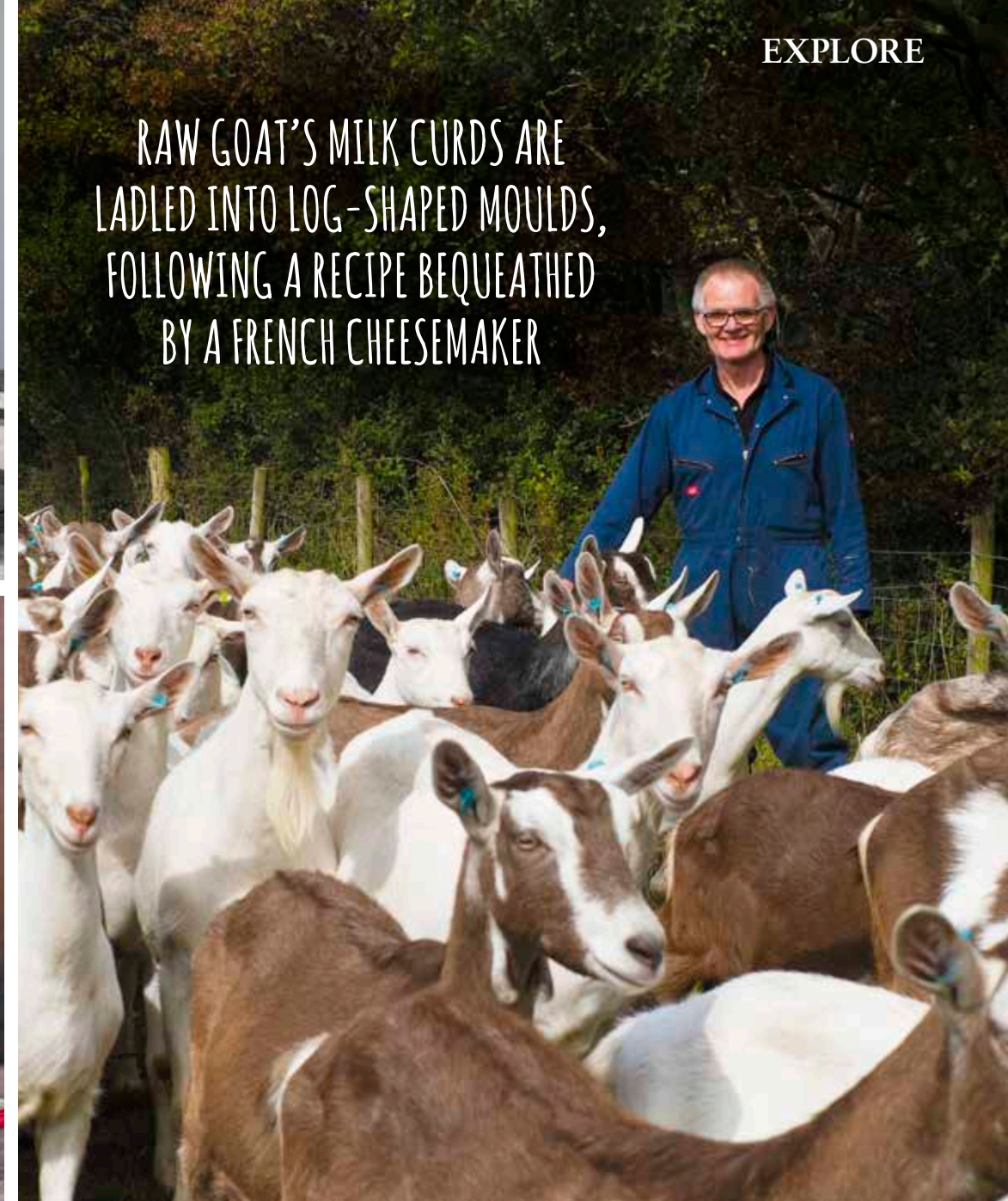
I spy Japanese aubergines, delicate ruby chard seedlings, and spiky bitter melons that look like reptiles. As a blood-orange sun peeks over the distant chalky rump of the South Downs, the picking ends and the task of loading the vegetables onto vans begins. The produce hits restaurants a few hours later, ensuring it's as squeakily fresh as possible.

Since 2016 NamaYasai has also been producing the Japanese citrus fruit yuzu, another of Matt's favourites – you'll find a yuzu syrup giving an exotic citrussy kick to a caramel parfait and bay leaf ice cream on his tasting menus.

There's fruit of a more conventional kind at Old Mill Farm, near Bolney, where Glyn Stephens has been growing apples for nearly 40 years. In the 1990s British apple growers were struggling to compete with the cheap foreign imports flooding supermarket shelves, so the Stephens needed to diversify. Glyn's son Tom, then at university, decided juicing was the way ahead. "It was sell up or juice, so I decided to give it a go," says Tom, as he shows me his orchards of Discoveries, views of the South Downs' Devil's Dyke in the distance. Under the name of **Wobblegate**, he now supplies cafés, restaurants and bars »



ABOVE, FROM TOP: A VAN IS LOADED WITH CRATES OF NAMAYASAI'S JAPANESE VEGGIES; FUCHSIA DAIKONS; GASTRO-PUB-WITH-ROOMS HERITAGE IN SLAUGHAM. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ALISON BLUNT MAKING GOLDEN CROSS GOAT'S CHEESE; KEVIN BLUNT AND HIS INQUISITIVE GOATS; HARVESTING AT FIRST LIGHT AT NAMAYASAI; WOBBLGATE'S CRUSHED APPLE JUICE



RAW GOAT'S MILK CURDS ARE LADLED INTO LOG-SHAPED MOULDS, FOLLOWING A RECIPE BEQUEATHED BY A FRENCH CHEESEMAKER

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across the UK (wobblegate.co.uk). Matt, who's known Tom since his South Lodge days, is an enthusiastic customer, serving Wobblegate juice in Heritage's bar, pairing it with pumpkin-spiced Aluna coconut rum in a cocktail; and using it in desserts such as apple terrine, a refined version of tarte tatin that comes with a grass-green Wobblegate sorbet.

Not content with producing simple fruit juice, Tom is now branching into ciders, which he serves along with other local artisan fermentations in his farm-based taproom. His sparkling Rebel Root Obsession, modelled on the dry, high-acidity ciders of the US, and his 2017-vintage still Rebel Root Outsider, made just from Bramleys ("something we were told couldn't be done"), are both winners. He's also joining forces with local vineyards to produce a wine-cider fusion that he hopes will take his cider to another level.

For now, though, it's just Tom's sparkling Eden cider that's on the pump at Heritage's bar. It's in good company, served alongside



NOT CONTENT WITH PRODUCING SIMPLE FRUIT JUICE, TOM IS NOW BRANCHING INTO CIDERS, WHICH HE SERVES IN HIS TAPROOM

aptly-named Heritage ale made by Horsham's Firebird microbrewery to a recipe from co-owner Bill King's great-great-granddad (firebirdbrewing.com), and sparkling wine produced by the Goring family from champagne grapes on their tiny Wiston vineyard down near Washington (wistonestate.com).

I try the latter in Heritage's Forest Fizz cocktail, blended with a homemade roasted chestnut and cherry shrub, and Æcorn Aperitif's non-alcoholic acorn-based aperitif (aecomnaperitifs.com). Earthy and subtly sweet, with hints of winter spices, it's the perfect preamble to my lunch of venison loin – pink, soft as butter, and paired with a pastilla parcel filled with the haunch. The meat comes with an array of bitter-sweet accompaniments: frondy enoki mushroom, slightly otherworldly and pleasingly crunchy; blobs of divine chicory caramel; and translucent tangles of pickled caramel. It's all held together by a dainty dribble of lemony sour-cherry sauce that's flecked with cocoa nibs – intriguing, but it works.

The venison (fallow and roe), culled from large estates and parks along the

South Downs by Jack Smallman (southdownsvenison.co.uk), has a subtle flavour that's revealed rather than disguised by Matt's unusual additions. But Heritage's must-try dish, The Herder, is, unsurprisingly, based around goat meat – meat from billy kids born to dairy goats that would otherwise be slaughtered and wasted – from stuffed loin to salt-baked leg, barbecued shoulder and herder pie. The dish even includes goat-fat dumplings. Matt's mother was from St Helena and regularly cooked goat at home, so the dish proudly celebrates his personal heritage.

HOW TO DO IT

Doubles at Heritage start from £255, including dinner and breakfast (heritage.restaurant). For more information see experiencewestsussex.com. Follow Clare on Instagram @larderloutuk.

FROM TOP: WOBBLEGATE'S TOM STEPHENS HARVESTING DISCOVERY APPLES; BUTTER-SOFT SOUTH DOWNS VENISON PLATED WITH RESPECT AT HERITAGE; A FOREST FIZZ COCKTAIL USING LOCAL WISTON VINEYARD FIZZ

