

With food prices rising, I hope that other UK shoppers will come to love eating offal as much as I do

FIRST PERSON

I surprised my friend with heart casserole for dinner the other night. It was delicious – and luckily, he quite liked it



Clare Hargreaves loves offal, but because it's not widely popular in the UK, much of it is used in pet food (Photo: Getty)



By Clare Hargreaves

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When **prices are spiralling**, but a belt-tightening diet of eggs, vegetables and pulses doesn't quite satisfy, what do you do? Take heart. Some may scoff at the thought of eating bizarre-looking animal body parts that over the past decade have become so unfashionable they've virtually disappeared from sale, but for me, offal is a godsend and a revelation. It's wallet-friendly, tasty and nutritious. And some would argue that if we eat meat at all, we owe it to an animal to enjoy not just its muscly prime cuts but its humbler bits, too.

rears his animals well. They're super fresh – which is vital with offal – and cost a quid each. On a good day, I'll pick up three. Sheep only have one each, as the farmer delights in reminding me when I ask for more.

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Unsurprisingly perhaps, finding recipes proves challenging. Search recipe websites such as [bbcgoodfood.com](#) and the only hearts you'll find are artichoke ones or heart-shaped biscuits for Valentine's. Happily, **Fergus Henderson's** nose-to-tail cookbooks came to the rescue, suggesting stuffing lambs' hearts with breadcrumbs, onions, garlic and fresh sage. Braise, then serve with vegetables and mash or dumplings.

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All credit to my friend who last week unwittingly arrived to find it was heart casserole for supper. He ate it and declared it “not bad, a bit like liver”. We're still friends, phew. Others might have been less amenable and asked if sheep's eyeballs were next. Many of us are now so far removed from the fields and animals from which offal comes that eating it is unthinkable. That's if, you can find any. Several butchers have told me that demand is so low they've given up selling it, so it goes into pet food instead. Lucky pets.

“There is a set of delights, textural and flavoursome, which lie beyond the fillet,” says Henderson in his book, *The Complete Nose to Tail: A Kind of British Cooking*. I agree. For me, the texture of heart is as butter-soft lovely as that of the tenderest fillet, yet about a tenth of the price.

Offal is also hugely nutritious, packed with proteins and minerals such as selenium, iron and zinc. In January its virtues prompted a group of health professionals calling themselves the Public Health Collaboration to launch **Organuary**, suggesting consumers eat organ meats at least twice a week. It says: “Organ meats are some of the most nutrient-dense foods on the planet.”

Another of my favourite offal cuts is kidney, both economical (50p each) and quick to cook. I buy it at the same market where I get my heart, but bizarrely, another customer is an aficionado, too, so we race to reach the stall first. I even set my alarm.

Apparently we're not alone. Waitrose reports that over the past year sales of sheep and ox kidney have risen by 12.6 and 21.7 per cent respectively. "Our customers are becoming more adventurous when it comes to trying out new, lesser known and cheaper cuts and we've seen sales of lamb kidney and ox kidney go up in particular," says meat buyer Oliver Chadwyck-Healey.



Pigeon offal served in style at restaurant No6 in Padstow, Cornwall

To cook kidneys, I pan-fry them on a hot flame leaving the centres still pink, then douse with a sauce of mustard, cream and a dash of sherry. It makes a smashing centrepiece on a plate of greens and spuds, while kidneys devilled with Worcestershire sauce and a smidge of cayenne pepper spice up weekend breakfasts.

I also love liver. The one chefs go crazy for is calves', but it's hard to find British and sustainably reared, so I normally plump for liver of lamb, organic chicken, or wild venison (buy online via farmwilder.co.uk). Like kidney, liver needs little more than a fleeting kiss with a hot pan, and is divine with crispy butter-fried sage. Forget the slow-cooked leather you ate at school, which almost put many of us off liver (and offal) for life.

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If you can afford the treat of a meal out, I recommend trying offal dishes. London's [Fallow](#), which uses animals and animal parts that would otherwise go to waste, serves a devilled lamb's tongue with gherkin ketchup. And at [No6 in Padstow](#), Paul Ainsworth offers a dish called All of the Pigeon in which the roasted bird is accompanied with a parfait from the livers, and a pain au chocolat whose "chocolat" interior is a blend of heart, liver and gizzard. After those gastronomic fireworks, eating offal seems a no-brainer.

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