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GRUB'S UP

with Bridport Community Cooking Kit



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BRIDPORT COMMUNITY COOKING KIT

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Photography Katharine Davies

We are standing at the highest point of the ridge at Washingpool Farm and looking out towards the town and the sea in the distance. It's a bucolic view. The red Devon cattle are happily grazing and beyond sit neat rows of plump salad and courgettes. Life is in abundance.

'Food touches on everyone's life,' says Ines Cavill, who manages Bridport Community Cooking Kit, founded in 2017 as part of the town's Local Food Group. The reality for many local farmers however is that youngsters are drifting away from careers in agriculture. This creates a real challenge for family-run farms like Washingpool and for some threatens their very existence. >





That's why another local enterprise, Discover Farming- the education programme established and managed by the Melplash Agricultural Society - has set up a permanent classroom here at Washingpool Farm, home for three generations of the Holland family. Run by former primary school teacher Katie Vining, Discover Farming's aim is to inspire the next generation of agriculturalists, in the hope that they will remain in the area and make a rewarding, positive contribution to the local economy and environment.

Today, Symondsburry Primary School's Gardening Club has arrived. While they're busy donning sun cream and caps, Katie has handed out the recipe of the day. They're to make a vegetable pasta using the kitchen kit which has been set up as an outdoor cooking station in the classroom's garden. But first the children need to pick the ingredients, so off they head to the field of courgettes and Washingpool's inviting edible garden.

There are gasps of delight when the children discover that the courgettes come with an enormous, yellow flower and the boys head into the sweet peas to pick flowers for the table. One member of the gardening club announces that she 'doesn't like courgettes, only cucumbers', Katie suggests that she might like *these* courgettes and they head off into the polytunnels which are packed full of juicy tomatoes.

Meanwhile, Ines and I talk about the idea behind the Community Cooking Kit. She explains that the kit is totally mobile, with anything you might need to cook with up to 30 people. There is a big gas hob, saucepans, a tea urn, chopping boards, mixing bowls and cutlery. 'It was important that it was both child-friendly and professional,' says Ines. 'We were offered a sustainable development grant from Dorset AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and a shareable, flexible kitchen for the town seemed full of potential uses.' The kit features in the children's marquee at the Bridport Food Festival and will appear again at the Melplash Show. It is available for other events and would frankly be ideal for any local young chef who fancies trying their hand running a pop-up. But its main purpose is to encourage cooking as a core life skill. It gives people of all ages the opportunity to cook and enjoy good food.

Back at today's pop-up kitchen at the classroom, things are in full swing. The Gardening Club have found the chopping boards and knives, and under the guidance of Katie and Ines vegetables are sliced and diced ready for the pot. Total silence has swept the class as the children are absorbed in the task in hand. The few boys who were a little unsure about aprons are now focused on the knife skills. Learning to slice an onion with speed and dexterity might just be the bud of a career in the food services >





industry but for now the focus is on doing it safely.

Before long the veg is ready for the pot and Katie has two big vats of water bubbling on the gas. A breeze has got up and the gas flames flicker. Warnings are issued by Katie: that although you can't see the flame, it's there and it's hot! But the children aren't deterred from the cooking, this is experiential and everyone gets a turn at stirring. Meanwhile another group of children are setting the trestle tables. The sweetpeas are plonked in jam jars and the cutlery is laid out. It's going to be a feast.

Jo Sage, Chairperson of Melplash Agricultural Society has popped by. As a local farmer's daughter she is keen to encourage the next generation to understand the role of farming and agriculture in the local economy. The classroom at Washingpool is just one of the ways they hope to engage their audience. It offers the ideal venue where they can invite local primary and secondary schools to learn more (visits to the Discover Farming Classroom throughout 2019 are free and there's even a subsidised bus service for schools within a 12 mile radius of Melplash village church). At this year's Melplash Show Discover Farming will be offering children and teenagers the opportunity to experience a variety of farm-to-food techniques as well as drive a tractor and

help calve a cow (not a real one). For anyone serious about furthering their education in agriculture or horticulture there are even college bursaries available.

Meanwhile the veggie pasta is ready to be served and it smells delicious. Hands are washed at the trough and an orderly queue is formed for serving before the children sit down and tuck in. The adults hover, secretly hoping they might be offered a bowl but this is all about the children, who are clearly enjoying their endeavours. 'It's really, really good,' says one. 'So hot,' says another, eyes agog; that'll be the chilli. Soon another queue is forming for seconds (bad luck adults) and even the non-courgette eaters are reformed. Of course, few of us have time to grow, tend, reap and cook our food everyday but with the help of the Bridport Community Cooking Kit and our local food producers we can at least dip in and who knows? Maybe inspire a whole new generation of chefs and farmers in the process. ●

Bridport Community Cooking Kit is contactable via bridportfoodfestival.co.uk

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