



# A Farm-to-fork Story

The Stag Inn at Rackenford is the local in all senses of the word, as **Rachel Curran** found out

Kate Palmer and Robert James at West Yeo Farm

Chef Matthew Robinson and Sophie Bulley who run the Stag Inn



PHOTO: KATE BAILEY

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**A**s I pulled into the yard at West Yeo Farm, I was greeted by a friendly little collie whose breath puffed cold into the bright winter air. Minutes later we were both trotting alongside Kate Palmer and her partner, Robert James, as they strode towards the turnip field, where their herd of Red Ruby Devon cattle munched the leafy stalks.

### The farm

It was not long before she turned 50 that Kate bought West Yeo Farm, having lived on smallholdings all of her life. After a career in education, she decided to make a real go of the 75-acre organic holding in Witheridge, raising coloured sheep for wool to make throws, jumpers and other textiles, and selling her beef direct.

"My initial driving force was to produce high-quality food with conservation at the

### *This is a story of determination, hard graft and a passion for two of Devon greatest assets – food and farming*

heart of it, to show that it can be done," said Kate. And thanks to the traditional farming methods she uses to grow crops organically to feed the livestock, the farm is buzzing with wildlife year-round.

A few years later Kate got together with Robert, also a farmer, and so too did their herds! They now breed dark, strong, old-fashioned pedigree cattle, and with Robert's father having bred Red Rubies for 60 years, they have a range of traditional bloodlines that stretch back to the 1920s.

In the summer, the cows graze the culm grassland on the farm in the traditional manner, giving them all the natural supplements and minerals they need to suckle their calves. The turnips around our feet help get them happily through the winter, as well as other veggies and barley grown and milled on the farm. All of this tender loving care produces the rich, marbled meat for which the breed is so valued.

But the ethics and drive of this family extends much further than the farm gate. It

is also a story of what determination, hard graft and an unfaltering passion for two of Devon's greatest assets, food and farming, can achieve.

### The pub

It was when Kate's daughter, Sophie Bulley, was visiting from London and saw that the pub in nearby Rackenford was for sale, that the 'farm-to-pub-fork' concept was born.

At the time, Sophie was running a vintage clothing business in Kensington and her partner, Matthew Robinson, was working as a chef in the city.

"Matt would be up at 6am and not home until midnight or even later," said Sophie. "For his two days off a week he would be a total zombie as he tried to recover from the week, so we had no life together really."

Yet for all the difficulties they left behind in London, they were entering into quite a risk in buying The Stag. "We had to take out

a commercial mortgage and borrow even more to renovate the pub, so it was all a bit of a gamble. What we certainly are not is some glitzy couple from London who have swanned in for an easy life in the country!"

And it has been anything but easy for the couple. From renovating and redecorating the building to managing the day-to-day running of the pub, it has been non-stop since they moved in during December 2007. They have kept every element of their involvement with the pub local, using nearby carpenters, plumbers and electricians for the work.

### The chef

But it is not just the sourcing of labour and the ingredients for the pub food that makes the Stag Inn special; the chef is of rather fine provenance himself.

Matt spent a number of years working under Marco Pierre White at his Criterion Restaurant in London, and Gordon Ramsay and Stuart Gillies at their Boxwood Café in Knightsbridge.



PHOTO: KATE BAILEY

### WIN...WIN...WIN...

In association with West Yeo Farm and the Stag Inn, *Devon Life* is offering readers the chance to win a first prize of dinner for two at the pub, and a second prize of a gorgeous organic wool throw courtesy of Kate's lovely sheep.

To enter this competition send a postcard to Devon Life/Stag Inn Competition, Archant House, Babbage Road, Totnes TQ9 5JA, or enter online at [www.devonlife.co.uk/competitions](http://www.devonlife.co.uk/competitions). The first two names drawn on the closing date, 21 January 2009, will be deemed the winners.



PHOTO: KATE BAILEY

## Food & Drink

“With Gordon there is no grey area,” said Matt. “He gives 100% all the time and expects that of his staff. Whether it is sourcing fantastic ingredients, how the napkins are folded, or how white truffles are stored, he instils his energy and drive for perfection into everyone he works with, and that is exactly how I operate here at the pub.”

Thanks to the on-site butchery at West Yeo Farm, Matt has the kind of control over the preparation of the meat that most chefs dream of. Meat is hung, cut and packaged there by Robert, who tailors the cuts to exactly how Matt wants them.

“We are not hobby farmers so we have to make what we do pay,” pointed out Kate. “We only sell what we produce and this way we handle it from start to finish and we know it’s done right.”

Making the most of the facilities, Robert now cuts meat for other farmers as well, bringing the processing of meat back into the community. The popularity of their beef

has since led Kate and Robert to introduce organic table birds and a herd of Oxford, Sandy and Black pigs, which are known for producing succulent pork. This enviable source of meat, alongside all the local vegetables and fish he sources, means that Matt’s menus are filled with beautiful, fresh and seasonal dishes.

“You just can’t compete with Devon’s regional cheeses, fish from Brixham and meat,” he says. “Coming from Australia, I just see these lush, green fields. It’s such an amazing place to raise animals and it shows in the meat produced. I feel lucky as a chef being able to work with it all.”

Despite having such a worldly approach to the food they serve, Sophie and Matt have not lost sight of what the Stag Inn is really about.

“We are very much a village pub and remain fully in touch with that. As much as we have a great menu for people dining out, we take as much care and pride in the bar snacks we serve, and the locals recognise

this,” said Sophie. With dishes such as salt-and-pepper Brixham cuttlefish, beer-battered pollock with crushed peas and hand-cut chips, or roast loin of venison with savoy cabbage, celeriac purée and a sour cherry sauce, all at affordable prices, the pub is already proving to be very popular.

“I’m just so proud when I put down a plate with a beautiful piece of meat that Mum and Robert have produced and Matt has cooked, and then to watch people enjoying the whole experience we’ve created here; it’s an amazing feeling.”

What with its marvellous food produced by this remarkable team, its warm welcome and cosy, fresh interior, it looks like the Stag Inn has a very bright future indeed. □

**The Stag Inn, Rackenford, EX16 8DT,  
☎01884 881369. Open 12 noon-3pm  
daily, and Mon-Sat 6.30pm-11pm,  
[www.thestaginn.com](http://www.thestaginn.com).**

**West Yeo Farm, Witheridge, near  
Tiverton, ☎01884 861269**

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*This warming winter dish highlights the beautiful Red Ruby beef we have in Devon, and shows a new way of preparing it, in a recipe devised especially for Devon Life readers*

**POACHED FILLET OF BEEF WITH  
BRAISED VEGETABLES AND THYME  
DUMPLINGS**

**Serves 4**

**Ingredients**

4 fillet or rump steaks of organic beef

**For the consommé:**

1 garlic clove

½ tsp each of mustard seeds, black peppercorns, celery salt, fennel seeds and coriander seeds

2 star anise

2 cloves

½ bunch of fresh curly parsley and fresh thyme (retain stalks)

1 turnip

1 carrot and a selection of any favourite winter veg (kale, parsnips, etc)

5 egg whites

1 chicken breast (skinned and boned)

750ml chicken stock

750ml beef stock

**For the dumplings:**

50g suet

100g self-raising flour

4 tbsp milk

20g fresh thyme leaves

1 egg yolk

Salt and pepper to taste

**To make the dumplings:**

**1** Mix the flour, suet, thyme and egg yolk and season. Add a small amount of milk and incorporate to a dough that has a texture like firm playdough.

**2** Roll into 20 balls and set aside in the fridge for poaching later.

**To make the consommé:**

**1** Roughly chop the carrot and turnip and dice the chicken breast. Place in a food processor with the egg whites and all of the spices. Add 4 roughly chopped parsley stalks and five roughly chopped thyme stalks and the garlic.

**2** Blend to a purée (about 2 mins) until smooth, a bit like rice pudding.

**3** Place the stock in a high-sided, small-based saucepan. Add purée and whisk into the stock. Place on a medium heat and continually stir until the liquid just starts to steam.

**4** Simmer a very low heat. A raft of egg white will start forming after around 5 mins, creating a clarified liquid below. Once the raft is completely solid, pour the stock through a sieve into a fresh pan.

**5** For a super-fine, clear liquid, drain through a coffee filter instead of a sieve.

**To cook the beef and veg:**

**1** Season the beef and then heat 1tbsp of vegetable oil in a frying pan. When hot, place the beef in the pan to seal it (this adds maximum flavour), and brown all over. Keep it at a high temperature, and don't be afraid to see smoke! Too much meat in the pan and it will stew not seal.

**2** Cut all veg to roughly the same size so they cook more evenly. Add a little oil to a hot pan and cook until brown. Add a knob of butter, a couple of sprigs of thyme and one smashed garlic clove. Add a ladle of consommé and braise gently until tender.

**3** Bring consommé to boil with thyme, star anise and cloves. Remove from the heat and place the beef in the pan, along with the dumplings. Do not let it simmer or boil or the beef will become tough. Cook for 6-8 mins for rare, 8-10 mins for medium-rare and 25 mins for well-done. The dumplings should cook for about 20 mins in the consommé.

**4** Let the beef rest in a warm place for the same length of time as it was cooked to allow the juices to disperse evenly.

**5** To serve: assemble the vegetables on a plate with the beef on top, and pour over a ladle of consommé to moisten.

PHOTOS: RACHEL CURRAN