

carroll's heritage potatoes

Tucked away in an idyllic corner of rural Northumberland, Tiptoe Farm is home to Carroll's Heritage Potatoes, brainchild of successful husband and wife team Lucy and Anthony Carroll, who pride themselves on growing "potatoes like they used to taste".

Although potatoes have always been an important crop on the family farm, the couple had become increasingly disillusioned with growing single varieties for huge co-operatives – in particular they struggled with the fact that they cared and nurtured the crop but then had absolutely no contact with the end consumer let alone knowing who they were. Then fired up by attending a conference on potato varieties, Anthony had his lightbulb moment. Lucy's eyes light up with enthusiasm as she talks about how Anthony became inspired by the possibility of taking some of the old heritage varieties such as the Pink Fir Apple and Red Duke of Yorks that they grew in their own garden and offering them for sale. Furthermore, they wanted a project which focused on the whole picture of how the crops were grown and on giving people potatoes how they wanted them.

Full of enthusiasm for their new project, on the advice of friends the couple took some of their heritage varieties down to Café 21 in Newcastle to get the opinion of top North East chef Terry Laybourne. He was very impressed by the idea of the heritage varieties. "His enthusiasm increased even more when he cooked with the potatoes" says Lucy. This was followed by a spot of market research at Berwick Farmers Market with Lucy and Anthony weighing potatoes on an old fashioned pair of weighing scales and bagging the potatoes by hand; again the public confirmed they were onto something and the seed of Carroll's Heritage Potatoes was born.

The company started off on a small scale growing just two varieties, Pink Fir Apples and Dunbar Rovers, over a few acres. Since 2003, the range has expanded to 22 varieties farmed over 65 acres. However, the Carroll's have never forgotten the importance of talking to their customers and indeed as Lucy says, "we have become something of a helpline on potato cooking for chefs and the public alike." While managing, growing and packing twenty plus varieties has been more time consuming, the venture has been infinitely more rewarding for both the Carroll's and their customers.

The heritage varieties offer a much richer variety of tastes, textures and colours – red, white, blue even purple potatoes are on offer. These traditional varieties have an intensity of flavour and extremes of texture which account for their fantastic cooking properties. For instance, Arran Victory are very floury and make fantastic roasting potatoes compared to the waxy, knobbly, nutty flavoured Pink Fir Apples which are delicious simply boiled and tossed in butter.

It becomes clear that the Carroll's are both still deeply committed to how their potatoes are grown and indeed how the whole of the farm is managed. Tiptoe Farm belongs to the Leaf Marque scheme whose farmers all care for their environment. Tiptoe is peppered with hedgerows, ponds and wildflowers to encourage local wildlife and is working with the RSPB on ways to maintain and diversify the local bird population. One of the highlights this year was when Tiptoe became a LEAF demonstration farm – a grand opening saw Terry Laybourne doing cookery demonstrations for sixty visitors with more events planned for the future.

Indeed visits to see how the crops are grown are positively encouraged with a network of public access paths, crossings and information signs stretching across the farm.

Carroll's Heritage Potatoes are now available in delis and farm shops throughout the North East as well as being served in many of the country's best restaurants – the Hairy Bikers and the Roux Chefs are all fans. However like any small business, it's not been all plain sailing. This year the farm was badly affected by the September flooding and Lucy and Anthony have had the heartbreaking scenario of watching some of their carefully tended crops rot in the ground. Indeed due to the bad weather, harvesting is still continuing until the evening light fades before the weary team even start to bag up the next day's orders. With the understatement typical of many small farmers who remain philosophical in the face of adversity, Lucy says "it's been quite hard" still with a smile on her face.

We end our visit by asking which potatoes Lucy recommends for Autumn cooking. After a struggle – she genuinely loves all the varieties they grow and doesn't want to pick a favourite, so she plumps for the Red Duke of Yorks. "They are fantastically versatile and maintain their red skins throughout roasting and baking." This potato has just been short listed for the final of the Quality Food Awards so hopefully this will soon turn into another success story for this hardworking North East farm. ■

Carroll's Heritage Potatoes
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