



Getting ready to make up garlic plaits at Mersley Farm – better known as the Isle of Wight Garlic Farm. On sale are varieties from around the world, such as Purple Moldovan



## Sweet smell of success

Fragrant, pungent, spicy – garlic adds zest to any dish. The Garlic Farm on the Isle of Wight showcases the versatility of this most potent of plants

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Right Colin Boswell among Elephant garlic flowers. This variety can grow up to 15cm across and weigh half a kilo. Colin first displayed his entrepreneurial spirit in the 1960s, selling roasted corn at pop festivals, and became famous as the man who sold a cob to Bob Dylan. Below left Trimming pearly bulbs. The farm produces most of the UK's home-grown crop



*'Over the last three decades Colin and his wife have conspired to rehabilitate garlic'*

to reproduce and swell. Split into 'hardnecks' which generally enjoy a cold winter, and 'softnecks', many of which are planted in spring, the bulb usually takes nine months to reach maturity, though some varieties grow faster. Rich, neutral, well-draining soil is ideal; his current crop of Elephant garlic - with freakishly large bulbs and technically more leek than garlic - is beginning to 'go to sleep' in the phase before harvest. Colin sets about 'recreating a Mediterranean climate' with vast glasshouses where the bulbs dry before being plaited and put into cold storage - with any luck, they'll last until early next summer. His farm produces some 200 tonnes of garlic a year from 20 hectares (50 acres) and employs around 50 full-time staff. 'I'm learning all the time,' he says. 'Next year the fields will be even more productive.'

Half of Colin's business is selling direct to the public through his shop and markets; farm shops around the country snap up his chutneys, which you'll also find in the food halls of Harrods and Fortnum & Mason. His children are regulars at farmers' markets in the south of England. 'I never knew why I had five children until I started going to markets.' It's very much a family business; Jenny oversees the shop, acclaimed café and the farm's self-catering cottages. Most of the chutneys were first created in her farmhouse kitchen; they're now produced in a kitchen >

**C**OLIN BOSWELL IS EXCITED. Britain's leading garlic baron has sniffed out that a warm, spicy garlic - Red Nubian, named after the vivid crimson casing of the cloves - is growing in Sicily, and he's planning to travel south in search of it. 'It's one of the prized early garlics, thought to have been brought across from North Africa.' Of course he's already familiar with most types of garlic - he's grown 40-odd varieties on his Isle of Wight fields, some of the sunniest in Britain.

The Garlic Farm, as Mersley Farm has become more commonly known, has been producing most of the UK's home-grown crop since 1975 and there's not much Colin doesn't know about it. From the punchy Purple Moldovan to the fragrant Solent Wight, Colin grows a wider range of varieties than anywhere else in Europe. His quest for exotic varieties has thus far led him to northern Turkey, Kazakhstan and, most recently, Georgia.

Garlic, or rather the Garlic Farm in particular, has taken off. Up to 1,000 visitors pass through its doors each day in summer, says Colin, and it's open all year. Some come for the novelty; the shop sells curios such as garlic beer, honey and ice cream; but many come from a genuine interest in food and gardening.

Over the last three decades, Colin and his wife Jenny ('a great levelling influence'), have conspired to rehabilitate the piquant bulb, and the British are learning to love it. 'We used to be scared

of garlic; we thought it overpowering,' says Colin. 'I'm convinced your body learns to assimilate it - everybody eats it now but you don't notice the smell.'

His early travels kindled his awareness in food and flavours, 'the whiff of Gauloise, red wine and garlic; it draws you in'. A graduate in economics and agriculture, he very soon decided after a spell in marketing that he was best suited to working for himself. Together with Jenny, he returned to his parents' sweetcorn farm on the Isle of Wight in the mid-1970s.

Quite by chance, his mother Norah had read a piece in the *Sunday Times* extolling the virtues of garlic. 'Nobody knew anything about garlic then,' she remembers. 'We were just looking for a new crop to support another family.' Inspired, she grew some in her own kitchen garden which she still tends; to her surprise it produced lush, glistening bulbs.

Colin had already displayed his entrepreneurial flair. Back in the 1960s, he began selling roasted corn at the Island's early pop festivals for a shilling apiece - 'twelve whole pennies, it seemed like a fortune' - and became famous as the man who sold a cob to Bob Dylan.

He threw himself into studying the science of garlic production, travelling to California and Mediterranean shores in his research. Garlic is a tricky crop, sun-loving and in need of certain levels of light, temperature and moisture in which



## Food ISLE OF WIGHT GARLIC

on the farm. Alexa, 16, his youngest daughter, works in the shop between school hours. 'She's terribly independent,' her father says proudly. 'That comes from being left on a London pavement at 6am at the age of 14 and being told to go to market.'

His eldest daughter Natasha has just published *The Garlic Farm Cookbook*, with gorgeous recipes, many created by Jenny. Most involve shocking amounts of garlic; a whole bulb in beef bourguignon, for instance. Natasha also teaches why crushed garlic is more pungent than sliced or whole roast cloves; when broken, a chemical reaction creates the sulphur compound allicin, which is responsible for the arresting piquancy. Smell a whole unbroken bulb and it has virtually no odour.

Built from local pine planted 30 years ago by Colin himself, the Garlic Farm Shop is a visual treat. Strung with plaited garlic, stacked with delicacies such as Isle of Wight tomatoes roasted with oak-smoked garlic, it also hosts a tasting table, which is buzzing. Assistants dispense information on how to grow and cook with garlic – two of the most asked questions the farm receives. 'Cut oak smoked garlic in half and put it in roast chicken and allow the flavours to infuse,' advises Colin, 'that's one of the easiest dishes for British cooks.'

Many aficionados head to the café which, with its list of enticing specials, is more of a restaurant. Not all dishes contain garlic, assures chef Charlie Bartlett. His beloved dish pigeon

kiev, made from birds shot on the farm is a favourite; brave diners sample his garlic mezze, an array of fiery fare and whole roast bulbs, which truly tests Colin's theory that we can absorb garlic's pungent aroma. Where most cooks trip up, says Charlie, is by overcooking garlic until it is brown and bitter. And never add parsley to garlic butter, he continues; it neutralises the flavour. 'Purple Moldovan is the best for garlic bread; try it with fresh rosemary or oregano for a lovely sweet flavour.'

In response to the cascade of questions about the history, health benefits, culinary properties and mechanics of growing garlic, Colin has devised a tour of his pretty farm fields. Visitors sample different garlics and can create their own plait of bulbs.

Set in the foodie heartland of the Isle of Wight, this farm has become 'a destination,' alongside the island's cheesemakers, brewers and organic growers. But that doesn't mean Colin lets the grass grow under his feet. After Sicily, he's bound for California in another garlic-related quest. 'Too many ideas, not enough time,' he concedes. <sup>®</sup>

**The Garlic Farm Cookbook is packed with mouthwatering recipes, plus handy advice on growing, storing and harvesting plants. £9.50 from [thegarlicfarm.co.uk](http://thegarlicfarm.co.uk)**



### A GARLIC PLANTING GUIDE

Although a native of warmer climes, garlic can grow successfully in Britain, in the ground or in containers. Plant in early autumn to provide the longest possible growing season and an important chilling period. If you live in a cold area or have poorly drained soil, a spring variety may be better.

- Purple Moldovan (hardneck)** Large cloves, persistent fierce aroma. Makes the best garlic bread. Harvest in June, keep until Christmas.
- Solent Wight (softneck)** Dense white bulbs and subtle aroma. Keeps flavour well during cooking. Harvest July, good until April at least.
- Elephant garlic (softneck)** Can grow to 15cm (6 in) across and weigh half a kilo. Has a warm mild flavour. Grate raw into salads, good roasted. Harvested green in June, dries by mid-July.
- Tuscany Wight (softneck)** Plump cloves, keeps well, good all-rounder. Plant December, harvest in July.
- Iberian Wight (softneck)** Large flat white garlic with purple stripes from south west Spain. Large cloves. Harvest in June and keep until January.
- Lautrec Wight (hardneck)** White-skinned, pink-cloved from south west France. Plant in autumn or early spring, but dislikes wet conditions. French gourmands believe it's the finest tasting of all French garlic. Harvest in June, keep until February.



Above Jenny Boswell in the shop, which sells a range of delicacies, including the chutneys she first dreamt up in her farmhouse kitchen. Top Chef Charlie Bartlett in the farm café, which is more of a restaurant.

One of his specialities is a fiery garlic mezze. He also offers tips for visitors on getting the best out of garlic and its pungent flavour. Far right One of the many inventive uses for garlic



### GARLIC DOWN THE AGES

- > Garlic is an enduring folk remedy, and is proven to be a powerful antiseptic, antifungal and antiviral. It may lower cholesterol and blood pressure and contains powerful antioxidants.
- > For centuries, cultures have believed it holds powerful, even magical properties. Egyptian slaves would receive a daily ration to improve their strength and endurance.
- > Athletes in ancient Greece would eat vast amounts before competing, and soldiers ate it before going into battle.
- > Central Europeans would wear it round their necks and rub it across chimneys and keyholes to ward off evil spirits and vampires.