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# “THE STORY OF THE DAYLESFORD COW IS THE STORY OF DAYLESFORD”

To find out the true meaning of the new Daylesford shop and restaurant in Marylebone, it is necessary to head west to a large, sprawling Gloucestershire farm: a place where animals are reared using principles that predate the modern intensification of farming

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## The Daylesford cow

“If you get the story of the Daylesford cow, you get the story of Daylesford,” says farm manager Richard Smith. Stood in a hazy field surrounded on all sides by their large, inquisitive, brown noses, the Daylesford cow certainly seems like an excellent place to start. Their coats are gleaming, their chocolate puddle eyes are twinkling healthily and they seem—if my lack of bovine knowledge does not deceive me—happy. “That is really my point,” says Richard. “There you are, with little or no agriculture experience or knowledge, and yet when you look at these animals you see vitality and health.”

A loud moo interrupts us, punctuated by distant clucking and the bleating of lambs. It sounds and looks like a kids’ picture book. There are no nettles here, no weeds, no bush; instead there is simply thick grass as far as you can see. “There are no chemicals,” Richard insists. “Our farm isn’t covered in thistles and weeds and poor quality pasture. It can be done organically, you just have to work hard at it.

After all, before intensive farming, we farmed organically for thousands of years.”

As Richard points out, farming has only become intensive in the last 50 or so years. “How did they survive before that? How did they make it productive and clean without fertilisers and pesticides?” he asks. “They did it because they had sheep, chickens and cattle as well as crops, and they rotated them around the farm, thus returning nutrients to the land and allowing it to recover.” They also bred animals well suited to the area. “These are South Devon cattle,” he says, gesturing to the tawny chestnut herd surrounding us, “and we keep them because they

are a traditional British breed.”

“They perform well on the green stuff,” he continues: the green stuff being the rich, luscious lawn we’re standing on. In the winter they dine on homemade silage, made from fermented Daylesford grass. “The single biggest job we carry out in the summer months is conserving grass to such a quality that we are can ensure in winter, the cows continue to have the good roughage-based diet that contains the trace elements and minerals they need. I could talk to you all day about feeding cows.”

We set off for pastures new: Richard driving, while I gawp at the vast sweep of forest and Elysian farmland which comprises the

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Bamford estate, where the farm is situated. The bundle of dogs in the back remain silent as, between bumps and dirt tracks, the seasoned farmer explains the significance of enabling his livestock to graze. “Ninety-five per cent of milk produced in the world comes from the Holstein, a Dutch breed of cow capable of producing 10 to 12,000 litres of milk in one lactation. However, it can only produce that if it’s fed large amounts of protein,” he explains. The average cow in this country eats 4.2 tons of imported cereal in the same period—305 days—and vast quantities of milk come out for us to buy at knock down prices. But the cost to the cow

in this factory-like process is huge.

“We have one stomach,” says Richard. “Cows have four. They have evolved to eat poor quality protein and extract every ounce of energy from it. Eating high protein, high energy food puts them under intense strain.” Imagine eating protein shakes all day, every day and them being digested four times over. “It makes the cow stressed, and if you stress a female you upset her reproductive cycle. She can’t conceive, so she stops lactating and is culled out of the herd.”

Every year in the UK, around 40 per cent of the cows in a herd suffer fertility problems and are killed accordingly: a practice

as ludicrously uneconomical as it is cruel. “The other massive disadvantage of a Holstein is that she is skin and bone,” Richard says. This is not for want of feeding, of course, but because of her body type, which makes it borderline impossible to support the huge udder her diet yields. “Lameness is the single biggest issue in the British dairy industry,” says Richard. “The enormous udders make the cows walk slightly bowlegged, so the outside of their feet become sore.”

Again this affects the animal’s ability to reproduce. “You will not have a regular cycle if you are constantly in pain and stressed,” he says. Little wonder the average

cow in this country lasts little more than three lactations—that is, five years of age. “There are animals here that are more than 18 years old,” says Richard, “and they’re dual purpose.” This means they produce meat as well as milk, unlike the Holstein. Its females may be the “F1 racing cow of milk production”, but heaven help them if they’re male.

We’re introduced to Jolene, a “tremendous cow” who is approaching her 16th birthday. She is a rare breed: a Gloucestershire, capable of producing only 25 per cent of the milk the average British Holstein yields. “In 2006 the Bamford family asked me if I would like to support a rare breed of cattle,” Richard explains. “We’re in Gloucestershire, so it made sense to start with these guys.” They are rare not through persecution, but because of their inability to produce masses of either milk or meat.

They’re reared to maturity—as are the British Friesians, which form the bulk of the farm’s milk production. They’re stronger, they live and produce milk for longer, and their strength and build means bull calves are raised for beef instead of being shot at birth. Overall outputs are lower, but inputs are lower too, as feed doesn’t have to be imported and new cows don’t have to be brought in to replace those struck by lameness and fertility. “We breed in a closed flock or herd, so we don’t get replacement animals from outside Daylesford. We use the best of the females we have.”

The result is serious productivity at a level and consistency that belies the airy idealism associated with organic farming. Richard is a pragmatist: “My single biggest management task is to get fresh meat into that business 52 weeks a year, every year.” He spent 12 years of his career in New Zealand, where the hardiness of sheep farmers is legendary. “They don’t have subsidies. The good boys stay in the game, the bad get out, and you make do with what you’ve got,” he says. “It’s there I learnt that animals



## The Daylesford cow

can perform well from grazing if you do it right. Here at Daylesford we're in the top one per cent of production for sheep flocks in this country."

There follows a stream of figures: "25,000 eggs, 20,000 litres of milk and eight and a half tonnes of red meat every week," he continues, "and that's before all the vegetables, the salad, the bakery—oh and the pigs, venison and bees. It's a totally integrated food chain business."

It being spring when we visit, a trip to the lamb house is obligatory. As are the embarrassingly high pitched coos that I emit upon patting the warm, delicate wool of the new-borns. These are the last of them, Richard tells me. "There would have been 125 lambs a day here at peak time, with six people, working 15 hour days and at least one here around the clock." One of the kindest of Daylesford's practices is that of shearing the sheep before they come into the lamb house. "You should take a sheep's jacket off when it comes indoors. It's more comfortable for them, and it saves the stress of shearing in summer."

The celestial calm here is in some ways misleading: it takes hard work to ensure a supply of quality organic produce throughout the year. "Buyers want consistency. One crop of lesser quality and you lose them. It's a delicate skill," he says. "I'm constantly comparing us with other producers because I want my critic, the intensive farmer, to be saying, 'how did he do that?' and to want to know more."

In his zeal to convert them, Richard is happy to host any intensive farmer who cares to visit Daylesford. "We'll have 50 or so farmers turn up on a summer's evening from, say, the Kent Big Producers Club," Richard explains. "I meet them, we have a beer and I do a bit of a spiel. You can see at first they're thinking, who is this orgasmic wally," he grins, "but



“The east of England was once the heartland of the sheep farming industry. Then they became straight cereal producers. Now vast swathes of fertile land can't be used to grow wheat

by the time we are 50 per cent of the way round they will start to listen." By the time they're back to the farm shop—a cool, colourful cornucopia—they are "mobbing me for info".

We've reached the chicken coops now, recently modernised to improve standards. The roaming space is enormous—and that's just the part marked out by the low fence round the coop. I count 20 chickens strutting out beyond that, clucking merrily. "There'll be picked up at the end of the day, don't worry. Welcome to chicken Shangri La," he grins.

"Our chickens share their coop with just 500 birds and are



outside from first light to sundown. The average intensive bird in this country lives with 120,000 friends with little or no access to outside pasture. The average life of that bird is 37 days: from 30g chick," he gestures with his hands, "to 2kg chicken." I grimace, and he nods sombrely. "It's true. That is Frankenstein levels of growth. Here we have slow growing breeds, which means better quality meat and eggs."

The ambiguous 'farm assured' mark is not enough. Even 'free range' is insufficient. "They're still packed in at the same density. Free range just means the doors are open for a bit." For Richard, organic

farming in livestock, as in arable, really is the only way to go. To those who protest that it isn't sustainable given soaring population growth, he points to the problem of black grass: a weed that's become resistant to herbicide, rendering wheat fields unusable. "The east of England was once the heartland of the sheep farming industry, as well as crops. Then they became straight cereal producers and now you've a situation where vast swathes of fertile land can't be used to grow wheat."

They need to reintroduce sheep, the weed's natural predator, but still the farmers shy away. "They'd be petrified. They'd argue they haven't the skills or the people these

days. How sad that you can't find a shepherd in the east of England." We stop outside a vast field, empty but for a small band of sheep in one corner, and Richard's dogs begin whining softly. "Outside Daylesford the only thing I do with any passion is sheepdog training. I've had several national champions over the years. You're about to meet Glen."

We jump out, followed by a lean, smart-looking sheepdog, and Richard purses his lips. There ensues a series of shrill whistles to which Glen responds instantly, careering gracefully toward the now resigned-looking sheep. In five minutes, Glen and Richard will do the work that would take 20 men on motorbikes hours. "I couldn't farm the way we farm without them," he says seriously. Richard insists that every farmworker at Daylesford has at least basic shepherding skills.

"They're the best salesmen we have," he says, fondling Glen lovingly. "They show we know what we're on about. The general public perception of farmers is that you do it if you can't work on anything else." In fact to be a farmer today, you need numerous skills. "You need to be good at maths, you need to be good at sciences, you need to be a vet, a shepherd, and you need to manage computers. That's why I am always very keen not to run down any form of agriculture."

Fresh, tasty food produced without cost to the welfare of animals, or the detriment of the environment. A sustainable business in which energy is recycled and production is economical. Contented customers. Arriving back in the farm shop at the end of our tour, lunch is beckoning, and these achievements are crowned by a succulent burger and tangy, melting cheddar in a warm homemade bun. The proof is in the eating. The story of the Daylesford cow is one that needs to be heard.

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