

Suffolk estate has taste of quality

Venison and lamb from a Suffolk estate is highly sought by London's top restaurants

A Suffolk farming business started almost by accident is now supplying top quality lamb and venison to London restaurants.

When the Denham Estate was purchased by the late Michael Gliksten in the 1980s, his original intention was to convert it from top fruit into arable production. While that has been achieved, today the farm at Barrow, Bury St Edmunds, is best known for Fallow deer and lamb production.

Run today by Michael's wife Cecilia, the deer enterprise can be traced back to the mid

1980s, when Michael was approached by a New Zealand company that wanted to export red deer from Europe via a quarantine farm in the UK. The Denham Estate was seen as an ideal location.

Some of the farm was duly fenced off. Red deer were brought in from Hungary, with the next generation duly exported to New Zealand. "It started off in a small way and has really grown from there," explains livestock manager Neil Clarke (pictured below).

When the contract finished, the farm decided to switch from red deer to Fallow deer

production – and for several years exported successfully to Canada, until the BSE crisis in 1990 shut down overseas markets.

"We were left with several hundred deer due for export to British Columbia – with no way of getting them there," says Neil. "The only sensible option was to go into venison production and try to find a market for them in the UK."

Since then, the farm's Fallow deer herd has progressed to become one of the largest in Europe. "We've specialised in Fallow deer because our chefs and customers believe it has a better texture, better taste and better quality than red deer," says Neil.

Although farmed venison is available all-year-round, different products have been added to the mix to complement it. "Chefs like to change their menus from time to time and it is good to offer a variety of products," Neil explains.

This has seen the development of Denham Castle lamb – a three-way cross which starts with a Soay ewe crossed with a Wiltshire Horn ram. The hybrid vigour produces what we call the Denham ewe – foot rot resistant offspring, which

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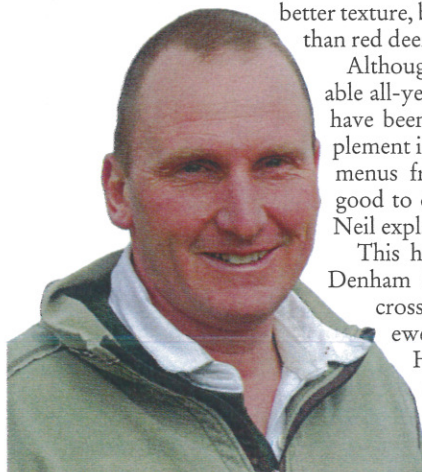


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don't need to be shorn.

"It gives me the ability as a livestock manager to look after 1200 deer on the farm and the same number of sheep, whereas there would be a lot more work involved. We then put the Denham ewe to a terminal sire – and market the offspring as Denham Castle lamb."

Terminal sires are either Southdown or Hampshire rams. This creates a slower-maturing lamb which retains the succulent flavour of the Soay – and is popular with chefs at the same London restaurants and caterers as the Denham Estate venison.

Deer are managed in a similar situation to the wild, with females stocked at a rate of 40-50 does to a paddock. The herd is closed, although some breeding stock is exchanged with a similar herd at Houghton Hall, Norfolk.

An on-farm slaughterhouse and butchery keeps production entirely in-house, with the business employing the services of full-time butcher Alan Plume on site. This reduces stress levels to a minimum, saves cost and guarantees the full traceability demanded by customers.

"Unlike wild deer, farmed venison is a very consistent product which is premium quality," says Neil. "We can supply a customer in December and guarantee the same product the following July will be just as good, produced to the same high standard and with the same great taste."

The arable side of the estate extends to 400 hectares (1000 acres), with a further 120 hec-

tares (300 acres) farmed on a contract basis. Enterprises are typical for the area, including winter wheat, oilseed rape, spring beans and some winter barley.

Both the estate land and the contract farm is looked after by arable manager Matthew Bell (pictured above), of Sentry, who also does the agronomy. "It is a fairly simple rotation – we're predominantly direct-drilled, with some rotational ploughing before spring crops," he says.

General farm worker Matthew Driver is the third employee outside on the estate. Although the livestock and arable sides are separate, everyone mucks in together at busy times, including lambing or harvest, as needed.

"We were lucky to get all our winter crops in – we use home-saved seed through the Sentry seed dresser, and all our inputs are purchased through Sentry too," says Matthew Bell. "We also have an informal machinery sharing ar-

rangement, which can bring big benefits."

With variable weather conditions increasing over recent years, good planning is key to arable success, believes Matthew. "We have spring crops, but not as a default because we were unable to drill winter crops – it's an approach that helps tackle blackgrass and boost soil structure."

Although mainly heavy soil, this year the estate is hosting a light land wheat trial for Agrovista and KWS. It is studying the impact of drilling dates and agronomy on yields to determine which varieties are best suited to pockets of lighter land in this part of Suffolk.

Estate management is a key focus too. "We take the opportunity before spring cropping to carry out any ditch maintenance and drainage works that need doing – we also bring in a lot of organic manure and sewage sludge to lift soil performance."




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