

Somerset Organic Links - Mucking in.

Most of the suppliers and growers used by SOL are in Somerset with a scattering in Cornwall, Dorset, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Devon and Wiltshire.

"The county of Somerset, commonly called Somersetshire, is a large and plentiful County, the soil is very rich, especially for grain and pasturage, tis very populous and tolerably well furnished with havens. Some think that this name was first given it because the air is gentle, and as it were a Summer air in those parts…”
William Camden 1584

The common consensus now is that the word Somerset comes from the Anglo Saxon *sumorsaete* or summer settlers referring to the people who herded animals on the rich summer pastures, pastures which are now drained and managed by a series of long ditches, drains and rhines accompanied by regular pumping stations, high flood banks and the odd tidal bore. In certain places on the Parrett the river is above the road. A strange reversal of roles when at one time most of the goods were shipped by water. Another quote from Camden describes Somerset in winter perfectly … “So wet and weely, so mirish and moory it is… “

But these days when I think of Somerset, I think the Somerset levels and moors, flooded, not just rich and diverse waterways and wetlands but with caravans, and mobile homes, the great long reach of Brean dunes, sand, the inimitable taste of salt in the air and long views across Bridgwater bay to the Quantocks. But it is not just tourism that makes Somerset flourish, mobile dairies and the communal way in which cheddar cheese was once made give Somerset a peculiarly modern and avante garde feel to the local food debate. Add in cider orchards, eels, elvers, wildfowl and venison and you have a potent mix, which is maybe why there were several medieval hunting forests in Somerset. Exmoor, North Petherton, Bruton, Cheddar, to name but a few…

But the real asset to Somerset apart from its climate is the soil in certain areas. The grade one soils around South Petherton, East and West Lambrook and Martock are particularly good for vegetable growing. These days every food mile is calculated to the nearest inch and the word ‘organic’ not longer conjures up visions of dead dog cider. Even the word fresh has new meaning… and doesn’t just refer to the passing muck spreader.

One person who knows a fair bit about organics is Christina Ballinger who has helped set up an organisation called Somerset Organic Links SOL for short… Partly funded by Defra they link organic food producers to their trade customers. An essential behind the scenes service which gets the freshest local organic produce onto your plate or doorstep with minimum fuss and travel. I visited her in a large converted grain store near Kingsweston between Somerton and Keinton Mandeville. They employ 5.2 people nearly all local. The place was humming, “Tuesdays is our busiest day” she said as she showed me round the store. Fresh vegetables and salads, were all lined up in boxes waiting to be loaded for the next day’s early delivery. SOL is a farmer owned cooperative set up in 2001. Christina said that two years ago they had 37 customers now they have 137. The business has blossomed and now they are delivering organic produce between Salisbury and Milverton, Bristol and Bath down to Bridport. Their customers range from farm shops to community buying groups, cafes, festivals, caterers and box schemes as well as their own market stalls. One of the most intriguing outlets is Buckland St Mary Primary School which organises its own Healthy Living Coop and the children themselves place the weekly order with Sol and then redistribute the boxes of vegetables and fruit into smaller bags which they sell on within the school. The children have designed logos, a slogan, mascot, labels and adverts to promote their business ‘Froots Roots ‘En Shoots’ (spelling ‘Fresh’). With ten year olds handling hundreds of pounds, it is real enterprise initiative. Gordon Brown watch out.

Most of the suppliers and growers used by SOL are in Somerset with a scattering in Cornwall, Dorset, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Devon and Wiltshire. It is a real success story and every restuaranteur and cafe owner should pay them a visit to see what is on offer on their doorstep. In 2006 SOL won silver in the Soil Association Organic Food awards for best Local food initiative.

It all comes down to soil, good growing conditions and green fingers and Somerset has all three in abundance. Eat the view.