

Peppers, Glorious Peppers!

by

Marc Millon

Topsham, Devon September 17, 1999 What a glorious September it is turning out to be. This is definitely my favourite time of the year: the morning rains we've had in the past few days have given way to warm, lingering autumn sunshine and the sort of weather that, elsewhere, ripens grapes and adds an intoxicating anticipation to the harvest time to come. Even here, across the Exe Valley from us, the grapes are today being picked at Manstree Vineyard (which last week scooped a Gold Medal from the South West Vineyards Association annual awards for its deliciously fragrant Madeleine Angevin/Bacchus blend). Elsewhere we look forward to new season apples, as well as to hosts of other good things to eat and drink in the days and weeks to come.

I visited Highfield Harvest Farm here in Topsham yesterday with organic food specialist Lynda Brown, who was down for the day. Highfield is an organic farm operation admirably run by husband-and-wife Lindsay and Ian Shears: they not only grow their own organic produce, they also occasionally raise organic pigs and lambs, and have a small but well-stocked farm shop that offers almost exclusively organic produce and products, including organic cheeses from Lye Cross Farm (plus non-organic but outstanding locally and regionally produced farm cheeses made from unpasteurised milk, such as Devon Oke, Cornish Yarg, Sharpham Beenleigh, various local cheddars); organic breads from Birch Farm Organic Bakery; fresh local organic tofu; organic butter, milk and cream; extensive organic dry goods (tinned pulses, pasta, vinegars, oils, jams, honey and preserves); organic tea, coffee and herbal tisanes; organic cereals, eggs, biscuits; an

outstanding selection of organic wines; and refillable eco-friendly detergents.

We have not, I should add, gone totally organic as a family ourselves, so we don't come here usually to purchase all our staples (it is far too expensive to do so). But we do come regularly mainly to stock up on outstanding homegrown and thus wholly seasonal organic vegetables that usually have just been pulled from the ground that morning.

At the moment there are the most gorgeous and delicious aubergines, rather thin, small, twisted in shape compared to the even, dark but comparatively tasteless ovoids more usually encountered; there are mountains of courgettes; and of course there are tomatoes still warm and fragrant off the vine. For lunch with Lynda yesterday we simply char-grilled the vegetables, dressed them with extra virgin olive oil, lime juice, and chopped flat leaf parsley and cilantro. Best of all, we now discover at Highfield that we're in the midst of a most fortunate glut of red peppers, sun-ripened, sweet and densely flavoured, not insipidly crunchy like the picture-perfect Dutch red peppers found in most supermarkets, but more like the knobbly red peppers you get at this time of year in the South of France, Italy or Spain. Ian is worried that he will not be able to sell them all, as the farm shop is the main outlet for all that he grows. Lynda suggests that he roasts them, then sells the roasted peppers in the shop, a way of adding value without excessive extra labour to seasonal produce that is plentiful.

It gives me an idea. I am reminded of autumn in the Rioja, around or perhaps just after the vendimia. Once many years ago when we were touring bodegas around Haro, we came across cellar workers in blue overalls, standing around fires made from old oak barrel staves during their breaks. It was indeed surprisingly cold, the fires a welcome means of keeping warm. But their main purpose was to enable the workers in their spare time to roast immense mounds of red peppers over a wood fire. The peppers were

subsequently peeled by hand, then usually bottled, and these homemade preserves would be tucked away for use throughout the winter. Sometimes if you were lucky you could find them in the food shops of Haro: you could always tell the handmade preserves as there would still be bits of charred black pepper skin on the strips packed into the jars, the hallmark of the real as opposed to the industrially produced version.

And so right now I'm off to Highfield to purchase peppers, lots and lots and lots of them. The weather looks set to hold this afternoon, so I'll stoke up a charcoal fire in the garden, and we'll stand around this evening roasting peppers and drinking tumblers of young Rioja wine, enjoying the last of the summer sun as it goes down over the Haldon Hills to the west. Of course, once roasted, the real work starts, but no doubt we'll enlist the slave labour of our children Guy and Bella and of any other friends who happen innocently to drop by: the char-blackened peppers will go into plastics bags to facilitate peeling, then we'll strip off the skins by hand (there is no other way and little fingers are often the most nimble), seed the peppers, cut them into strips, then add to a large cooking pot together with copious amounts of olive oil and whole cloves of garlic. Thus stewed, we'll pack them into sterile jars and stash them away for the winter, pulling them out to enjoy in evenings around the fire together with roasted shoulders of lamb and not young but aged Reserva and Gran Reserva wines from favourite traditional producers like La Rioja Alta and R. López de Heredia.

As day into night, so autumn into winter, but somehow the thought of it right now does not seem all that bad.

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