

people



Chris Westgate checking old-fashioned edible favourites in her very English West Country cottage garden

Perfect rustic recipe: Kiwi, bramble and dandelion

Chris and Dave Westgate bought an old farmhouse and restored various traditional features. Then Chris started foraging in the garden and surrounding countryside. **Suzanne Savill** sees – and tastes – the results of a revival of this ancient art. Pictures by **Clare Green**



The sign on a white-painted wall near the front door of Chris and Dave Westgate's home reads: Rookehill Farmhouse.

But this is no mere house sign. It is emblematic of the way in which the couple have returned this property, and the surrounding half an acre of land, to their historic roots.

"When we bought the house, it was called Rockhill Farmhouse. After we bought it, we discovered it was originally called Rookehill Farmhouse, and so after getting permission from the council we changed it back," says Chris.

Since buying Rookehill Farmhouse, which is set on a hill on the outskirts of Keynsham in the Chew Valley, the couple have restored old beams and flagstone floors inside the house, and have painted the walls using traditional limewash.

The revival of old ways has extended from the house into the garden. Beyond the trampoline used by their children – Rosa, 12, Stanley nine, and Magnus, aged seven – the ground slopes away steeply towards bee hives that Dave, a surveyor, keeps as a hobby.

Across the lawn from the hives is a henhouse, and beside that is what appears to be a typical vegetable patch. In fact, it is also used to grow wild plants which would have been in common use decades – even centuries – ago, but which have become largely

unfamiliar in the 21st century. Chris hands me a plant, which has tiny flowers and small green leaves. "Try tasting this," she says.

I take it reluctantly, and bite. A warm sensation and a mustardy taste spreads across my tongue.

"This is hairy bittercress," says Chris. "Many people think it's a weed, but it can be used in salads and would have been widely eaten about 40 years ago."

We stand in the sunshine, with bees buzzing around and the mustardy taste of wild bittercress on my tongue.

It feels like being in an unspoilt corner of old rural England, and is the sort of scene that might bring back memories to some of childhood visits to grandparents' homes in the countryside. However, it is a new experience for Chris, who is originally from New Zealand.

"I was brought up in suburban Auckland," she says. "There wasn't much to forage around where we lived, apart from picking wild mushrooms with my mum sometimes on our way home from school."

"Like many young people I came over here to do the OE – the Overseas Experience. I was 21 and I meant to go back after a year to attend university, but I made such a good group of friends here that I stayed on."

Chris did temporary work and then got a job with an engineering com-



Bath Beekeepers' Association member Dave Westgate checking his hives in the Chew Valley, near Bristol

pany. She got married to Dave and set up home in Bristol, but gave up work when they had children.

She began foraging as a hobby about eight years ago, after they moved to Rookehill Farmhouse, which had been part of a working farm until the Seventies.

Chris recalls: "Our youngest son Magnus was a slow eater then, so while he was spending a couple of hours eating I'd be making stuff from wild berries and plants that I'd picked. I taught myself what to do by reading lots and lots of books."

Some of those books, such as *Wild Food* are on the wooden dresser in the flagstone hallway, alongside bottles and jars containing delicacies such as bottles of hawthorn brandy and jars of rose petals in vodka.

"You can put it on ice cream," says Chris, in response to my observation that the rose petals suspended in a vodka jelly look beautiful but I wouldn't know what to do with them.

Chris's other home-made wares from wild produce she has foraged include crab apple jelly, elderberry and bramble jam, dandelion jelly,

26%

Alcohol content of Best Before Bed bramble vodka by Heavenly Hedgerows

hawthorn jelly, sloe gin, thyme vinegar, rosehip jelly, lavender jelly, and elderflower cordial.

There are some unfamiliar names that I have never encountered on the shelves of modern grocery shops and supermarkets. I am puzzling over a bottle labelled "Pontack", when Chris explains that this is an elderberry vinegar that was a popular sauce in old England.

There is no such puzzling over the bramble vodka that she gives me to try, which is made from steeped local blackberry brambles, and has a label with information which includes the words "Best Before: Bed".

It is smooth, rich, fruity and delicious, and I could happily drink it all day, not just at bedtime, but I decide that with a 26 per cent alcohol content that might not be sensible.

Chris started selling her wares at the local farmers' market, and set up her business Heavenly Hedgerows, which specialises in producing jams, jellies, honey and liqueurs from wild produce.

Over the last year she has also started supplying retailers, including Arch House Deli, Farrington Farm Shop, Hartley Farm Shop, Newton St Low Farm Shop, and Kilver Court.

Foraging in hedgerows for native vegetation such as rosehips, hawthorn, sloes – medlars, quince, wild garlic and sorrel might sound very simple and idyllic, but Chris reveals that there is an etiquette that needs to be followed.

"You should always show courtesy for the countryside and make sure to leave some behind for the birds," she says. "Picking wild food for commercial purposes is illegal, as is uprooting a plant. You need to have obtained the permission of the landowner before you start picking anything. I always collect away from busy roads, and bottle everything on the day of picking."

The fact that all the produce made and sold by Heavenly Hedgerows is completely natural means that it is very much affected by what is happening in the natural world.



people



Chris and Dave Westgate pictured by Clare Green at their home in Chew Valley where Chris cooks up foraged hedgerow treats

"We didn't have any honey this spring because of the extended winter that we had this year," says Dave, who is a member of Bath Beekeepers' Association.

"The effects are still being felt now. The colony should be at maximum strength at this time of year, but everything is running a month late and it remains to be seen whether the bees will be able to gather enough nectar.

"White clover is out at the moment, which is really good for nectar, so I'm hoping there will be honey this summer."

He continues: "Our bees are healthy. The problem has been the weather. We haven't had the problems that have been experienced by beekeepers in the United States, but that could be because husbandry methods are different.

"It is a hobby for most beekeepers here, but in the States it is a big commercial operation. Also, here in the Chew Valley there isn't intensive farming with acres and acres of single crops and use of pesticides. There are some very good organic farmers, and natural English woodland and plants."

For further information about Heavenly Hedgerows go to www.heavenlyhedgerows.co.uk

'You should always show courtesy for the countryside and make sure to leave some behind for the birds'

Coeliacs can have their cake and eat it, says sufferer Jenny

Gluten-free need not mean treat-free, as **Sue Bradley** discovers when she meets Jenny Carter

A diagnosis of coeliac disease was a double-edged sword for Jenny Carter.

On the positive front, the busy mother-of-two was finally able to pinpoint the reason why she was suffering a debilitating range of symptoms and do something about it.

Yet at the same time the knowledge that she was among the one in 100 to suffer from coeliac disease came with the realisation that she would have to avoid eating anything containing gluten, including bread, cakes, biscuits, scones and pasta made with wheat flour.

Jenny promptly set about researching alternative ingredients so that she could carry on baking for her friends and family, as well as herself.

Now she has gone a step further by setting up a business providing a range of home-baked gluten-free foods, including scones, cakes and biscuits, together with a selection of mixes for customers to prepare and cook themselves. She even makes celebration cakes to order for people living in Gloucestershire.

Her most popular products include rocky road bars, gingerbread men and flapjacks, along with her ginger, coconut, coffee and walnut and double chocolate cake mixes.

Jenny Carter, who has started a gluten free baking business, pictured with son Max, 11



"I've called my business Yippee Foods, because that's often the reaction I hear from people who realise that they can carry on eating the good things in life even if they suffer from coeliac disease," says Jenny, who also works as a teaching assistant at a Gloucestershire school.

"Although the leading retailers stock a limited range of gluten-free products, they are mainly expensive products and I felt there was a need for the great taste of home-baked foods at prices people can afford.

"Yippee Foods has only been going properly since March but I have received some great feedback."

Jenny, who was diagnosed with coeliac disease in 2011, says her two brothers are also too familiar with the unpleasant symptoms of gluten intolerance. "Gluten is a protein that can ultimately damage the lower intestine," she said. "It causes tummy pain, bloating, constipation, diarrhoea and muscle and joint aches and fatigue.

"I'd been suffering from coeliac disease since I was a teenager, but it wasn't diagnosed until a couple of years ago. It's often confused with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)"

She admits avoiding everyday ingredients is not easy but hopes to help other coeliacs enjoy their food.

www.yippeeglutenfree.co.uk