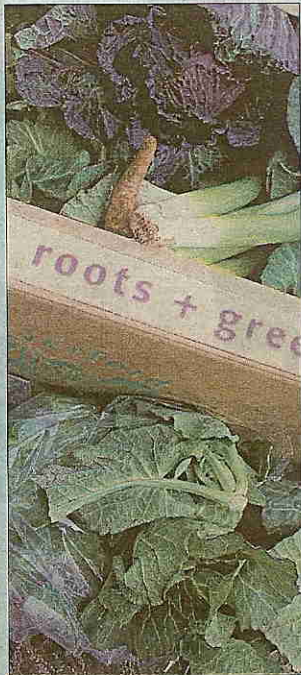


RECIPE

Stir-fried cabbage
(Serves four)

My friend was so delighted – she had just received her first organic veg box for Riverford Organic and had begun cooking up the contents by following recipes on the Riverford website. This stir fry recipe is but one of many recipes Riverside Organic features on its website (www.riverford.co.uk). She said it tasted absolutely delicious and proved a great way of making the most of freshly harvested organic cabbage.

YOU WILL NEED:

- 1lb (500g) green cabbage
- Two medium carrots
- One bunch spring onions
- 4oz (100g) cashew nuts
- 2 tspns oil
- Two cloves garlic
- 1in (2cm) piece root ginger
- One dried red chilli
- 3 tspns soy sauce
- 1 tspn dry sherry.

METHOD:

- Finely shred the cabbage, cut the carrots into matchsticks and chop the spring onions.
- Heat the oil and fry the cashew nuts in a large wok on a low heat until brown, then remove from pan with a slotted spoon.
- Finely chop the garlic, root ginger and red chilli and add to the pan.
- Stir garlic, ginger and chilli for a minute and then add cabbage, carrots and spring onions and continue to stir-fry for three minutes.
- Stir in the soy sauce and sherry and cook for a further two minutes, then add the cashew nuts and serve with rice or noodles.

Working to build a peach of a business



HAPPY TOGETHER: Some of the Peach team, Nelly, Tom, Zoe, Lee, Paul, Menny, Maggie the dog, Hamish and Jo

Picture: Helen Peacocke

It's not often I am invited to lunch and then asked if I would like to cook it myself – but this is what happened last week. I didn't mind; in fact it was all part of the meal experience. What's more, it was great fun. I was visiting a newly renovated barn on James Taylor's organic farm at North Aston, as a guest of the team that run The Peach Pub Company. They had invited me to view their new headquarters, which they moved into in January.

Award-winning Peach runs ten highly successful pubs, three of which are in the Oxford region: The Fishes in North Hinksey, The Fleece in Witney and the Thatch in Thame. The remarkable thing about this company is that while pubs continue to close at the rate of more than 30 a week nationwide, and others are both reducing their menu size and staffing levels to cope with the recession, it manages to maintain high turnover levels.

It even managed to expand from seven pubs to ten during the economic slowdown last year.

Founded by Hamish Stoddart and Lee Cash in 2002, Peach does all it can to ensure that most of its ingredients are British and local. This is why I was invited to visit the barn, which is not just an office but the company's training and cultural centre.

It's here that Peach chefs learn more about cooking with fresh seasonal produce. Hamish and Lee knew I had vowed to eat only local or British food throughout 2009 and decided it would be good idea to invite me to see their seasonal food philosophy in action and look over their centre at the same time.

Within minutes of arriving at the Peach Barn I was whisked outside to meet Mark Stay, the farmer who runs North Aston Organics and grows many of his salad leaves, herbs and vegetables in poly tunnels close by. Having been handed a sharp knife, I was invited to harvest a basketful of fresh herbs, including mizuna, coriander and mustard leaves for our lunch.

Mark took up the organic challenge more than 20 years ago and now runs a highly successful vegetable box scheme. You will



By HELEN PEACOCKE

find him selling his produce at both Wolvercote and Deddington farmers' markets. I must admit that it was great to be let loose among such a superb collection of salad plants and be told I could pick just what I wanted.

The fragrance that lingered on my fingers once I'd collected what was needed was out of this world.

Lee explained that while it was not possible to supply all ten Peach pubs with salad leaves from North Aston Organics, similar suppliers were used for pubs further afield when ever possible.

"We believe in supporting local enterprise and getting our chefs to think seasonal, which is why we were all so thrilled to discover that the barn is situated minutes from crops such as this," he said, as he munched on a couple of leaves that he'd picked too.

Before joining forces with his partner Hamish Stoddart in 2002, Lee had worked as deputy manager at Raymond Blanc's Le Petit Blanc, Walton Street, Oxford, and then as general manager for the Birmingham branch. He admits that it was Raymond's food ethic that has influenced the way Peach Pubs are run.

"During the five years I worked for Raymond I learnt the importance of sourcing the best ingredients possible."

Lee sees this as being particularly important now that people are being more selective about where they spend their money. The company also places great importance on staff training.

Whenever a new person joins the company, regardless of the position they will take up, they undertake a one-to-one induction with either Lee or Hamish.

They are also given a chance to be a customer at a nearby Peach pub and experience the service and food from a customer's perspective. Staff are also given a chance to go on brewery visits, attend cheese tastings and meet suppliers.

Now that the barn is up and running, kitchen staff will be given training in the new state-of-the-art training kitchen on the ground floor. Applicants for chefs' jobs with Peach Inns will also be invited here to display their skills, before being offered a job. When I was invited to see how this training kitchen worked by helping to cook the lunch under Lee's watchful eye, it was hoped I would come to appreciate the importance that the Peach team place on staff training.

Actually, I knew that already. I have always been impressed by the fact that all customer questions are answered with enthusiasm by their front of house staff.

Not long ago, while ordering lunch at the Fleece, I told the waiter of my 'British food only' pledge. Within minutes he and the chef had sorted out a way of adapting my entire order so that everything served was British – it was all very impressive.

Our lunch at the barn was impressive, too, mainly because once Lee and a trainee chef had finished showing me how the kitchen operated, and the salad leaves were dish up as a tasty starter, they took over the reins and cooked up some delicious local lamb chops and vegetables.

A scrumptious apple crumble cooked by Penny Aston, a member of the Peach team, followed. During lunch, Lee and Hamish spoke of the way they share Peach's success with their staff.

As they both said, running a successful pub business is all about sourcing quality food, making staff feel they are members of a team and sharing the company's success with the people that make this success happen.

■ Restaurant reviewer Christopher Gray gives his verdict on The Thatch – a Peach Pub in Thame – next week