



Stand by your HAM

Have you ever wondered how the farmers feel about the markets where you love to shop? Are they really making a difference for the farmers, or are they just a pretty side show for the tourists? Gordon Tudge had an answer when Sarah Girling went to visit. Photography by Paul Lack

When one person in the queue at the farmers' market tells the next that the pork they had last week was the best they've ever had, that's worth any amount of advertising.

Gordon Tudge

FARMERS' markets literally saved my bacon," says Gordon. "80 per cent of what I now produce is sold through the markets at Hereford, Abergavenny, Ludlow, Leominster and Malvern."

Gordon Tudge farms at Richards Castle on the Herefordshire/Shropshire border, producing among other things rare breed Berkshire pigs and chickens, as well as geese and turkeys for the Christmas market. He had just bought his brother out of the family farm – which until then had produced mainly beef and cereals – when the BSE crisis hit. "So I had a lot of debt and no income at all. It's amazing how that focuses the mind."

He picked up the phone and rang Shaun Hill ("who I didn't know from Adam"), then running the Merchant House restaurant in Ludlow, and asked if he would buy pork from him if he started farming Berkshires. Shaun agreed enthusiastically, and so Mr and Mrs Tudge became pig farmers. "To be quite honest if he'd said he wanted sharks I'd have agreed!"

For the next couple of years the Tudges sold their pigs to restaurants, but, with the exception of Shaun Hill, they found that their customers were more interested in price than quality. "Shaun was our saviour through that period. When the price of pork dropped he told us his customers wanted to support good producers, and discouraged us from reducing our prices."

Then the farmers' markets began to take off. The Tudges don't advertise, reckoning that word of mouth is far more effective. "When one person in the queue at the market tells the next that the pork they had last week was the best they've ever had, that's worth any amount of advertising," he says. The family decided to add in chickens, to broaden the appeal of the market stalls. They keep about 2,000 birds, which have the run of a 24-acre field; "but they're not really brave

enough to go all the way to the far end of it".

The expansion of the business provided a route for Gordon and Rosie's two sons to come back to the county from desk-bound jobs in London – first Guy, a civil servant, then Chris, in IT. Gordon says: "They'd been away for ten years and told me they wanted to come back and be village idiots. I told them both there wasn't a vacancy but they came anyway." They are now resident on the farm with their young families, and obviously as happy as – well, pigs in clover. "Earnings down, quality of life up!" grins Chris. "Though in the management hierarchy I'm somewhere below the Labrador..."

They happily let me follow the progress of a magnificent smoky side of bacon from its return from the local abattoir in Leintwardine, to its final form of thick, succulent slices destined for the market.

The processing shed is a modern mini-factory; it's sparkling clean, smells wonderful and is dotted with the paraphernalia of modern food production such as vacuum-wrapping machines, supplies of bio-degradable packing trays, and neatly filled in temperature charts. Gordon clearly slightly regrets the need for all this, as is only to be expected of someone who started out delivering green-top milk around Ludlow. "It's the food which has been messed about with that ought to have big warning labels on it, not the organic and naturally reared stuff."

He is a passionate believer in the importance and value of real food, going so far as to source, with some difficulty, untreated (preservative-free) oak with which to smoke his bacon. Most "smoked bacon" has just been treated with smoke flavouring suspended in an alcohol base. The alcohol is allowed to evaporate, leaving the smoke 'flavouring' behind. The Tudges' smoked bacon is properly smoked in a smoker from Scotland obtained through the Venison Society. And their customers can clearly taste the difference – it's so



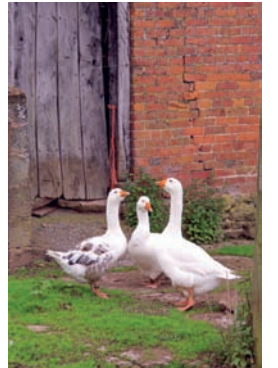
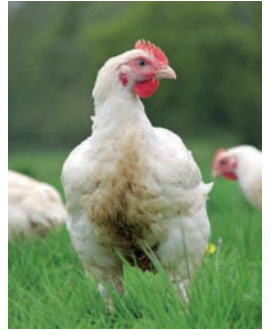
good that the Tudges are building a bigger smoker.

This is very much a working farm, but there is an open invitation to customers from the farmers' markets to come and visit the chickens and pigs. All the animals are free range and the Tudges have always been against what they see as the unnecessary use of growth promoters, routine antibiotics, and the use of E numbers, colourings, preservatives etc in their animals and products.

They tried going organic for a while but eventually decided against it as the licensing requirements were proving so expensive. Their belief in natural methods for raising their stock remain, however. "When we

started making sausages ten years ago, we didn't add any colouring, and we were told that nobody would buy a sausage that wasn't pink. Now everybody's doing it."

Will the Tudges' crystal ball work as well for the next decade? It's not going to be an easy one. In common with everyone else in the pig industry, they have been hit hard by the recent dramatic increases in the price of feed, which is principally made up of wheat. Wheat prices have doubled in the last year as a result of a number of factors, including poor harvests last year, a rapid increase in demand from countries such as China adopting a Western diet, and the



Above: Rosemary Tudge.



setting aside of both land and crops to produce bio-fuels.

The national pig herd has already halved in size over the last ten years, and according to the National Pig Association, 95 per cent of pig farmers are considering giving up. Gordon Tudge says: “We’ve only ever been told about feed price increases when they happened before: it was 10 per cent in November and then 15 per cent in February. Now we’ve been warned to expect a ‘substantial’ rise soon – which presumably means that 10 per cent and 15 per cent weren’t considered substantial.”

Food price inflation is now at the top of the agenda both for governments and agencies such as the UN. The commitment to bio-fuels – “madness”, seen from Gordon Tudge’s perspective – is being re-examined much more critically, as land is being taken away from food crops and the environmental impact of bio-fuels is being questioned.

Whatever the outcome of the debate, it seems likely that the era of ultra-cheap food is over. We are going to have to acknowledge the true cost of food, both to the farmer and to the environment. Will that transition be kinder to those such as the Tudges, who produce to high standards for farmers’ markets?

There’s a perception that those who shop at farmers’ markets aren’t as concerned about prices as those who shop at the supermarket. Mr Tudge disagrees: “We get all sorts of people coming to us. Will they be put off if the price goes up? We’ll have to wait and see, but I am fairly sure that people are going to have to get used to



Left: Gordon and Rosemary’s sons Chris and Guy.

Our sons had been away for ten years and told me they wanted to come back and be village idiots. I told them both there wasn’t a vacancy but they came anyway...

paying a bit more for their food across the board.

“From my point of view, I judge how things are going by the length of the queue. And as long as the queue is there, I know I’m getting at least some things right.” ■