

# Samphire farm shop

**olive** meets the woman who ditched accountancy for a life of farming and award-winning pork pies

**'I used to be an accountant.** It was all very flash with big bucks, but in 1999 Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *Escape to River Cottage* started on Channel 4 and I really got into it. I decided to find a new job that still paid lots but in a part of the world where I could get a place with a bit of land for a veg garden and a few chickens. Initially we only intended to produce enough for ourselves, but as I got more bored at work, farming got increasingly interesting, so eventually I quit.

**'Farming made me happy from the word go.** We got our first sheep the summer of 2002 – three lambs to rear and then take to slaughter. I couldn't eat the meat for a month afterwards, I'd grown too attached to the animals.

**'I didn't know anything about farming before I started this.** I learned through courses with the Norfolk Smallholders training group, from watching others and taking notes. Plucking up the courage to kill my first chicken was terrifying.

**'I visit all the producers who supply meat to our shop to see how the animals are kept.** I'm interested in how the owner interacts with animals – it's like watching someone with their dog, you can see what their relationship is like. We've paid for RSPCA Freedom Food to assess all our meat producers so there's someone from the outside saying "What you're doing is good."

**'For a long time, I thought I couldn't cook pork.** I'd buy the meat from the supermarket and however I cooked it, it'd always come out dry and tasteless. Rare breed pork was a revelation – juicy and flavoursome with crackling every time.

**'We only sell rare-breed meat.** It's important to support the diversity of breeds. Before the Rare Breeds Survival Trust stepped in during the 70s, Britain had lost breeds such as the Lincolnshire Curly Coat pig and there were others close to extinction. The more sausages I sell, the more breeding animals exist. Yes, I'm sending the offspring off to slaughter, but the parents live. That's the point.

**'It's sad to take an animal to slaughter but what comes back is exciting, too.** The slaughterhouse comments on



**Karen Nethercott** Disillusioned with the rat race, Karen Nethercott gave up a lucrative career in corporate accountancy for the muddy wellies and grassy paddocks of a smallholding in rural Norfolk. She now rears British Saddleback and Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs and Ryeland sheep on her seven-acre farm near Diss.

In 2005 she and her husband Jeff opened Samphire farm shop at Blickling Hall in Norfolk to immediate critical acclaim – Gary Rhodes declared her sausages 'the best he'd ever tasted' and Giles Coren described her pork pies as 'quite the most extraordinary I had ever known'. Samphire also sells meat and veg from other local producers, but exemplary animal welfare is its hallmark.

how relaxed our animals are. When an animal gets stressed it releases adrenalin to the muscles. As a result the muscles become tauter, and so the meat is tougher. They're used to huge numbers of commercial pigs screaming away.

**'People should be more honest with themselves.** There are a great many people justifying not buying free-range chicken, saying they can't afford it – they're choosing to buy a DVD over the welfare of a chicken. Whatever you buy, you're buying into the whole process behind it.

**'Giles Coren gave our pies a rave review.** We've heard Stephen Fry's a fan too – his mum comes in the shop. Our pork pies have got a bit of smokey bacon in them, which works brilliantly with the onion marmalade – a bit sweet and sour.'

## WHERE TO BUY

Produce from Karen Nethercott's smallholding is sold at her shop, Samphire, The Estate Barn, Blickling Hall, Aylsham, Norfolk (01263 734464). Her sausages and pork pies are also available to buy online at [samphireshop.co.uk](http://samphireshop.co.uk).

## HOW ETHICAL IS SAMPHIRE SMALLHOLDING?

**ORGANIC NO** Animal welfare's the priority here. Karen's strongly against routine antibiotics for animals, but wants the choice to use certain medicines if animals are in distress.

**SUSTAINABLE YES** Though small-scale, Samphire has helped secure the future of some rare breeds, heritage produce, and even some local small businesses.

**FOOD MILES LOW** Almost all produce is sold at the shop, under 30 miles away from the smallholding in Tibenham, near Diss, and a small percentage online. More than 95 per cent of Samphire Farm Shop's stock is from Norfolk.