

GROW YOUR OWN



It's harvest season for Drummond House in Co Louth, one of Ireland's largest garlic and asparagus producers

Words: Klara Heron | Photography: Ramona Farrelly

The world has gotten whole lot smaller when it comes to food, especially fresh foods. We have access to lots of exotic fruits and vegetables from many different countries all year round. As the demand for Irish produce increases, when you do a quick scan of what's on offer in the supermarkets, garlic remains to be majority imported, despite the fact that it can be successfully grown right here in Ireland.

Marita and Peter Collier started their garlic farm in 2012, with a dream of supplying Irish grown garlic nationwide. Inspired by a trip to India, they looked into procuring seed for their 100 acre farm, which has been in Peter's family for over 100 years. Five years in, the lessons they've learnt along their journey have allowed them to organically grow and expand their crop in the idyllic setting of Baltray, in Co Louth.

Being just one mile from the Irish Sea not only makes for a beautiful view, but it also allows for great conditions for the garlic to grow: "Garlic hates wet roots so when we do get good rain it drains really well in this soil," explains Marita, "and then the sea breeze is our natural hairdryer." However, in the beginning they didn't know enough about the conditions to grow a successful crop and they lost everything they had planted: "We didn't know what we were doing, we said 'wouldn't it be lovely to plant some garlic cloves and we'll do it organically'.

"The weeds took over, we had a major drought – garlic needs a lot of water – and as we were pulling the weeds they were growing behind us. We hadn't the subsoil preparation done, you should really prepare it with horse manure and as much organic matter as you can. We didn't do that, we didn't test the soil for the pH levels, we jumped straight in and we learned a lot from it."





WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WE WERE DOING, WE SAID 'WOULDN'T IT BE LOVELY TO PLANT SOME GARLIC CLOVES AND WE'LL DO IT ORGANICALLY'

An interesting development that came from their initial years experimenting was that they are now the largest grower of garlic scapes in the country. Scapes grow up during the summer and are cultivated in order for the garlic bulbs to grow. On some farms, they are waste that is disposed of, but Drummond House identified a demand, particularly amongst Irish chefs, and all from a lucky coincidence when they started out: "In year one we thought we had planted 80% soft neck garlic, and 20% hard neck. Soft necks do not give you a scape and anything hard does.

"They told us when we bought the seed from Holland they were soft and next thing there's scapes coming up. We took out the invoices and receipts, sure enough they all said we had bought soft, and so we rang Holland and showed them a picture and they said that's hard neck, we don't know what we sold you.

"That wasn't in the plan for year one, that was supposed to be the experiment but there you go! It was a happy accident. The scapes are great because they taste as if you've bitten into a garlic asparagus. You can do so much with them, make pesto, tempura them in a batter. They're limited, there's one to each garlic plant so once they're snapped off they're gone, that's it until next year."

Drummond House is currently growing three types of hard neck garlic and one soft. The scapes come from their Elephant garlic crop: "We'll start harvesting the wet Elephant in four weeks' time. Each day I come out with the kids and at the weekends Peter, and we walk up and down checking each plant. The kids lay out the crates for us and we walk up and down and they just snap off, it's easy to harvest. Friends are very good, they come down on a sunny day we'll throw on a barbeque and bring cold beers out and they don't mind, they get paid in garlic!"

Once the scapes have been harvested, the garlic bulbs grow under the ground over the coming weeks and then they are pulled up and cured by air hanging in an on-site unit, which allows them to last throughout the year.

The Elephant bulbs are large and produce a mild garlic flavour, while Marita's Green Garlic, Vallelado and Red Duke crops are much more spicy and strong-tasting. Next year, they plan on doubling their Elephant crop: "If you're not mad about garlic, the Elephant has that leek-y flavour so when it's cured or cooked it becomes very mild. It appeals to the middle ground people whereas with the regular varieties people can really taste that spice.

"For the past three years we've held back stock, that's where we get the seed, we reinvest in our own product. Out of the twelve drills of Elephant we planted last year it produced the seed for 75 drills, each bulb produces about twelve cloves and each clove is then a bulb. 75 drills is just under four acres so we'll probably do ten acres next year.





WHEN WE STARTED OUT PEOPLE WERE SAYING, WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT GARLIC, YOU PUT GARLIC INTO THINGS, BUT YOU CAN WHOLE ROAST A BULB, SQUEEZE OUT THE FLESH AND PLASTER THAT ON A TOASTED BAGUETTE AND PUT BRUSCHETTA ON TOP OF IT. DON'T TELL ME THAT'S JUST AN INGREDIENT, IT'S FOOD!

"Last year one of the varieties didn't take to our soil very well, it wasn't cold enough and it came out like an egg shape – it's always trial and error. That's why we're always looking for new growers in Europe that grow ethical seed that's good quality and certified, they're not trying to sell us something that's shipped in from China."

Marita says that as people become more educated about garlic and garlic scapes, the demand should increase: "The usual garlic that you find in the supermarket which might be from China or Spain, it just doesn't compare when it comes to flavour. There's always going to be other people in Ireland looking at growing garlic and I think that's great because it's certainly something the country could do with and we would never be able to supply the whole of Ireland."

Another crop that can be tricky to grow is asparagus and this summer Drummond House are harvesting their first crop which they planted three years ago. "We have year three asparagus almost ready to go in the front garden of Drummond House, you have to do a thinning crop each year. If I gave you some blind you'd think I'd popped fresh peas into your mouth – it's completely buttery and nutty," smiles Marita.

"The cold snap slowed everything down this year so it should be another three weeks before they're ready. The harvesting is very erratic because it's a difficult plant but it's so fresh and it's straight out of the ground, there's no chemicals pumped into it, it's a seasonal plant. It's labour intensive, they all have to be cut one by one by hand. When you harvest an asparagus spear within 24 hours it's grown about six to eight inches. You get eight to ten spears from each plant."

As much as the work is labour-heavy with plenty of risks in terms of the weather and weeds, Marita and Peter are now at a point that they've a good system in place and a lot of those initial trials are behind them. Now is as good a time as ever for Marita to develop the retail side of the business, and this summer Drummond House is launching three new products including a garlic scape pesto and oak smoked cloves. They'll be available in independent stores such as Morten's in Galway and East Coast Sea Foods in Malahide and Naas, and chains Fallon & Byrne, Avoca and Donnybrook Fair (keep an eye on www.drummondhousegarlic.com for updates).

"The pesto is my own recipe and I'm not a chef, so I'm nervous to see what people will think. I'm doing a chunky one and a smooth one initially to see what people like. The garlic scape gives it a really nice mild flavour, I made it last year for a couple of events we did and it went down well so hopefully people will enjoy it."

They are also looking forward to attending the Oxford Food Symposium in July as part of a Boyne Valley meal that's being held (tickets are £800): "There's loads of great producers around this area, we're all really supportive of each other. For the meal, we're giving our produce for a banquet table on the Boyne Valley and Ireland's Ancient East."

When it comes to their Irish grown garlic, Marita and Peter are adamant on one message: "This is food, not just an ingredient. When we started out people were saying, what's the big deal about garlic, you put garlic into things, but you can whole roast a bulb, squeeze out the flesh and plaster that on a toasted baguette and put bruschetta on top of it. Don't tell me that's just an ingredient, it's food!" 🌱



RECIPES

Thank you to Head Chef **Robert Thompson** in **The Lime Kiln Gastro-pub**, Julienstown, Co Meath, who came up with these three mouth-watering recipes using Marita's produce. Drummond House garlic and asparagus are regulars on the specials board in season, as well as many other producers from the Boyne Valley and beyond. You'll also find great local products in the newly opened Pantry at The Lime Kiln, as well as baked goods by the restaurant's talented pastry chef.

ELEPHANT GARLIC POTATO VELOUTÉ

SERVES FOUR

Elephant garlic, not being a true garlic, has a milder more gentle taste than normal garlic. It's stalks, more like that of leeks and can be used in the same way. Here we've made a rich and creamy soup and served it with roasted bulbs, fresh ciabatta and elephant garlic oil.

- 50g garlic stalks
- 100ml sunflower oil
- Whole elephant garlic bulbs
- Few sprigs of thyme
- Splash of rapeseed oil
- 100g butter
- 450g garlic stalks
- 600g sliced potato
- 750ml milk
- 250ml cream
- 80g crème fraîche
- Salt/white pepper

1 To make the oil, use the darker end of the stalks and finely slice. Blanch in boiling water for 1-2 minutes, drain and plunge into iced water to cool quickly.

2 Strain stalks, pat dry and place in a food processor with a pinch of salt and blitz for 5 minutes. Leave to sit for a few minutes to infuse, blitz again and pass through a fine sieve discarding stalk. Set aside.

3 Cut the tips off the whole garlic bulbs, place on tinfoil sheet, season with salt, add a splash of oil and thyme sprigs. Wrap the foil loosely to form a parcel and place in oven at 180c for 30/40 min or until soft and roasted.

4 For the soup melt the butter in a saucepan add sliced garlic stalks and sweat slowly until soft add sliced potato

and mix to combine. Add milk and half the cream to the pan and bring to the boil. Simmer until potatoes are soft and start to break down.

5 Transfer to a food processor and liquidise. To achieve an extra smooth finish pass soup through a fine sieve.

6 Return the soup to the saucepan, bring back to a simmer and add salt and white pepper to suit your taste. Remove from the heat and whisk in remaining cream and crème fraîche.

7 Serve with a drizzle of the oil and some cut chives, fresh bread and the roasted garlic bulbs on the side.

8 The roasted garlic can be added to the soup or spread on the bread before dunking in the soup.





DRUMMOND HOUSE ASPARAGUS, ROAST GARLIC AND LEMON BUTTER WITH A POACHED EGG

SERVES FOUR

The asparagus from Drummond House is such an amazing product in itself we keep it simple, add a few extra ingredients just to enhance the experience.

- 2 bunches of asparagus
- 4 free range eggs
- 80g butter
- 1 lemon
- 4 cloves roasted garlic (left over from the soup!!)
- 4 pieces of elephant garlic stalks (optional)
- Sea salt flakes

1 Cut the elephant garlic stalks, if using, into thin strips and quickly deep fry until crisp. When cooked, drain onto kitchen paper to remove excess oil and season with salt. Set aside.

2 Soften the butter, add lemon zest and roasted garlic cloves (cut into small pieces), mix and set aside.

3 To poach eggs ahead of time, bring a saucepan of water to the boil and add some salt and reduce heat to a gentle simmer. Crack the eggs and gently drop them into the water, if the water is boiling too fast the whites will break up and look a mess so a gentle rolling simmer is best.

4 When the eggs have firmed up but not fully cooked they can be gently removed and placed into iced water to stop the cooking process. When completely cooled they can be removed and set aside until later.

5 Place a fresh saucepan of water on to boil and add plenty of salt. Trim the asparagus stalks and drop into boiling water for 1-2 mins depending on their thickness, you really don't want to overcook them so less is best.

6 Remove asparagus and drain on a clean tea towel or kitchen paper. Meanwhile drop the cooled poached eggs into the saucepan for 1 minute to finish cooking.

7 Place the asparagus on a warm plate in a neat pile, divide the butter on top of each pile. As the butter starts to melt remove the eggs from the water and drain. Place an egg on top of the butter and asparagus. Sprinkle with some sea salt and garnish with the fried strips of elephant garlic and a drizzle of the garlic oil left over from the soup.





SLOW-COOKED LAMB AND SMOKED GARLIC PIE

Lamb and garlic are a marriage made in heaven and the gentle smokiness of Marita's garlic really is something special. Always a favourite when we sell it in our deli, always quick to sell out.

- Shortcrust pastry
- 225 g plain flour
- 100 unsalted butter
- Pinch salt
- Puff pastry (A tricky pastry to get right and a long process from start to finish, using store-bought is fine but do try and get your hands on all-butter pastry, a little more expensive but well worth it.)
- 600g diced lamb shoulder
- 100ml white wine
- 30g butter
- 15g flour
- 125g diced carrot
- 125g diced onion
- 125g diced celery
- Whole bulb of smoked garlic
- Sprig thyme
- Sprig rosemary
- 250ml lamb stock

- Salt/pepper
- 1 egg
- Bunch of flat leaf parsley

- 1** To make shortcrust pastry, rub butter and flour together until it resembles bread crumbs. Add 2-3 tbsp of water and mix to form a dough. Knead dough gently, cover with cling film and refrigerate until needed.
- 2** Heat a heavy based frying pan and add a little oil. Fry the lamb in until browned all over and deglaze the pan with the white wine and set aside.
- 3** Melt the butter in a sauce pan and add onion, carrot and celery. Cook for a couple of minutes to get a little colour.
- 4** Add flour and cook for a further 1-2 minutes and add the lamb and wine deglaze. Add a little salt

and pepper and gently cook for a further 2 mins.

- 5** Add bay leaf, thyme, rosemary, whole bulb of smoked garlic and lamb stock and stirring continuously bring to the boil. Place a lid on the saucepan, reduce heat and simmer for 1-1.5 hours or until lamb is tender. Stir occasionally to prevent sticking.
- 6** Meanwhile roll out shortcrust pastry 3mm thick and line an 8 inch pie tin. Line with baking parchment and baking beans and bake blind at 180c for 15 min. Remove the beans and paper and return to the oven for a further 5 mins to crisp up.
- 7** Roll out a puff pastry disc 3mm thick and about 2 cm wider than the pie dish.
- 8** When the lamb is cooked re-

move the thyme, rosemary bayleaf and garlic bulb and adjust seasoning. Allow to cool slightly and add chopped parsley.

- 9** Mix an egg yolk with a little water and brush on the outer rim of the puff pastry.
- 10** Fill the prepared pie crust with the lamb mix, quickly invert the puff pastry lid on top. Press gently to help stick the lid to the base, then fold down the excess puff pastry or crimp if desired.
- 11** Quickly brush the top with the remaining egg yolk and cut a cross in the centre to allow steam to escape.
- 12** Bake at 180c for 25/30 min until the top has a rich brown colour and shiny finish.
- 13** Remove from the oven and allow to sit for 5 to 10 min before serving.