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FOOD IS OUR FRIEND

Simon Cooper welcomes niche businesses putting chalkstreams in the spotlight



FLEDGLING BUSINESSES ARE ASSAILED BY all sorts of problems; mine, back in the 1990s, aside from all the usual cash flow and dull stuff was primarily explaining to people exactly what chalkstreams were. To those in the know it was an easy sell but to the wider public, both fishing and non-fishing, it was a good deal harder. In conversations with strangers I could see blank expressions at the use of the term. But today? People nod. They smile. Become engaged. Chalkstreams, if you will pardon the pun, have finally filtered into the public consciousness.

In fact, we have reached the moment when chalkstreams are a thing. I know now that media types, editors and their like, will prick up their ears at the mention of the word. It is no guarantee of PR success, but it does at least allow you to cut through the hubbub to be in with a shout. How has this happened? Well, I would like to think that it is down to fly-fishing, but the truth lies more in the realms of food and ecology.

The chalk valleys have long produced fine food; there is little better for the Sunday roast than English lamb grazed on the mint-sweet water meadows or a summer salad of watercress grown in cool, gravel beds. While the former is little talked of the latter is big business. Vitacress, pioneered by the Isaac family in the 1950s, began life on the River Meon. It changed hands not so long ago for tens of millions. The chances are that the next time you buy watercress in a supermarket it was grown by Vitacress or one of its Hampshire competitors.

A more recent start-up is Chalkstream Foods in the Test Valley, which has found its niche in trout. However, not in whole trout but rather trout fillets. The business case went like this: there is a demand for easy-to-cook cuts of tuna, salmon and their like. Why not trout? From endorsements (and orders) from top chefs including Jamie Oliver, it is going from

strength to strength with a thriving wholesale and retail mail-order business.

And I guess it only was a matter of time before the well-worn phrase “gin-clear and twice as expensive” spawned the craft gin industry. And so, it has. At the Longparish-based River Test Distillery, gin is made with pure chalkstream water drawn from a borehole sunk for the very purpose. The magic “botanical”, as distillers Sarah and Jon Nelson call their flavouring ingredient, is the dried, crushed and powdered flower of the meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) herb that grows in profusion in the water meadows. The frothy clusters of cream flowers, which have a sweet smell (meadowsweet is related to the rose family) are picked by hand in late summer by an army of friends and family.

But though the chalkstreams have the power to excite and tantalise our tastebuds it is really the surge in interest in ecology and wildlife that has brought them to the fore. There is an amazing tale being told of this miracle of Mother Nature in, out and beside the streams. The story might not always be good — we know well the dangers — but the insects, birds and creatures are part of the iconography of the English countryside.

As fly-fishers we might have cause to feel slightly irked to have our thunder stolen; after all, we knew of the chalkstreams first. However, the more they become a “thing”, the more we are able to press our causes with the support of those who now love them as much as we do. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.