



VIP

VERY IMPORTANT
PRODUCT

Words Susan Low

Photographs Cristian Barnett
& Dan Jones

Raising pulses

Once a staple, carlin peas almost disappeared from our plates – until a team of keen beans started growing them again



Clockwise from top left:
The peas are grown with another crop to support their stems; Hall Farm's James Bucher and Amelia Christie-Miller, founder of Bold Bean Co; carlin pea pods; carlins are delicious in salads



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UR mission is to make people obsessed,” says Amelia Christie-Miller, founder of Bold Bean Co.

It helps explain why she is at Hall Farm in Suffolk, knee-deep in an unruly tangle of vegetation. Reaching down, she plucks what looks like an ordinary pea pod and pops it in her mouth. “Tastes almost like a mangetout – slightly more bitter, very fresh,” is her verdict. But this isn’t an ordinary crop; these are carlin peas, a nearly forgotten pulse that is making a remarkable comeback.

“Carlins appear in written records in the Elizabethan period, but they would have existed long, long before that,” says Josiah Meldrum. He’s co-founder of Hodmedod’s, another company that has been fuelling a UK ‘bean renaissance’ by helping British farmers source and grow a huge range of pulses. Also called pigeon peas, black badgers, or black or grey peas, carlins were once an important crop, but they fell from favour after the Industrial Revolution. “I think it’s to do with the stigmatisation of being ‘peasant’ food,” says Josiah. “But they did hold on in the Black Country, where they were eaten as ‘parched peas’ – boiled and soured in vinegar and salt.” They are still traditionally eaten there at Easter, and on Bonfire Night in Lancashire.

At Hall Farm, carlins are grown by farmer James Bucher, a childhood friend of Josiah. Both are advocates of regenerative, or sustainable, farming. “It simply means leaving the land in a better condition than I found it,” explains James. ‘Regen ag’ is the agricultural buzzword of the moment, and this field is what it looks like. Out go preened, serried rows of crops; in comes a style of farming that’s wilder at the edges. Instead of growing just one type of crop per field, plants are buddied up as ‘bicrops’ – an arranged marriage in which both plants benefit.

Gesturing towards the intertwined stems, James says, “Here, we’re growing the carlin peas with a cereal called triticale. The triticale, which has strong stems, acts as a scaffold. The peas climb up – and that makes them easier to harvest.”

If there’s an unsung hero playing a major part in regenerative agriculture, it’s the legume. “Legumes are beans, peas, clovers – a family of plants that has the ability to pull nitrogen out of the atmosphere,” James explains, pointing to the sky, “and into

nodules on the plants’ roots,” pointing at the soil. “And nitrogen is a key element in the growth of a plant.”

Since shifting to regenerative farming in 2021, James has cut synthetic nitrogen fertiliser use by a staggering 75%. But the plants’ impact runs even deeper – literally. James explains: “Bean crops have very deep roots, so they break up compacted soil. They bring so much fertility to the following crop.”

They’re not just darlings of the agricultural world, either. Beans are celebrated both for their health-giving properties (they’re packed with protein and fibre) and for being absolutely delicious – evidenced by the recent surge in enthusiasm from top chefs and home cooks alike. Heritage varieties such as carlins bring unusual flavours. “If you were to blind-taste a cannellini against a red kidney bean, most people couldn’t tell them apart,” says Amelia. “But with carlin peas – their rough skin, their fresh flavour – you can taste the difference.” She describes carlins as “like a chickpea and a puy lentil had a baby”, adding that anything those pulses can do, carlins can do too, be it in soups, stews or salads.

A one-time private chef, Amelia joined the bean-lovers’ brigade after studying in Madrid. There, she fell in love with the jarred beans consumed across Spain – more flavourful and tender than their tinned counterparts. Back in London, she got a job connecting farmers and

food producers with restaurants – which is how she came across the dried carlin peas supplied by Hodmedod’s. After convincing a top chef to put carlins on his menu, she had what she calls her “defining moment”. In her cupboard was a bag of dried carlins that had sat for months, uneaten. Why? The usual reasons: too busy, not sure how to cook them... The penny dropped.

Beans may taste great, but they need to be easy for home cooks to use. “I spent months trying to find a British factory that could cook beans with the same quality as the ones in Spain, and I couldn’t,” says Amelia, who now ships her beans to a Spanish factory for cooking. “I knew that the ‘cook’ of the beans is key to giving people the best experience possible.”

Bold Bean Co launched in 2021 with queen chickpeas and queen butter beans; Waitrose was the first supermarket to sell them and is the only one to sell carlin peas, which launched in January of last year. Amelia calls their arrival “a restoration” – bringing back an ingredient that has been grown on British soil for centuries. Packed with nutrients and full of flavour, it has benefits for the very ground we walk on. As the old rhyme goes, there’s a lot to be said for “eating your beans with every meal”. »

‘Carlins are like the baby of a chickpea and a puy lentil’

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Creamy 'nduja carlin peas

This is ready in just 30 minutes but, thanks to the addition of spicy Italian 'nduja, it has the deep, rich flavours of a slow-cooked stew.

Serves 4

Prepare 10 minutes

Cook 20 minutes

- 40g fresh Cooks' Ingredients 'Nduja*
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 500ml fresh chicken stock

- 700g jar Bold Bean Co Queen Carlin Peas*
- 200g pack cavolo nero
- ¼ x 20g pack lemon thyme, leaves picked
- ½ unwaxed lemon, zest and juice
- Crusty bread, to serve

1 Put the 'nduja in a pan over a medium heat; cook for 1 minute, until it releases some oil, breaking it up with a wooden spoon. Add the onion and cook for 5 minutes, until softened. Stir in ½ of the garlic; cook for 1 minute more. Add the stock and peas with their liquid; bring to a simmer and cook for 10 minutes. Use a potato masher to crush ½ of the peas until creamy. Bubble for 1 minute to thicken a little.

2 Meanwhile, strip and discard the stems from the cavolo nero and shred the leaves. Add to the pan with ½ of the thyme (reserving the rest) and cook for 2 minutes, until wilted.

3 Finely chop the remaining thyme and mix in a bowl with the remaining garlic, the lemon zest and a pinch of salt. Stir the lemon juice into the peas. Top with the herb mixture and serve with the bread on the side.

LOW IN FAT / HIGH IN PROTEIN

Per serving 1627kJ/387kcal/8.2g fat/
2.2g saturated fat/49g carbs/
5.5g sugars/11g fibre/23g protein/
3.2g salt/2 of your 5 a day