



Tasty cobnuts can be enjoyed straight from their furry-looking casings, with a light crack revealing the fresh, pale kernel within

You little cracker

Enjoyed by the Romans and a post-prandial Victorian treat, the Kentish cobnut is no longer a faded memory—it's showing signs of a resurgence, declares Susan Low

THE first Kentish cobnuts appear when the English summer begins its long, slow nosedive into autumn.

During those golden, slant-lit days, the summer heat slackens and the trees loosen their grip on the fruit they have been nurturing since spring. Cobnuts find their way to green-grocers and farmers' markets after mid August, with the traditional harvest starting around St Phillibert's Day on August 20. The leafy, green-ruffed clusters enclose faintly furry nuts that look almost unfinished beside the hard-shell certainty of their hazelnut cousins.

The cobnut's delicate shell is easy enough to crack between forefinger and thumb. A single strong press reveals a small, pale nut with the colour of old piano keys, a milky texture and a sappy, fresh taste reminiscent of almond and chestnut. Eating them straight from their protective casing brings all the pleasure of anticipation fulfilled. These are

one of the last truly local, seasonal British foods and they are making a comeback.

Charles Tebbutt, who founded Food & Forest in 2017, is only one grower in the UK who is helping to fuel the cobnut's revival. 'Our aim was to create a market for native nut products, particularly English walnuts and Kentish cobnuts, and that's what we continue to do,' he says. As well as managing the company's busy Borough Market stall in London SE1, Mr Tebbutt works in partnership with several growers in Kent, the cobnut's heartland, using agroforestry to restore once-abandoned cobnut orchards back to productivity.

At Ightham Mote, a National Trust property near Sevenoaks in Kent, Mr Tebbutt manages an eight-acre orchard (or plat, as it's locally known) in partnership with grower Gillian Jones. The carefully pruned trees are exactly the right height to be hand-harvested—evidence of a long and intimate relationship between

man and plant. 'At its simplest, agroforestry means farming with trees,' he explains, amid the burgeoning springtime growth—lush green grass, yellow primroses and purple bluebells—that's exploding into Technicolor life around the 125-year-old trunks when we speak.

However, that's only part of the picture, he makes clear, as he enumerates the benefits agroforestry can have—decreased soil erosion, increased biodiversity, higher carbon sequestration and greater productivity among them. The type of agroforestry used here, called wood pasture, allows for poultry or sheep to graze beneath the trees, something Mr Tebbutt's team is experimenting with at other sites in Kent where the conditions are right.

Cobnuts (*Corylus avellana*) are well suited to the climate, providing a regular crop in all but the most difficult years. 'They're not temperamental. They can do well on a bit of clay soil and can handle quite low temperatures.

They flower in February, but they're not susceptible to frosts,' Mr Tebbutt confirms. There are numerous cobnut varieties, but these are Kent cobs, the most widely grown—and the best tasting. 'Others may yield more, but Kent cobs are incomparable,' he enthuses. Humans are not the only creatures with a taste for cobnuts. Grey squirrels can't get enough of them and their regular raids can put a hefty dent in the annual crop, much to growers' chagrin.

Although they've been cultivated in Britain for centuries, uncracking cobnuts' early history isn't straightforward, points out Tom Cannon of family-run Roughway Farm in Tonbridge and chairman of the Kentish Cobnuts Association (KCA). 'Until recently, we believed that the Kent cob was cultivated by the Victorians, but a source uncovered at the Linnean Society in 2019 points to an earlier origin in the Georgian period and, from this, we understand the Kent cob was being grown from as early as 1779.' Shells found in archaeological sites show that the Romans enjoyed hazelnuts, most likely wild ones, in the province of Britannia.

The Victorians (much like grey squirrels) had a passion for cobnuts. Cultivation expanded and, by the end of the 19th century, there was a thriving trade centred around Kent. Cobnuts were important economically in the same way as cherries or hops: a seasonal crop that shaped local rhythms of labour and trade. As well as being a beloved post-prandial treat of the Victorian dinner table, they were also a favoured theme of still-life painters, such as Edward Ladell (1821–86), who depicts the handsome nuts in his *Cobnuts, A Roemer*,

Raspberries, A Peach Black Grapes & A Leaf On A Carved Wooden Ledge (about 1870).

A 1913 agricultural census estimated that cobnuts covered some 7,000 acres, mostly in Kent, writes Meg Game in *In a Nutshell: the story of Kentish Cobnuts* (1999); by 1944, that had dwindled to 730 and continued to drop well into the 1980s. Their demise can be put down to the usual reasons: increased imports, land pressure from housing, loss of specialist skills—and advances in refrigeration. 'The cobnut was crowded out as exciting new foods entered the market,' Mr Cannon confirms.

By the time the KCA was formed in 1990, about 250 acres survived and the flavour of those late-summer cobnuts would have been a faded memory for many. Now, there are signs of resurgence. 'In our most recent members' survey in 2023–24, we found that there were 700 acres,' Mr Cannon reports, with many of those stretching beyond the 'Cobnut Triangle' of Maidstone, Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks to counties across southern England.

To rekindle interest, producers are getting creative. Roughway Farm holds a National Collection of almost 50 varieties and hosts events to encourage nut-growing; cobnuts are excellent trees for small gardens if you can distract the squirrels. Visitors to Food & Forest's Open Days in Kent can see exactly where and how the nuts are grown, whereas at newcomer Glastonbury Nut Farm in Somerset a 'Making Nuts Sexy Again' campaign centres on farm visits and community outreach.

From his stall at London's Borough Market, Mr Tebbutt sees firsthand the pleasure

first-timers have of tasting a hitherto unknown nut. 'They love it. It's something unique; it comes from barely 30 miles away from the market and they love the fact that they can come and visit the orchard.' This is where he sees a real opportunity. 'If we get together as producers, we could do what Napa Valley has done for wine—create thriving communities of growers who are creating places where people can go and visit and holiday and enjoy. That's a vision we could all get behind.' 🍷

‘In Somerset, a “Making Nuts Sexy Again” campaign centres on farm visits’



Brown-butter cobnut and plum cake

Based on the traditional Kentish cobnut cake, but made with browned butter, for added nuttiness, and seasonal plums.

Ingredients

250g cobnuts (shelled weight)
125g self-raising flour
250g salted butter
200g golden caster sugar
5 medium eggs
1tspn vanilla-bean paste
6 medium plums, quartered and stoned

Method

- Pre-heat the oven to 160°C fan/180°C/350°F/gas mark 4. Butter and line the base of a 23cm (8in) springform cake tin.
- Lightly toast the nuts in the oven until brown, about five minutes. Cool, then pulse to a fine breadcrumb consistency in a food processor. Combine the flour and ground nuts in a bowl.
- Brown the butter in a pan until it smells wonderfully nutty, then let it cool.
- In a mixing bowl, use electric beaters to whisk the browned butter and sugar until it turns paler and airy (up to 10 minutes). Add the eggs one at a time combining well between additions. Using a spatula, gently fold in the flour/nut mixture to form a smooth batter, adding the vanilla.
- Pour the batter into the tin, smooth the top and scatter over the plums (they will sink into the batter as it bakes). Bake for about one hour. Cool completely in the tin before releasing.



A century ago, Kent was the cobnut capital of England, harvesting millions for market