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Marion Regan's family has
been growing strawberries
in Kent for 130 years





Portraits Jamie Lau
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Red revolution

Strawberries are a simple pleasure, but the appliance of science also plays a part. *Susan Low* follows their fragrance to Hugh Lowe Farms in Kent to find out more

“**W**hen people feel the sunshine, they think of strawberries,” says Marion Regan. She’s right.

That first taste of a fragrant, heart-shaped berry is like sinking your teeth into summer itself. Marion knows a thing or two about strawberries – she’s the managing director of Hugh Lowe Farms in Mereworth, Kent, which grows 500 tonnes of them a year and supplies everyone from Wimbledon to Waitrose. “When you consider that they weigh about 23g each and are all picked by hand, that’s a lot of berries,” she quips.

Hugh Lowe Farms has supplied Waitrose for more than 40 years (and Wimbledon for 25), and for Lydia Garner, Partner and Waitrose buyer for soft fruit and cherries, it really is all about the relationship. “These long-standing partnerships mean we have developed shared values with our growers. It’s this that allows us to offer the best fruit week in, week out.”

We’re sipping tea in Marion’s kitchen, which looks out over the land her family has farmed for more than 120 years. “My great-grandfather came here in the 1890s and he had three daughters, one of whom was my grandmother. My father [Hugh Lowe] took over from him, and I took over from my father in 1995.” Following a career in corporate law, Marion’s daughter Amelia McLean has recently joined the business, making her the fifth generation in this family-owned company.

Clockwise from opposite:
light, temperature and humidity are monitored; berries are grown on tables for ease of picking; the beautiful final result

Marion describes to me how the 1,730 acres are farmed in a patchwork: one third is used to grow strawberries, raspberries or blackberries, one third is given over to arable farming (oats, barley and wheat), and one third managed as a haven for the birds, butterflies, bees and other pollinators that are vital in supporting the farm's ecosystem.

Strawberries are taken very seriously here. Marion has a degree in botany from Oxford, as well as a Master's in horticulture from the University of Maryland, near Washington DC. There she researched strawberry breeding for the US Department of Agriculture, going on to work as a conservation biologist in Madagascar and elsewhere before returning to the family farm in her late 20s. It's been a long and distinguished career, and in 2014 she was awarded an MBE for her services to the soft-fruit industry.

"Strawberry varieties fall into two categories," she explains. "They're either June-bearers or ever-bearers. June-bearers are short-day plants: they form their flowers as the days get shorter in autumn, then grow their berries in one peak season from the following May. Then there are ever-bearers, such as Driscoll's Katrina, which are day-neutral. As soon as they have enough leaves, they start laying down flowers. They can flower and fruit throughout the summer until November, when the frost stops them." Two varieties – Driscoll's Zara and Driscoll's Jubilee – are considered some of the farm's star performers – but all the berries Marion and her team grow are proper earthly delights: scarlet, aromatic and lusciously juicy.

Growing berries commercially is something of an art form, mixed with precision science. Balancing variables such as the time of year, temperature and the amount of light the plants get, Marion explains, is the key to a strawberry season that lasts from May through to November – at least ideally. "We still get it wrong sometimes and end up with big peaks. But the good thing about strawberries is that if you put them out there and they look bounteous and delicious, people don't mind – they'll just buy two punnets."

Our teapot emptied, we head out to see what's going on under the roofs of the protective, open-sided polytunnels. The plants are grown on tables raised high, with grass growing between the rows and the berries dangling below at just the right picking height. To anyone who's spent a back-breaking day at a pick-your-own farm, the advantage of being able to stand while gathering fruit will be obvious. The tunnels do more than just protect the berries from the elements. Sensors record temperature, humidity and light levels. Rainwater collected from the tunnel roofs is fed to the plants by trickle irrigation, which minimises external water use. "It's a better environment for plants, pollinators and people," Marion says.



'We're concentrating on being sustainable into the next generation'

Alongside us as we stroll through the polytunnel is a clipboard-carrying researcher who intermittently gazes at the tunnel's roof and takes careful notes. Looking up, I see a series of dark strips overlaying the flexible arches. These are voltaic strips, Marion

explains, which contain mini solar panels that turn the sun's rays into electricity. The University of Greenwich and Hugh Lowe Farms are trialling this new technology to help UK agriculture businesses reach net zero carbon emissions targets.

It's not all high-tech, though. Marion and her team are also experimenting with using sheep to crop the grass between the rows – currently the Shropshire breed, which is less inclined than others to rub against the table supports and upset the plants, is the favourite. "We're a mix of traditional and technological," Marion says. "Ironically, the reason we can still be traditional is because we have always been looking ahead." »

Back outside, Marion explains what the farm is doing to increase sustainability. She points out reed beds around the reservoir, and names the grasses, legumes and nectar-rich wildflowers planted to support wildlife. Where possible, biological controls are used to manage pests such as aphids and thrips. Her favourite? Something called the Orius, or minute pirate bug – “A voracious predator that eats the adult thrips.” Also getting top marks are ladybirds, lacewings and hoverflies. The farm also works with a local beekeeper. “We get the pollinators, he gets the honey.” The farm’s underpinning aim is to minimise its impact on the surrounding soil, water, landscape and wildlife; its environmental practices are certified by Linking Environment and Farming. “We’re concentrating on being sustainable into the next generation,” says Marion’s daughter Amelia McLean, who has a young child herself.

There’s one thing that can’t be factored into any scientific equation, though, and that’s the sheer pleasure these strawberries give. Such a tiny thing – a 23g scarlet berry ripened by the summer sun – has a sweetness and deliciousness entirely out of proportion to its diminutive size. Grab them while the sun shines.

Want to try Marion’s strawberries? Check for the name ‘Marion Regan’ on punnets in store.



Like mother, like daughter:
Marion and Amelia



‘The berries that Marion and her team grow are proper earthly delights: red, aromatic and lusciously juicy’



Strawberry & cardamom traybake

A deliciously simple summer cake with a touch of aromatic spice. See page 117 for our tips on achieving a fluffy icing.

Serves 10-15

Prepare 25 minutes + cooling

Cook 30 minutes

- 250g unsalted butter, softened
- 250g caster sugar
- 4 eggs
- 250g self-raising flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp fine salt
- 6 tbsp milk
- 6 cardamom pods, seeds removed and crushed (see page 117)
- ½ tsp vanilla extract
- 365g pack No.1 Speciality Strawberries, hulled, 150g cut into 1cm chunks, 215g reserved

ICING

- 150g unsalted butter, softened
- 300g icing sugar, sifted
- ¼ tsp fine salt
- ½ tsp vanilla extract
- 2-3 tbsp milk

1 Preheat the oven to 190°C, gas mark 5. Grease and line a 30cm x 20cm cake tin. In a mixing bowl, use an electric hand mixer to beat the butter and sugar for 5-8 minutes until pale and fluffy. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, with 1 tbsp flour. Sieve in the remaining flour, baking powder and salt, then fold to combine. Fold in the milk, cardamom, vanilla and strawberry chunks.

2 Pour into the cake tin and bake for 20-30 minutes until golden and risen; a skewer inserted into the centre should come out clean. Cool in the tin for 15 minutes, then remove from the tin; transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

3 To make the icing, in a large mixing bowl, use an electric hand mixer to beat the butter for 5 minutes until pale and fluffy. Working in 3 batches, gradually beat in the icing sugar. Add the salt, vanilla and milk; beat for 1 minute. Spread over the top of the cooled cake. It will keep in the fridge for 4 days; cut the remaining strawberries into wedges and arrange on top before serving.

✓ Per serving (for 10) 2756kJ/659kcal/
36g fat/22g saturated fat/77g carbs/
58g sugars/2.4g fibre/6.2g protein/0.8g salt »

White chocolate & saffron mousse with roasted strawberries

Saffron sets off the sweetness of the white chocolate in this mousse to create something truly sophisticated. Roasting strawberries heightens their flavour and gives them a syrupy texture – make a double batch to spoon over yogurt.

Serves 4

Prepare 20 minutes + chilling

Cook 20 minutes

- 150g white chocolate, roughly chopped
- Pinch saffron
- 230ml double cream
- 3 eggs, separated
- 2 tbsp caster sugar
- 365g pack No.1 Speciality Strawberries, hulled and halved
- 1 tbsp olive oil

1 Put the chocolate in a heatproof bowl set over a pan of simmering water (don't let the water touch the bowl). Stir until melted, then set aside to cool a little. Grind the saffron to a powder in a pestle and mortar (or crush with your fingers). Heat 2 tbsp double cream in a small pan until just starting to steam, then pour it over the saffron; set aside.

2 In a large bowl, whisk the egg whites to soft peaks, then add 1 tbsp sugar and whisk again briefly. In a separate bowl, whip the remaining double cream to soft peaks. Stir the egg yolks into the cooled chocolate, then fold into the whipped cream with the saffron cream and a pinch of salt. In 3 batches, gradually fold the egg whites into the cream mixture. Divide between 4 ramekins or glasses and chill for 6 hours or overnight.

3 Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 200°C, gas mark 6. Mix the berries, remaining 1 tbsp sugar and the oil. Roast on a baking tray for 10 minutes, stir, then cook for 5 more minutes. Allow to cool for about 20 minutes, then spoon over the ramekins to serve.

✓ **Per serving** 2573kJ/620kcal/48g fat/27g saturated fat/34g carbs/34g sugars/3.5g fibre/9.8g protein/0.3g salt/gluten free

