



Eat more British beans!

Why don't we eat more British-grown beans? In 2012 this simple question inspired the three founders of Hodmedod to create a business with the aim of getting more British beans into British kitchens.

The question had arisen through research towards Transition Norwich's vision for a more resilient city in the face of climate change and declining use of fossil fuels. If we are to feed ourselves more sustainably, then increasing the amount of vegetable protein in our diets is a big part of the answer. And if that vegetable protein can be more locally produced, then so much the better.

Casting around for sources of vegetable protein that might be viably produced in the agricultural hinterland of Norwich we were suddenly struck by the realisation that we are already growing large volumes of field beans, also known as fava or faba beans. The puzzle is that these beans are almost entirely absent from the British diet.

At first we assumed that the beans must be simply not very tasty. But as any Egyptian will tell you, fava beans are truly delicious, whether cooked as whole beans in dishes like ful medames, the spicy slow-cooked bean stew that's the national dish of Egypt, or used as split beans to make ta'amia or falafel. And while Egypt is the largest market for the best quality British beans, fava beans are widely appreciated across North Africa, Southern Europe and the Middle East.

Fava beans used to be an important part of the British diet too. Introduced to Britain by the first Bronze Age farmers they were among the earliest farmed crops alongside wheat, barley, oats and peas. Harvested dry and readily stored, the beans and peas provided an excellent and reliable year-round source of protein.

For centuries these pulses would have been the main source of protein in British diets, eaten daily in dishes like pottage, the British equivalent of ful medames. But as Britain later industrialised, increasing wealth and agricultural development meant that meat and dairy foods were available to more people more of the time. Only the poorest in society still had to eat beans to provide the protein they needed and so the beans fell completely out of fashion, stigmatised as the food of the poor.

As a beneficial break crop and nitrogen-fixing legume, beans remained attractive to farmers, their high protein content attractive as feed for livestock and later as a valuable export crop. The British later embraced pulses from further afield – lentils, chickpeas, American Phaseolus beans – that didn't carry the historic stigma of our own traditional beans. Most bizarrely we adopted canned Baked Beans as our own national dish, a food made born of war-time rationing and made entirely with imported beans.

Surely the time is ripe to get over the historic stigma and start eating British-grown fava beans again? Before launching Hodmedod we carried out a small trial project, providing split fava beans and recipe ideas in return for feedback. The response was clear: barely anyone had tried them before – and there was an overwhelming appetite for more British beans.

Introducing an unfamiliar product to the British market is a challenging task. To encourage and inspire cooks to try whole and split fava beans – Hodmedod's first products back in 2012 - we've developed and published over 20 recipes, from simple soups and hummus to chilli non carne and chestnut and fava casserole.

Fava beans are excellent cooked from dry, but as a canned ready-cooked bean the whole beans are quicker and easier to use. We're also now milling them for a gluten-free flour that makes a robustly earthy pastry and acts as a flour improver when used with wheat flour to bake bread. And Hodmedod's roasted fava beans make for a deliciously moreish snack, the British answer to Spanish habas fritas.

We're pleased to see growing wider interest in the uses of fava beans and continue to experiment ourselves. While others are trialling fava beer and batters we're now looking at fermenting the beans for miso, tamari and black beans.

There are going to be a lot more British beans in our kitchens over the coming years.



Nick Saltmarsh, Managing Director, Hodmedod Ltd



Mark Lea inspects carlin peas

