



Once a sought-after delicacy, cobnuts have been gathered on an ancient site in Kent by five generations of the same farming family

# A rare kind of harvest

**I**N A QUIET corner of rural Kent, an ancient piece of farmland is home to one of this country's lost harvests.

The humble cobnut was once a delicacy grown in great number in England's southern counties. A relative of the more common hazelnut, it's a peculiarly British nut and one that Tim Chambers is determined to keep growing.

On his plantation in Otham near Maidstone, avenues of small, dense cobnut trees are set in orchard-like rows; their gnarled trunks bearing the marks of age, their heavy, low-hanging branches waiting to be harvested.

Tim has known and loved this place since he was a boy. The 1,400 cobnut trees here were planted by his grandfather's

great uncle in 1890 and are now part of his parents' farm.

"I used to come here with my father in the school summer holidays," Tim says, crouching under one of the trees. "The nuts are bright green then. I would pick them off the tree then put them in kibsey baskets [the traditional willow baskets used for fruit harvesting]. They seemed huge then – or maybe I was small."

Tim works on the farm full time. His elderly parents take more of a back seat now, but very little else has changed.

The plantation – or 'plat' as it is traditionally called – was built in an ancient quarry that dates back to medieval times. After years of digging ragstone from the ground, miners left the six-acre plot







Tim Chambers starts the autumn harvest. The plantation yields around 120 trays of cobnuts a year



Left: Left to ripen, the cobnut has a hint of caramel followed by a deep, almost smoky aftertaste  
Below: The cobnut trees at Tim's family farm were planted in 1890



The trees are kept at a height so the nuts are within easy reach

with a steeply sloping perimeter. So while it was unsuitable for a horse and plough, it was perfectly good for cobnut trees, which need very little maintenance. The trees were planted in the lower ground and sheltered by slopes of wild hazel trees, giving the plantation a sort of 'secret garden' appearance.

In the late 19th century, when the trees were planted, cobnuts were a sought-after delicacy and sent by train to London to be sold to the wealthy. By 1913, there were 7,000 acres of cobnut trees in England, but after the First World War when labour became more expensive and transport and refrigeration improved, cheaper imported nuts forced the domestic market into decline. By 1990, cobnut production in

England had shrunk to just 250 acres.

On Tim's plantation, the annual yield is around six tons or 1,200 trays, but cobnuts are not a money-making crop.

"Prices have dropped considerably," he says. "I hardly make enough profit to justify growing them at all. But the heart replaces hard economics. The plat holds many fond memories for me."

The cobnut year starts in January or February, when the trees are hand pruned. "The trees are kept at around seven feet tall so the average person can reach the nuts," Tim explains. "The branches must also not be too dense – the flowers need sunlight to be able to grow and pickers need access to get the nuts, so the trees are thinned."

The perfect cobnut tree has a thick >





Cobnuts are a favourite of the nuthatch, which smashes and cracks the shell until it opens

"So people can't sleep, So they go out where elms and oak trees keep A kneeling vigil, in a religious hush. The harvest moon has come!"

Ted Hughes, *The Harvest Moon*

stem and an umbrella of upper branches. The new shoots or 'wands' – straight and strong – are carefully broken from the main stem and used as garden canes, usually for runner beans.

By late February, the yellow catkins appear, followed by flowers of tiny red tufts that are pollinated by wild hazel from nearby hedgerows or woodland. In May and June, the nuts start to grow as little buds then fully formed bright green nuts, partly enclosed in a frilly casing.

In August, the nuts are usually ready for their first harvest. They are picked from the trees by hand and sold as green or 'wet' nuts, with a moist, coconut-like texture. They're picked over a period of two to three weeks and will keep for up to 14 days in the fridge. Their season is short: blink and the green cobnut season is over.

By October, the remaining nuts have turned brown and are ready for collection. They're simply shaken from the trees then gathered quickly before the local wildlife has a chance to help itself.

This riper nut has a hint of caramel followed by a deep, almost smoky aftertaste. Fresh brown cobnuts can be cracked and eaten as they are, or they can be roasted to intensify the flavour. The fresher the nut, the tastier they are –

drying or refrigerating them lessens the natural flavour.

By November and December, the remaining nuts will have been gathered up by the local wildlife and the ground left to rest until the whole cycle begins again.

The nuts are eaten by squirrels, badgers, dormice and field mice, and also enjoyed by jays, rooks and nuthatches.

"Rooks don't like taking the nuts when the trees are full of leaf," Tim says, "but when the leaves have gone and they feel safe, they will take one then drop it from a great height, hoping it will crack. They'll keep on scooping the nut up and trying to break it until they succeed. The nuthatch, though, will lever it open, much like a human would use a nutcracker."

"This place is good for wildlife – insects, birds and animals – and has been so for over a century," Tim adds. "The plat being here means the rook can drop his nut from on high and the badger can enjoy a quiet nocturnal supper." ■

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## CONTACT

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## Cooking with cobnuts

Cobnuts are similar to hazelnuts and can be substituted for them in recipes, but do they have a richer depth of flavour than hazelnuts. Simply shelled, they are delicious accompaniment to cheese and a glass of port, but to really enjoy their richness, try them roasted. They can be eaten whole or broken up and used as a flavoursome garnish for a salad.

### How to roast cobnuts

Spread the hulled nuts in a single layer on a baking tray. Roast at 150°C/gas mark 2 for up to an hour. They should be hard but not burned. The nuts will shrink by up to half their weight, so bear this in mind if you are intending to use them for cooking. If you want to eat them as they are, sprinkle with a little table salt and/or shredded rosemary, then allow to cool.