



Monday 21st September 2015

Dear Customer,

I think you should make cup of tea with plenty of sugar and make sure you're sitting down before you read this. This week's letter is not about me !

It is about Rosemary Wass, the organic 'Queen of the North'. I've always thought that the name is Viking but Howard and Rosemary didn't agree. It's living in Swaledale with its villages such as Muker, Thwaite, Crackpot – I see Viking in everything. Howard and Rosemary have been supplying us since we started in 1994. We used to send our pale-faced London driver up on an expedition to the North Yorkshire Moors to collect, what have always been, some of the best carrots, potatoes, parsnips and cabbages in the country. In winter they would get stuck in snow drifts on the moors. Collecting the cabbages was like an extreme sport. It challenged them. We never knew if they would make it back. But it was worth it.

Howard's father had the tenancy on Newfields Farm at Fadmoor where he kept cattle, sheep and grew root crops. His family had farmed it for generations. Then in 1968, Howard formed a partnership with his father and they bought it. This was the year before Howard and Rosemary married in 1969. In 1976 Rosemary picked up a leaflet in a wholefood shop in York about organic food, this was in the days of Cranks and organic was perceived as cranky. But she kept the leaflet. Eventually in 1990 they converted the farm to organic. It was an easy conversion as it was how they were farming anyway. Howard and Rosemary were ahead of their time. I remember how Howard was always inventing and experimenting with different ideas to keep away pests and improve yields. He was always so lively and interesting to talk to. He meticulously measured the rainfall every day and charted the weather, eventually deducing that he had to dig a borehole for continuous access to water as the weather could not be relied upon as much as he tried to find the patterns and second guess it.

In 2001, unassuming, understated Rosemary became the World President of the World Federations of Methodist and Uniting Church Women and started travelling the globe and meeting with world leaders. It was a five year appointment. Howard was so proud of her, not least because she always managed to fill the freezer with shepherd's pies, apple pies and everything else he would need to sustain him while she was away.

In 2007 Howard died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Nature heals and the rhythms and cycle of the seasons over the years. Rosemary carried on with the farm supported by John, her farm manager and farm hands David and Norman. She is full of admiration for them, especially John and his 'amazing commitment'. Rosemary told me she finds farming exciting – pitting oneself against nature – growing, battling the elements – crop successes, crop failures. Every season is different, every day is different. It seems to get into ones blood, become ones ebb and flow. She never gets bored. I suggested it was like gambling.

We have Rosemary's cauliflowers in the bags this week, her potatoes and carrots and her leeks. Red is trending in the bags this week. The ruby chard is from Lyncroft farm in Ormskirk.

Here are a couple of recipes you could try this week:

Sweet Potato, Chard and Peanut Stew

2 tbsp sunflower oil

1 tsp cumin seeds

½ tsp crushed chilli flakes

140g salted, roasted peanuts

1 large onion, chopped

400g sweet potatoes, cut into medium chunks

400g tin chopped tomatoes

250g chard, leaves and stems, washed and roughly chopped

Heat a large saucepan with a lid over a medium heat and add the oil. Stir in the cumin seeds until fragrant, about a minute, then add the sweet potato, chilli flakes, tomatoes and 750ml water. Stir, cover and bring to the boil, then uncover and simmer for 15 minutes. Meanwhile whizz the peanuts in a food processor until finely ground but stop before you end up with peanut butter. Add them to the stew, stir and taste for seasoning. You may need an extra pinch of salt. Simmer for a further 15 minutes, stirring frequently. Finally, stir in the chard, return to the boil and simmer, covered, stirring occasionally, for 8-10 minutes or until the chard is cooked. Serve piping hot with plenty of freshly ground black pepper.

Sag Aloo

1 large onion, chopped

bag chard or spinach, coarsely chopped

½ tsp cumin seeds

1 tsp garam masala

2 large potatoes, cut into ½" cubes

1 tsp ginger, grated

1 tsp turmeric

olive oil and butter

Fry the cumin seeds in a heavy bottomed pan in the oil and butter until just starting to brown. Add the onion and fry until starting to brown. Add the potato, garlic, turmeric, ginger and garam masala, then fry until starting to soften. Add the chard or spinach and cook until tender and wilting into the potato. Add salt to taste.

As for me, nothing's changed. I'm on week three of still trying to work out the point of the farm shop and café other than an exercise in shoe string commercial interior design and a study on the economics of running a café. Whatever you do, don't try it. Let me have been your learning curve. I am still stupefied and in shock. When I find out the reason why I did it I'll let you know.

I have a magazine coming here on Friday to do photos. I had someone over to do an emergency repair job on my hair yesterday after I took the nail scissors to it a few weeks ago. I had decided I was never going to have my photo taken ever again and that I would submit my own. However, when I looked at the magazine, I realised that wouldn't cut it. It was all about the photos – stunning landscape photography from all over the world. But I am going to insist on being very tiny and lost in the landscape. I have to do it for the sheep don't I, 1200 words to write. On Saturday was a huge live export of lambs to the Continent for ritual slaughter for Eid and another one tomorrow night. It breaks my heart – it's the September lamb sales – they're all on the move. The lucky ones will be slaughtered locally but most won't. Anything for Tesco will go to Merthyr Tydfil. The unlucky ones may end up as far away as the Middle East.

Kindest wishes,

Isobel