



Monday 6th November 2023

Dear Customer,

It's a thick, wet and foggy morning here. Visibility poor. November isn't my favourite month, then nor is December, nor January, nor February – the dark months. Yet I'm sure they will fly by like this whole year has flown, and the snowdrops and crocuses will be poking through again before we know it.

They are doing battle with the elements out on the farms. Every week it's touch and go which crops will make it through to harvest in these saturated lands. I was talking to Will Edwards this morning who farms down in the Lincolnshire fens and has been battling the ceaseless rain.

The problems started back in the spring, which was cold, wet and late, meaning everything was sown late. With early summer came the heatwave and drought, then in July it started raining and has barely stopped since. The broccoli can cope with a day of rain, then it dries off, but two or three days in a row and the water sits on the crown and rots the heads which eventually rot the stems. It just takes one head to go black on each head to lose the crop. They only yielded about 15% of their autumn broccoli. The wet weather pushed up their labour costs. They are normally quite well mechanised for weeding and hoeing but the land being so wet they haven't been able to use their machinery on it so all these tasks have had to be done by hand. The swedes grew quickly, too quickly, in the warm, wet weather – so quickly that they cracked open, got wet inside and rotted. They only managed a 20% yield. They got their potatoes in early, safe into the cold storage while neighbouring farms are slopping about in the mud trying to get theirs out. One of their neighbours has got 14 diggers out, every man and digger in the county, recruited to dig ditches to try and carry the water away to salvage his crops. It had rained 6" in 48 hours.

The Edwards farm is just 2 miles from the sea, at Wrangle, and they lie at between 7 and 9 feet below sea level. There are three sea banks – the first built in the 1800's when farmers claimed land from the sea – created from the marsh soil. The latest sea bank was funded by the EU and for conservation reasons, to protect the marshland, was created using earth scooped up from the farmer's land behind it where there is now a lake, with waves, which are eroding it away from behind. It breached in 2013 and tidal froth covered the farmland for miles.

Here are a few tasty recipes you could try this week:

Spicy Aubergine and Tomato

3 tbsp olive oil **1 aubergine, diced into 1cm squares**

3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced **440g tin chopped tomatoes**

1 tsp sugar **pinch ground all spice**

pinch cayenne pepper **splash balsamic vinegar**

fresh coriander, mint or parsley, chopped **salt and pepper**

In a large frying pan heat up olive oil and sauté diced aubergine until golden brown. Remove with a slotted spoon onto kitchen roll to remove excess oil. Add sliced garlic to remaining oil in the pan. Cook for a few minutes on a low heat. Before the garlic turns brown add tinned tomatoes with the sugar, allspice and cayenne. Turn up and reduce tomato down for about 10 minutes until very thick. Add aubergine back to the pan with the tomato sauce - heat through gently and add a splash of balsamic vinegar. Season well. Finish with fresh herbs.

Orange Drizzle Cake

200g butter / margarine, softened 275 g caster sugar, plus extra to decorate

4 Hen Nation eggs, lightly beaten 200g self-raising flour

finely grated zest 2 oranges and juice 3 oranges, keep separate

Preheat oven to 180°C / Gas 4. Grease and line a 900g loaf tin with baking parchment. In a large bowl, using a handheld electric whisk, beat butter and 200g caster sugar until pale and fluffy, about 3min. Gradually add the eggs, beating well after each addition.

Using a large metal spoon, fold in the flour, 2tbsp orange juice and most of the orange zest (reserve the rest for the drizzle). Scrape batter into prepared tin, smooth gently to level and bake for 55min-1hr or until a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean.

Meanwhile, make the syrup. Gently heat the remaining caster sugar, orange zest and juice in a small pan, stirring, until the sugar dissolves. Increase heat to high and bubble for 1min. As soon as the loaf comes out of the oven, poke holes into the top using a skewer and drizzle over half the syrup. Leave to soak for 10min then spoon over remaining syrup. Cool completely in the tin set on a wire rack, then turn out and dust with a little caster sugar to decorate. Serve in slices.

I have to tell you, it is already Wednesday, and this has been so hard to write, firstly for lack of concentration and secondly, my fingers aren't working properly. I spent the weekend worried sick that I had some degenerative disease. Something I'd been ignoring for a good while is a numbness in in a couple of fingers and my wrist. Finally, I started panicking about it and went onto Google. I have diagnosed myself with 'cubital tunnel syndrome'. It is afflicting mainly my left hand. It doesn't seem to be terminal and I found some exercises on YouTube as well as having bought a brace for my arm to stop me bending my elbow when I'm asleep. It could be a result of too much time typing and WhatsApping and holding my phone. It got a whole lot worse when I got a new phone which is bigger than my last one. So I am now trying to minimise the typing and am going to get earphones and a microphone. I do have a bit of numbness in the fingertips on the other hand which I just put down to laptop radiation, but my ring finger is swollen at the joint and I don't even know what I did to it. I made it a whole lot worse, when finally, my freestanding bath was plumbed in. I ran the bath to christen it and enjoy my first bath with a view over the valley. I went into the other bathroom to grab shampoo, soap, razor, in the dark, didn't bother putting the light on and cut a big slither of flesh off the already swollen finger. It poured blood and was agony and I am still nursing it.

The plumber when he was here noticed I have a few art deco things and told me about friends of his with a Le Corbusier-style home in Darlington which they had restored. There is a whole street of them there apparently and everyone has put pitched rooves on them. What do you do with a modernist Corbusier house - in London you put a £2 million price tag on it, in Darlington you put a roof on it.

I hope you have a good week,

Kind wishes, Isobel