OVER THE TOP

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Helge Rubinstein's chocolate desserts

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Beaujolais Nouveau—ripe for drinking

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Travelling in Thailand
RETURN TO REAL MEAT

A Devon company is delivering meat with the flavour and quality of days gone by. Robert Temple finds out how the old values are being revived, and brings good news of a special offer for Taste readers.

Anne Petch is waging a campaign on several fronts. On one hand, she is trying to bring back rare traditional breeds of farm animals that had almost become extinct. On the other, she is trying to bring back real flavour and quality to meat-eating.

Her perfectionism and dedication to quality and flavour know no bounds, and if she weren't so mild-mannered, quietly spoken and smiling, one would be tempted to think she must be a fanatic. Furthermore, she is waging an implied campaign against additives and 'rubbish meat', along

Below: Heal Farm, North Devon, where rare breeds of farm animals are roared just as they were back in the 18th century when meat tasted like meat.

It is now possible to step back in time and taste meat as it was in the good old days of the 18th century, when pork was pork, beef was beef, and George III would eat only Portland lamb.

Anne Petch, of Heal Farm in North Devon, is leading a crusade to give us real meat again. For the past seven years she has been supplying more and more people with meat from rare breeds of pigs. She rears them herself by traditional methods. In the past year or so she has expanded her range and now also offers beef from North Devon cattle; known locally as 'Red Rubies', they are direct descendants of ancient Roman plough oxen.

The latest addition is North Ronaldsay lamb from Linga Holm. On this island off the coast of Scotland, the lambs live on seaweed which they graze from the rocks. George III's favourite, Portland lamb, is now available from Heal Farm, too.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust, of which Anne Petch has long been an enthusiastic member, encourages her use of rare breeds for the table. 'They believe that I call attention to the breeds' existence and provide a reason for more people to want to breed them,' she says. 'That, in turn, will ensure their survival.'

She herself has a great love for her pigs: 'Look at that Tamworth. She carries herself like a great lady, doesn't she?' John Thomas from Umberleigh, her gentle farmer friend who supplies her with beef, says of his North Devon: 'They're lovely cattle. There's no breed like them.'
Right: Anne Petch is strongly against additives and the intensive-rearing techniques used to mass produce today.

are a triumph: the garlic ones are made with Isle of Wight garlic, the tomato, chilli and basil variety combine piquancy with mellowness. One sausage makes a meal.

She uses only shoulder meat and real casings.

Her version is from two-year-old prickers (young hams) of either roe or fallow deer, rather than the inferior red deer commonly available. She has just brought back real mutton from the traditional Ryeland or Southdown breeds: "This is not just old ewe but proper mutton, that is, a wether (castrated ram) which has gone through two whole summers and winters."

Anne is believed to be the only maker of native English salami. She has made eight different kinds, but during the 15 weeks it takes she cannot be away from home for more than a day at a time, so she personally supervises the entire process.

She also prepares bresaola, which is a very lean topside of beef cured in brine and Rowntree wine, and then dried and cured for four years. Other products include beef olives and smoked beef rolled in chilli and cayenne pepper. Now and then she makes a liver terrine. And her standard cold is made with ham or bacon, some fresh pork, and very little liver, some herbs, salt and pepper, and local Devon cider.

Heal Farm marketing has improved over the years and there are now some remarkable bargains. Kebab packs of beef, lamb and pork for £1.40, including delivery, are estimated to feed 60 people, thus making the price about 12p per head. For about £2.30 a head you can feed 100 people with the Barbecue/Grill pack, which otherwise "could feed a whole family for a summer". It includes a wide selection of different meats and cuts, along with recipes, samples of marinade spices and cooking instructions.

The most spectacular of all Anne Petch's offerings is unquestionably her hamper. She does a few for Easter and other special occasions, but her masterpiece is her Christmas hamper, which is just becoming famous. For £235 it will feed a family of six with plenty to spare for the entire holiday season, apart from vegetables, bread and drink. The food is packed in well-insulated, stout wicker hampers. The 24-hour delivery service ensures that all the produce arrives at the customer's door in perfect condition, ready for immediate use or storage for later on.

Anyone who orders their hamper through Taste (see page 70) will get a special bonus - an addition 2lb layered breast of Lings Holm lamb interlaced with Heal Farm's own apricot and cashew stuffing. The meat from these animals, available exclusively through Heal Farm, has a subtle piquant flavour and is very tender. The stuffed breast in the hamper is delicious hot or cold, and as it is attractively layered and easy to carve makes an interesting feature at a meal.

Certainly one of the strongest attractions of Anne's meat is that it contains no additives. None of her animals has had any copper or hormones pumped into it as growth-promoters. Nor have they been given antibiotics and asseme as is often the case with intensive rearing. For her cured meats she uses the smallest possible amounts of salt and pepper.

In the early days, a salesman discovered that Anne had lost 35% of the weight of a leg of fresh pork in the process of turning it into a ham. He boasted he could sell her a machine that would increase the weight by 60% instead. But she spurned this technological approach to meat production. She says that six years ago a trade journal carried a revealing advert headlined: "Why sell meat when you can sell water?" and offered a machine to extend the fibres of meat and inject water into it.

But Anne Petch refuses to sell water, or stabilisers, or any other additives. She is interested only in quality, and she has shown that quality will sell. When she was first written about in a national newspaper in 1981, she received 15,500 letters containing orders for her products. The market for flavoured 18th-century meat is, as she says, "big business."