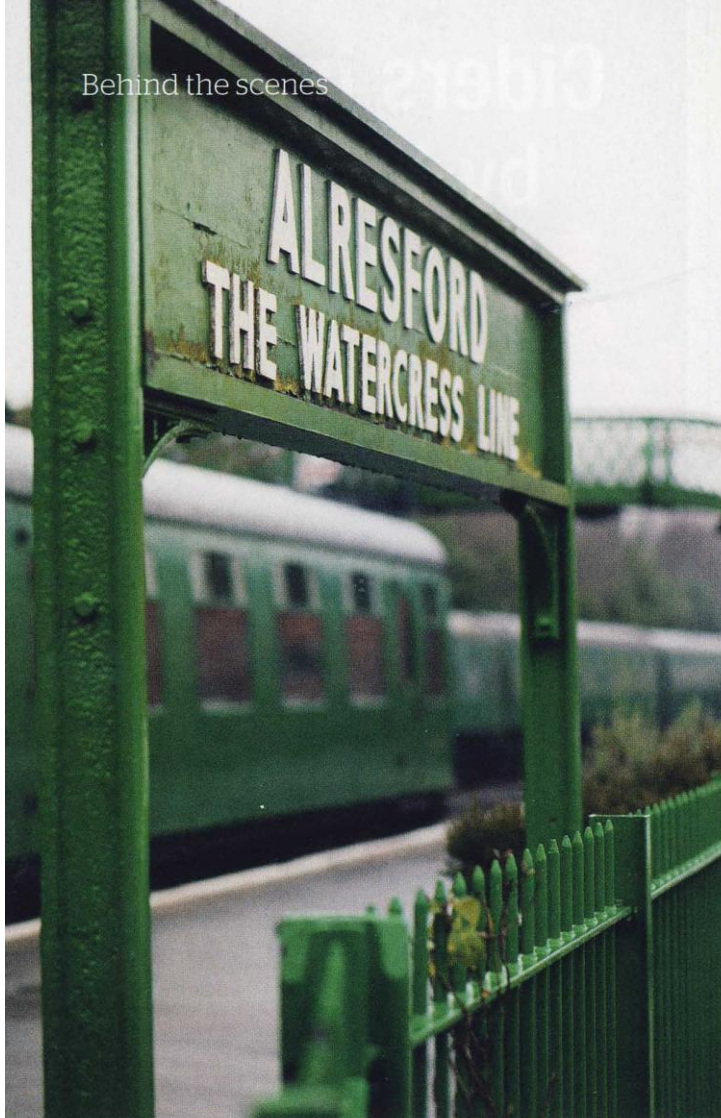


Behind the scenes

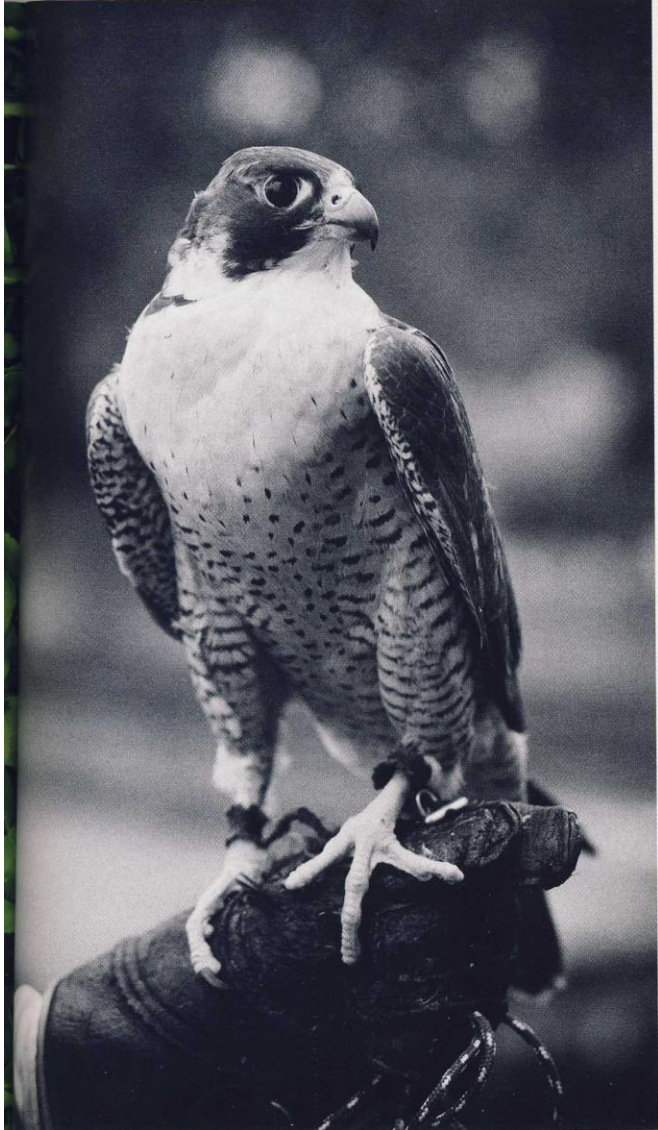


# The wonderful world of watercress

words daniel tapper

photographs cristian barnett

*Bright green, rich and peppery in taste, grown in gallons upon gallons of natural spring water and guarded by a peregrine falcon, there is more to watercress than meets the eye*



**G**race looks restless. Her eyes are fixed on something in the distance. And though she's tethered to her owner's arm, her wings are flapping fiercely. "She's spotted a pigeon," whispers falconer Bob Dalton. "Peregrine falcons are the fastest animals on earth, so that pigeon should probably hurry up and leave." Bob and Grace are on Manor Farm in Alresford, Hampshire, where they work every day to help keep pigeons away from the farm's award-winning crop – watercress. And using a bird of prey to scare them, instead of traps and poison, is humane and environmentally friendly.

It's no surprise that such effort is being invested in a deterrent like this. If left to their own devices, pigeons could destroy up to ten per cent of the farm's watercress. And this farm has a huge responsibility to provide a healthy crop – after all, it supplies every Waitrose store in the country. Britons consume more than 100 tonnes of watercress a week – more per person than any other nationality in the world.

Watercress from this part of Hampshire has always been popular – the steam railway route in this area became known as the Watercress Line due to its important role in transporting the leaves to London. "Watercress was one of the original superfoods," says Waitrose salads buyer Rhonwen Cunningham. "For many people it was their key source of vitamin C. And this health credential is one of the reasons it continues to be so popular today – as well as its delicious rich and peppery taste."

The watercress here owes its unique taste to the local water supply. This part of Hampshire, like the other watercress-growing areas of Wiltshire and Dorset, is

*The steam railway from Alresford became known as the Watercress Line due to its role in transporting the leaves to London, far left. Peregrine falcon Grace keeps a lookout for troublesome pigeons, middle right. Rhonwen Cunningham, Waitrose salads buyer, right, tastes watercress fresh from the field*



Husband and wife team Sean and Penny Ede, right, nurture 29 beds of watercress on the farm. They inspect their crop daily, top, as the quality of the cress is paramount

positioned over an aquifer, which provides a natural underground reservoir of mineral-rich water. The water, which has been underground for 50 years or more, shoots out from a spring and is channelled into large shallow beds of locally sourced gravel. Husband and wife team Sean and Penny Ede then use these beds to plant, grow and harvest all their watercress.

In total there are 29 beds on the farm, each one bursting with copious amounts of bright green watercress. The roots of these plants lie submerged in water, while their hollow stems enable the leaves to float on the surface. "Two million gallons of water pass through these beds every day," says Sean. "And it all happens naturally. This area is really special because it's full of springs like this. One local lady even had a spring appear in the middle of her very expensive parquet kitchen floor."

The water is crystal clear – it's perfect for growing watercress and ideal for supporting the local ecosystem. "My family have been farming watercress in this area for three generations," says Penny. "As children we'd go fishing in the channels of water that feed the beds and we'd catch minnows and frog spawn – testament to the cleanliness of the water."

And 40 years on, an abundance of wildlife is still attracted to the area, including otters, buzzards, deer, rainbow trout and kingfishers. The wildlife is thriving, mainly thanks to Sean and Penny's insistence on sustainable farming techniques. Indeed, the watercress from Manor Farm has been awarded a Leaf (Linking Environment And Farming) marque, which recognises farms that work to enhance the natural environment. One reason for this is Sean and Penny's avoidance of pesticides. "We spray the cress with garlic instead," says Sean. "It naturally deters insects without the

*"You can tell it's good just by looking at it," says Rhonwen, inspecting a bunch in her hands*

need for chemicals. In our eyes we have a huge responsibility for the cleanliness of the water that passes through here. If we did use chemicals then we'd risk losing all the local wildlife."

If the couple persist in using these natural methods of farming, how do they produce such consistently good results? After all, watercress is a notoriously temperamental crop to grow: if the weather is cold and windy, its leaves will turn blue and if the weather is hot and dry, it can easily wilt and die. But the cress here is thick, broad-leaved and a rich green. "You can tell it's good just by looking at it," says Rhonwen, inspecting a bunch in her hands. But it's not chemicals that are responsible for this quality; it's down to the people who work here. "We live, breathe and eat watercress," says Penny. "It means waking up at 5.30 every morning and working almost seven days a week. But we love it – watercress really is a way of life for us."



Treading lightly  
The Waitrose way



Manor Farm's  
Strong Watercress  
is available  
at Waitrose