
Opening Extract from...

Countrywise Country Cookbook

Written by Mike Robinson

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COUNTRY COOKBOOK

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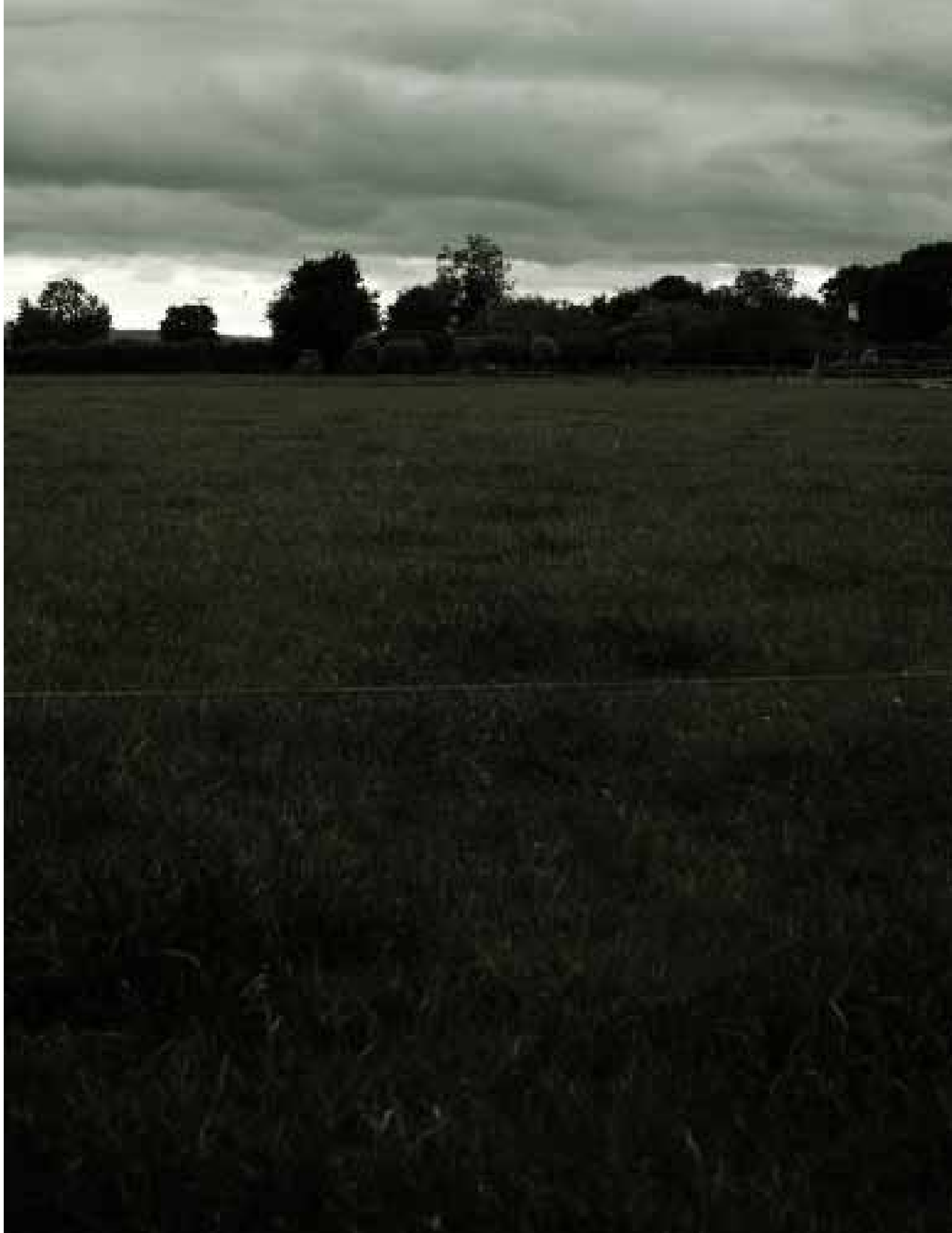

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I consider myself to be the luckiest of men. I travel the country, foraging and cooking, for *Countrywise* and *Countrywise Kitchen* and I live in an area that, in my opinion, is akin to paradise: west Berkshire. At home I use the fat of the land in a practical way, working as a modern-day hunter-gatherer and feeding customers at my pub, The Pot Kiln, so that everyone benefits. It is a privilege to present *Countrywise* and *Countrywise Kitchen* with Paul Heiney, for we get to eat the best the UK has to offer and get to meet people who really know our country and what makes it tick.

It is amazing how much food is out there in this bounteous land of ours, and how well the land works, when left to the devices of people who understand it. These people – the farmers, gamekeepers and fishermen – are the reason why *Countrywise* and *Countrywise Kitchen* exist; they are the cement that holds the British countryside together, and *Countrywise* is their programme.

'We have an amazingly diverse variety of landscapes and cultures on this postage stamp of an island. As a result, our foodstuffs change hugely across the length and breadth of the country.'

We have an amazingly diverse variety of landscapes and cultures on this postage stamp of an island. As a result, our foodstuffs change hugely across the length and breadth of the country. You cannot farm lamb in the same way on the rich downland of Hampshire as you would on the windswept and harsh uplands of the Outer Hebrides, for example, and yet we call the meat 'lamb' notwithstanding. We need to get the hang of provenance – that is, to know exactly what our food is and where it comes from.

There is a real change happening to the food culture in Britain. We, the Great British public, are demanding ever-higher standards from our food, and producers are responding as never before. I get very excited by the buzz at food markets and farm shops on a Saturday morning. And it is not only the small shops and markets – supermarkets are doing it, too.

This demand for ever-increasing quality has had a direct effect on farming practices. A few years ago we would have thought an organic chicken was really 'out there', but now we will pick up organic produce without giving it a second thought.

I believe that the biggest single change is our awareness of food ethics. Ethical food to me is food that achieves two goals. Firstly, for meat and fish, it should mean that the animal has had the best life possible and, crucially, the most respectful end. Secondly, the land should suffer as little as possible from the raising of the food; I see daily how species such as the brown hare, one of our most beautiful and iconic mammals, have benefited from good modern farming techniques. No longer subject to toxic sprays, and allowed conservation strips that are left wild around fields, these creatures are doing really well. Wildlife in general has much to thank the British farmer for.

'We picked masses of heady scented wild garlic, wild hop shoots from the hedgerows and sundry other edibles that teemed wherever we looked.'

Another big change that has come about in recent years, and one that still has a long way to go, is our awareness of seasonality. Until 40 or so years ago we never gave it a second thought; we just ate food that was in season. You had asparagus in May, and that was that. The idea of buying it in December would never have entered people's minds. Modern transport techniques changed all that and now you can buy a product like asparagus all year round, albeit from Peru.

We are learning to embrace the seasonality of our foods and to make the most of the often short windows of opportunity. As I write this, the trees outside are bursting with elderflowers – one of the most wonderful tastes there is, but only available in a three-week window, which in the past we made full use of. Elderflower cordial is unbelievably easy to make and is basically the bottled and preserved sunshine of early summer. I make tons of it, just as I pick the sloes of Autumn and preserve them in gin for the cold Winter months.

Nowhere is this idea of seasonality so important as in the hunt for wild food. Foraging has become a buzzword as people enjoy the thrill of finding wild food, which is available in abundance in the UK.

I particularly enjoy foraging on the seashore. One of the beauties of our coastline, especially the cleaner parts like north Devon, is that we can, with a little knowledge and the right feel for the environment, go and forage safely for the bounty to be found there. In this day and age of rules and regulations there is a delight to be gained from finding a meal for free: it gives a childish pleasure and is an enjoyable form of hunting that people should try. All you need is a reference work (I like Roger Phillips' great book *Wild Food*, a photographic guide to every wild edible food in the UK, with its seasonality and general advice).

If you are going to join the millions who are thinking hard about how they eat, then you need to know your vegetables. Our temperate islands, protected from the savage Arctic cold by the Gulf Stream, grow some of the finest veg in the world, and thousands of artisan producers are growing amazing food in the soil. As a committed carnivore, I only learned to love vegetables when I took over the pub The Pot Kiln six years ago. We had a small piece of waste land behind the pub that needed using, so we built some beds and engaged a local expert to help. Now our garden has a polytunnel, we use every inch of land we have and grow all our salads, most of our veg and a lot of herbs. To be able to walk out of the kitchen door and pick salad leaves 10 minutes before service is a real joy, and makes me feel like I am doing something worthwhile. The taste of food like this is unparallelled, since none of its flavour has been lost. You can get close to this by buying your veg when it comes into season, and not using imported produce. You can also, of course, start growing some of your own. You don't need a garden – window boxes are awesome for growing salads and carrots.

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Seasonality is not just for the land, however. Fish, in both our seas and rivers, are seasonal. When filming fishing for *Countrywise* I am always struck by the love that fishermen have for what they do. On a memorable morning on a crab boat out of Lulworth Cove in Dorset, we caught a huge lobster, and I mean *huge* – this old fellow must have been 100 years old and weighed about seven kilos. The fisherman looked at it with real affection and mentioned that he caught it about four times a year. There was not even a thought of killing such a fabulous creature, and back into the sea it went. These people are the real conservationists – they appreciate that if they take too much, their livelihood will be gone. A good example of this is the wonderful Randolph Jenkins, who I filmed with on the Gower Peninsula in south Wales. What a place! Miles of sandy beach, which Randolph has walked for 60 years. His particular skill is in finding the area's buried treasure: the cockle. I love these humble little shellfish, and the Gower used to have them by the million. Unfortunately, the beaches have been ravaged by commercial cockling and now produce a shadow of their former bounty. Randolph taught me how to riddle with a sieve and rake and we found a bucketful, of which he lovingly returned at least half to grow on. The rest, cooked on the tailgate of the Izuzu with a little local cider and cream, were a revelation, and I salute him.

Let's talk river fishing for a minute. I love fishing, and several million other Britons do as well. It seems to be part of our national psyche. There is something so deep-down exciting about outwitting a fish, whether it is with a dry fly or a maggot. But from an eating point of view it is usually the fly-fisherman who eats what he catches. Our lakes and rivers are carefully

stewarded to ensure abundant insect life and water quality, and managed to prevent overfishing. I am, at heart, a fly-fisherman. For me, the pursuit of the salmon or trout is one of the most elegant forms of hunting. Attempting to mimic the trout's natural food, either in the nymph form, or better, in the dry-fly form, is half the battle. The other half is the skill of presenting the fly to the fish in such a way that he wants to gobble it. Remember, the fish will not expend the energy in coming for a fly unless he is sure he is going to get it, so accuracy is everything.

I have had several brilliant days filming this frustrating sport for *Countrywise*, and met some real masters of the art. Lee Cummings is one of the UK's top fly-fishermen, and lives near his beloved Lake District. We met at the lonely, windswept, but achingly beautiful Devoke Tarn, which is the highest lake in England. We fished our hearts out for one little brown trout (but what a pretty trout!) and one perch. Not much, you may think, but when we cooked them in lemon juice and foil, and watched the sunset with a hint of wood smoke in the air, all was well with the world (see page 134).

A wise man once said that God does not take from the term of a man's life time spent fishing, and I am tempted to agree with him.

I grew up literally surrounded by shooting. The part of Berkshire that was my home in childhood (and still is) is very rural, and every farm and estate in the region has a shoot. Shooting has been one of the most important factors in shaping our countryside for the last 1,000 years. Almost every piece of private land in the UK (and that is most of it) provides a venue for sport shooting. Whether you agree with it or not, shooting (by which I mean the formal or informal shooting of pheasants, partridges and ducks that have been reared and released for the purpose) is key to the management of the British countryside today. The fact that people pay a lot of money to come and shoot throughout the winter is a godsend to the farmers and estates in rural parts of the country. The money from shooting does not go to increase the wealth of landowners, as is often said. In reality, very few shoots make money, they just plough it back into management – paying for the gamekeepers and the feed merchants and keeping the rural economy going. The simple truth is that most 'shooting folk' are by their nature committed conservationists.

'A wise man once said that God does not take from the term of a man's life time spent fishing, and I am tempted to agree with him.'

Shooting involves the careful use of the ground, which ensures a haven for wildlife and keeps the balance of the countryside in place. The important thing to me is that all game that is shot must be eaten and used. Game is healthy, with no cholesterol and very little fat; it offers good value for money and it is not imported. It has also had a really great life, being properly free

range and slowly grown (in the case of pheasants and partridges). If you have not tried eating it, please buy some the next time you're in the supermarket or farmer's market and it is in season (think Autumn and Winter, on the whole).

Reared game aside, the wild game of the UK is amazing, and is in great demand. Rabbits, pigeons and wild venison-meat that would have all have gone to France and Spain, is now mostly consumed here. It's amazing to think that on this crowded island we have no fewer than six species of wild deer, which have no natural predator apart from us. They are present in huge numbers, and those numbers are growing. Unless they're controlled, they will suffer, so you should feel no qualms about eating this most magnificent meat.

Scotland is the homeland of the deer, and it is full of them. However, red deer in Scotland are generally well managed and provide not only a large source of domestic venison, but also generate huge amounts of revenue that goes directly to the upkeep of the rural estates. This revenue comes from the large sums that people will pay to stalk the deer in the wild Scottish mountains – a truly amazing experience that is gaining in popularity. I was lucky enough to film *Countrywise* in the beautiful Trossachs region of Scotland with Paul Kent and Angus Churchill, two experienced stalkers who look after the red and roe deer over an area of about 30,000 acres. Spending a day with such quiet, honourable men was a real pleasure and, while the weather ruined our stalk, I learned much and will return. Paul was a fine advertisement for living on venison – tall and very fit, he has a reputation for being able to walk for days up vertical hillsides with no apparent effort.

'Game is healthy, with no cholesterol and very little fat; it offers good value for money and it is not imported.'

I mainly stalk and manage the lowland species of deer. Venison is so popular in both my pubs (The Harwood Arms in London, which I co-own, as well as The Pot Kiln in Berkshire) that between the two we use about 400 deer a year. In order to fulfil that demand, I manage about 20,000 acres of private land in and around Berkshire. It works well, because everyone benefits – the farmers get their crops protected, the estates get a revenue, and I get the venison.

One of the oldest and most challenging forms of shooting to be found in the British Isles is wildfowling. It has always been, and still is, enjoyed by an eclectic bunch of individual men and women who don't mind braving waist-deep freezing-cold tidal mud flats, extremes of temperature, and ultimate discomfort, to outwit and shoot a few wily wild ducks and geese. This is surely one of the most rewarding forms of shooting. The Heacham Wildfowlers' Club has been looking after a large part of the north Norfolk coast for several decades. They have steadily improved the habitat and generally done wonders for the conservation in the area. In return for all their hard work, every year each member is allowed to shoot a few geese and ducks.

Darren, who took me out for *Countrywise*, is a master of the sport, and taught me a lot in the short time we spent together. It is astonishing how difficult it is, especially hitting the teal that come in early morning and late evening. These ducks fly spectacularly quickly and plunge down to feed from a height, like a swooping peregrine. We were lucky enough to shoot three the morning we spent crouching in the reeds, and since the weather was particularly brisk, they had cooled down by the time the sun was risen and we decided to eat.

'The recipes in this book are all simple. They have to be, or they would take too long to film. If you cannot find an ingredient, you can substitute something else. They usually offer good value for money, since I am a great proponent of using cheaper cuts of meat wherever possible. '.

Filming for *Countrywise* and *Countrywise Kitchen* presents its own problems. The weather is one. I love being outdoors in foul weather but sometimes it is truly awful. This does not really matter, of course, but cooking on a barbecue in a howling gale is novel and quite tricky. One of the best things about the programme for me is the challenge of cooking a recipe on the tailgate of my trusty pickup truck. We have developed this into quite a black art and I can assure you that everything is as you see it – no cheating allowed. Some of these recipes have made it onto my pub menus, and all are to be found here.

Now to the recipes: the recipes in this book are all simple. They have to be, or they would take too long to film. If you cannot find an ingredient, you can substitute something else. They usually offer good value for money, since I am a great proponent of using cheaper cuts of meat wherever possible, and I am aware of the economic times we live in. There is quite a lot of slow cooking in this book, so make sure you have a couple of good, heavy sauté pans in steel or iron (pans with a high side but basically frying pans) and some large saucepans. Finally, you will need a big, heavy casserole; you will use it for everything, so go invest.

Knives are the next must-have – get some good ones, and some scissors and a heavy cleaver, and learn how to keep them sharp. A good kitchen knife is the original food processor, and knife skills are key to good cookery.

I recommend everyone cultivates a relationship with a good butcher and a good fishmonger. Once you get on well, he or she will help you source things, since repeat business is really hard to get these days. I work with one butcher who not only supplies my meat, but also taught me everything I know about wild game and deer. If you cannot get, say, roe deer venison from a butcher, then go online. Nearly all artisan meat and fish is now available online, just try a few brands or farms until you find a product you like.

Thank you for watching *Countrywise* and *Countrywise Kitchen* and for buying this book. Our countryside is so precious, and the only way we can protect it is by furthering the understanding of how it works. I am proud to be a part of such a good show and hope that you carry on enjoying it for years to come.

MEAT

MEAT

As one of the country's most ardent carnivores, I could talk for days on this subject alone. But since this book is not just about meat I will confine myself to a few thoughts. I believe that we in Britain produce the best meat in the world. There is a real resurgence in our native breeds, and we are getting away from the post-war mentality of growing meat fast by any means.

Let us start with what we are best known for: beef. We are blessed with a profusion of wonderful breeds of cattle in these islands, and during my journey with *Countrywise* I have seen quite a few of them. I have admired and tasted the best Britain has to offer, from the Sussex, to the Ruby Red Devon, to the Welsh Black, to the Highland. All the breeds have their good points, but what I really appreciate is when cattle is farmed in the area it was bred to live in. As one farmer said to me, they are of the landscape.

All these breeds give meant with slightly different qualities, depending particularly on what the animals eat and what their environment is. The main thing for me is that they are allowed to grow slowly and, once slaughtered, are then allowed to hang properly.

Hanging is key to good beef. If a carcass has good conformation (that is, the right quantity of muscle and fat), it will eat well so long as a proportion of the moisture is allowed to disappear and the meat can darken, relax and dry out a little. Only dry aged beef will offer that.

Alan Hayward, who is my mentor and a genius butcher, says that he recommends hanging the forequarters of a body of beef for up to 15 days, and the hindquarters (where all the posh cuts are) for about 30 days. This will give the meat that famous, rich, beefy flavour that shouts quality. This, combined with the farmer's hard work, will give you stellar results.

Remember that there is more to a body of beef than its fillets and sirloin. The lesser, cheaper cuts are from muscles that have done a lot of work over the years and, whilst needing slow cooking, will have a fabulous flavour.

Veal is much misunderstood in the UK. I am not talking about Dutch veal that has been kept in crates and denied light and solid food. I am talking about British rose veal, which would have been shot at birth to keep the cows milking if it were not used for veal, but which here is lovingly brought on for eight months before slaughter, enjoying had a good standard of living. English veal is a fabulous meat product, pink in colour and quite delicious, and needs to be supported as an industry. Anyone who is happy to eat lamb should have no problems with veal.

The flavour of lamb varies immensely depending on its breed and where it's from. It is now easy to buy many varieties of lamb, from Poll Dorsets (my great friend Tom Brown farms these just up the road from me, near Reading, and they are a wonderful breed – not particularly big, but they taste fabulous) to Soay sheep from the wild islands off Scotland, which are dark and strong in flavour, to Jacobs and, of course, the now legendary Herdwicks from the Lake District. All have one thing in common – a great life spent outdoors and some passionate people farming them.

Look for lamb that lived to at least six months old. Very young lamb is pale and has very little flavour in my book. You should choose lamb that has a good 5mm/1/4 inch of fat on its back and looks muscular. Lamb should not be hung for too long – a week is more than enough.

Mutton, once wildly out of fashion, is now really popular. Strictly speaking, it is the meat from a sheep that was slaughtered at two years of age or older. Mutton is darker, stronger in flavour and larger than lamb, but the same cooking principles apply. The recipe for slow-braised shoulder of mutton on p.000 is particularly good.

What a noble animal is the pig. Once upon a time every family would have kept a pig over the summer, which would then have fed them over the winter. Just think what the pig gives us – bacon (glorious bacon!), chops, roasts, sausages, black pudding, trotters – the list is endless. As with cattle and sheep, there is an amazing variety of pig breeds. I have a particular fondness for the Black Berkshire, with its squashed face and glorious high fat content. Other notable breeds are the Saddleback, the Oxford Sandy Black, the Tamworth and the Gloucester Old Spot. When buying pork, look for a really good layer of white fat over the meat. When purchasing chops I like about 2cm/3/4 inch of fat on them – yum.

MUSTARD-SPICED T-BONE STEAK

Serves 2*: All year round*

Beef is an evocative subject to the British; we are proud of our heritage cattle, and rightly so. There is no more heritage a cow than the Sussex cow – these animals were roaming the Sussex hills when the Normans invaded in 1066, and have changed little since. Like many of our native breeds, they are perfectly adapted to their environment, having dark curly coats that defy the summer sun and the ability to graze on poor-quality winter grass. They are 'slow-growing' animals – this was a dirty word for many years, but now slow-grown meat is, thank God, fashionable again.

Whatever the breed, I think the most noble cut of beef is the T-bone. It must be cut thick, at least 2.5cm/1 inch (preferably 4cm/1½ inches), and should encompass both the sirloin and the fillet. A T-bone cut like this will weigh 800–900g/1¾lb–2lb, and will set you back the best part of £20.00. Think of it this way, that's a tenner-a-head to have a massive two-person feast of the finest aged beef that Britain has to offer.

1 x 800–900g/1¾lb–2lb T-bone steak
1 tsp English mustard powder
1 tbsp vegetable oil
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F/gas mark 6. Liberally sprinkle the meat with salt, pepper and English mustard powder. Rub the seasoning into the meat, then lightly oil a very heavy pan. Bring the pan up to heat so that the air above the pan is shimmering and the oil is smoking lightly. Drop in the T-bone and cook without moving it around for 90 seconds. Turn the steak over and cook it for another 90 seconds. Transfer the meat to a roasting tray and place it in the oven for 7 minutes for medium-rare, 8-9 minutes for medium and 10-11 minutes for well done (the cooking time will vary depending on the thickness of the steak, so do keep an eye on it). Remove it from the oven and allow it to rest on a wooden board for 10 minutes.

I like to serve a T-bone with piles of crunchy, garlicky fried potatoes and perhaps a thin slice of butter slowly melting over the top.