The eight seasons of the year

28 Aug 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

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Today, the adjective 'seasonal' exerts a vice-like grip on British menus. Every press release I receive about a new restaurant makes it very clear that this will be this chef's distinctive approach to preparing his dishes, while the same philosophy dictates what is on television cookery shows (within the constraints of scheduling) and the recipes in cookery columns.

A seasonal approach has many virtues. It means that the customer can enjoy ingredients at their freshest while the kitchens are working most closely with local suppliers, minimising air miles, packaging and waste. But it is an approach that begs two questions. Firstly, which season are we in? And, for certain ingredients most affected by rapidly changing weather patterns, which part of which season? Many British chefs have come to appreciate that there are now far more than the assumed four seasons in the year.

The most recent season to have got underway is the game season that began in mid August with grouse and will extend via pheasant, partridge, wild duck and woodcock until early 2013. And while many chefs are currently extolling the virtues of their roast grouse, my appetite was particularly whetted by the game menu proposed from mid September by Indian chef Karam Sethi at Trishna restaurant in Marylebone that will include a venison keema naan and tandoori partridge with a five-spice marinade.

Fish, too, are far more susceptible to seasonal fluctuations than most chefs acknowledge when they invariably hide behind the phrase 'market fish'. According to Natalie Hudd, sales director of fishmongers James Knight of Mayfair, variations in water temperature, spawning and migration patterns significantly affect the daily catch. Fish at their best in September include mackerel, rope-grown mussels, squid and lemon sole.

I have recently been especially struck by how one particular chef successfully handles the fluctuations in what he receives from his principal fruit and vegetable supplier and then adapts these to the menus of the four restaurants for which he is responsible. All this came home to me over lunch at The Grazing Goat in Marylebone just north of Oxford Street, and a subsequent dinner at its sister restaurant, The Pantechnicon in Belgravia.

Lunch of a minted pea and broad bean tart, spring carrots and turnips and creamed leeks with thyme exemplified the best of seasonal cooking in a British summer. The colours were vibrant; the ingredients cleverly coalesced; the dish exuded freshness and a touch of acidity; and it was delicious to eat, filling and not at all heavy. It was somewhat ironic, therefore, to discover that the chef who had created this, and the excellent first course of Scottish scallops, Wiltshire truffles, cauliflower and girolle mushrooms at The Pantechnicon, came from a remote part of New Zealand's North island.

Phil Wilson (above left) is the executive chef responsible for not just these two restaurants but also The Thomas Cubitt in Victoria and The Orange close by. This small group belongs to property developers Barry Hirst and Stefan Turnbull, whose initial success took them to homes in Belgravia only to lament the absence of anywhere locally where they would want to eat. They promptly turned what was a neglected pub into The Thomas Cubitt and have worked equally sensitively on the other three restaurants that respect both local styles and history. (The Grazing Goat is so called because in the mid 19th century the land was used for grazing goats for the then lactose-intolerant Lady Portman.)

Wilson was determined to move towards seasonal menus and, encouraged by the admirable Sustainable Restaurant Association, switched from buying his fruit and vegetables from New Covent Garden Market, where, he explained, he saw the same produce year-round, to buying from Secretts, a large farm outside Guildford, Surrey. 'It is more expensive', he admitted, 'but far more fascinating'.

And far more challenging, he added, particularly this year when hardly any fruits or vegetables have stuck to their normal seasonal rhythm. Thanks to a cold start to the year followed by heavy rain that washed away the spring seedlings, many crops have started often as much as a month late and in certain instances had no sooner appeared before they vanished. Wilson's face turned almost sour when he recalled the abrupt end to this year's season for asparagus, many chefs' favourite ingredient. 'We were on a staff trip to the farm and I could see that there were still plenty in the ground and I

wanted them for our menus. But I was told that they had to stay there to germinate, otherwise there would be none next year. It was sad', he explained.

Having come to terms somewhat with the vagaries of British weather, Wilson now believes that there may be as many as eight different seasons in a growing year with different varieties of fruit and vegetable appearing and disappearing as Nature dictates.

Experienced, chastened, but far from downhearted, Wilson has devised a clever method of writing the menus for four restaurants that allows each chef some individual expression and meets the financial demands of his bosses. The left-hand side of each dish, the protein, is printed on to a menu that lasts approximately three months. But each Tuesday morning at the company's smart HQ just behind The Grazing Goat, the in-house printers add the critical right-hand side in distinct italics: the vegetable or salad accompaniment to the Devon crab or shoulder of lamb; the Suffolk chicken; the Castle of Mey beef; or the garnish with the English strawberries.

Appetising menus - for all seasons.

Trishna www.trishnalondon.com

The Grazing Goat, **The Orange**, **The Pantechnicon, The Thomas Cubitt** www.cubitthouse.co.uk