

THRINGS MEETS...

Lying on the northern edge of the New Forest, Lyburn Farm has been run by the Smales family for almost half a century



Current owner, Mike Smales, talks cheese, vegetables and Brexit with Thrings partner, Mark Charter

Mike, how did your association with Hampshire begin?

My father came to Little Buckholt farm in West Tytherley in 1952. He worked for Lord Carnarvon, who gave him three cows on leaving. We took on the Lyburn Farm tenancy in 1969 - it was almost derelict - with 270 acres and no cows. We then put in 200 cows. Today Jonathan, our eldest, runs the farm, we have a dairyman, a tractor driver and I run the cheese plant. We have about 500 acres and a closed herd of 170 cows.

How would you sum up Lyburn's cheese offering?

We set out to use as much of our milk as possible while making something that wasn't too niche, too blue or too complicated. I describe our Old Winchester cheese as part way between cheddar, gouda and parmesan. People ask why we don't make brie or camembert or blue cheese. We're happy making a tonne and a half of cheese a week. Why make life more complicated than it needs to be?



But you weren't always solely focused on dairy?

We chose to grow vegetables early on. An old friend of mine, Peter Barfoot, and I were growing sweetcorn and we were asked by Waitrose if we would 'go organic'. Twenty years on, our sweetcorn, broad beans, runner beans, green beans, courgettes, pumpkins, squash, sweetcorn and peas are all organic.

We still work with Barfoots and Waitrose, as well as with Riverford and Abel & Cole.

Do you operate internationally?

Old Winchester - or 'Old Smales' - is exported through the Fine Cheese Company and featured at the Winter Fancy Food Show in San Francisco in January. We spent three days supporting our exporters, who also sell our products in Australia, the Middle East and Singapore. We end up going all over the place.

What impact do you think Brexit will have on farming?

There will inevitably be winners and losers from Brexit. Profitable businesses which have diversified will be fine, while for others the outlook is less certain. We take on about 20 seasonal staff from Bulgaria and Romania during the summer. We need access to foreign workers, but the jury is still out on how Brexit will affect this. We're pleased the Single Farm Payment is continuing for another five years - it will help stabilise rural communities and give them time to adjust.

You've said that farmers' markets are important to Lyburn

When farmers' markets started in 1999, we decided to get involved straightaway, and we still sell in Romsey, Petersfield, Winchester, Southsea, Emsworth and Ringwood. I've been dealing with the same people at some farmers' markets for nearly 20 years - we have some very loyal customers. A successful farmers' market needs a diverse range of products, and they clearly continue to help a lot of businesses, large and small.

So are they still a key part of your marketing strategy?

Farmers' markets are an excellent shop window for us, and account for about 10 per cent of our trade. They also allow us to speak directly to customers and, crucially, get their feedback. You meet a lot of very interesting people from all over the world at farmers' markets - from local families to New Zealand and American dairy farmers - which is why I still really enjoy them.