

Spring is just around the corner
Andy Link, chef/patron at The Riverside Inn, Aymestrey
Talking Point - Hereford Times

It cannot be denied - the days are lengthening, and while we could still have snow and ice in the weeks to come, the signs of spring are there. Snowdrops, crocus, the first daffodils, aconites and increased bird song all give clear signs that warmer weather is not that far away.

For us at The Riverside and our sister pub, The Bateman Arms in Shobdon, it's an exciting time as we devise our spring menus. Hearty food can give way to something lighter and more playful.

One of the first seasonal highlights is the lovely blushing pink early rhubarb from the Wye Valley. It looks fabulous on the plate, and is very versatile. Soon after, we can look forward to asparagus - local asparagus has a tender sweetness that the imported stuff lacks. It's only around for about six weeks, so while it's there we make the most of it, and it appears in many guises on our menus.

Our kitchen garden here at The Riverside will be sporting its first leafy greens, and I'll be heading out on my much anticipated foraging forays, looking wild garlic, dandelion, nettles and even more unusual ingredients such as gorse flowers.

Spring time also feels like a new start, far more so than in the New Year, when the cold and dark induce a hibernation mentality. Looking ahead, we'll be meeting producers to source ever more exciting local meat, vegetables, herbs and drinks from the people on our doorstep. Supporting local enterprises is so important, not just in terms of reducing air miles and our carbon footprint, but to keep local communities alive and thriving.

As more and more people live and work in urban areas, the countryside is in danger of becoming a theme park, and we as individuals lose touch with the natural world.

The exciting conservation project at Knepp in Sussex has allowed a failing farm to be left to its own devices. With hands off the steering wheel, pesticides

and herbicides withdrawn, and scrub and flood plains allowed free rein, eco systems have recovered spectacularly well. The 3,500 acre estate has become a stronghold for Turtle Doves, a species threatened with extinction in the UK, also for the nightingale, a once common species that is now a rarity.

In our kitchen garden we have created a space for seasonal produce for our kitchen, but also considered how the garden can provide a diverse home for wildlife. This year, we are looking more closely at making a garden that is conducive to pollinators, birds, hedgehogs, and reptiles. As habitat in the wider landscape diminishes, our gardens are increasingly important as wildlife havens.

What's more, culturally speaking, diets are changing, with people opting for a plant-based diet and meat-eaters looking at ethically reared meat sources. As a proud supporter of British farms/growers and producers we continue to showcase our local producers whilst trying to adapt to guests' changing diets.

There is also the issue of food waste. The amount we throw away as a nation is shocking, even when taking account that overall food waste is down by seven per cent. We should not be seduced by two for one options, and we should shop locally, wherever possible. Walking to your local shop means that you do not buy more than you can carry, and you support a vital community enterprise.