

I HAVE just read the article on potatoes by Silvija Davidson, with pleasure and (I'm afraid) an appetite stimulated by the foody delights she describes so well.

As an inhabitant of Jersey, the Jersey Royal potato plays a major part in my life every year. There is nothing nicer (and if Silvija is reading, I hope I can now make her hungry in the same way that has just made me) than a bowl of Jersey Royal potatoes, dug from the ground, shaken, washed, and lightly scrubbed free of the loose earth covering it, boiled with a sprig of mint, and served with melted Jersey butter for dinner the same day.

Not only a delicious accompaniment to, perhaps, local fish or shellfish freshly caught, or Jersey beefsteak, but a dish that could be much enjoyed on its own – it is certainly much tastier than a mere 'accompaniment' to something else. Potatoes might seem to be a fairly neutral and uncontroversial subject about which to write, but anyone who thinks that might be the case does not know Jersey, or the passions and the politics that have existed regarding its growing and marketing.

In the spring, before the potato harvest commences, it is fascinating to see the steep southerly facing slopes green with potato plants, occupying the same favourable microclimate sites that would be occupied by vines if Jersey were a part of a wine-growing culture.

The Jersey Royal is the only potato that enjoys protected designation of origin – similar to the AC designation for French wines – that has been made available from the European Commission, and it can only be sold as 'Jersey Royals' if grown in Jersey. The comparison with wine continues into the way the potato has been marketed. It has been called 'the champagne of potatoes' – a slightly self-conscious ho-ho description that emphasises its delicious taste, and, of course, explains why it is more expensive than 'yer average bog-standard' main crop or new potato from goodness knows where.

Back in the 1980s there was a marvellous marketing exercise when, for a few years, and borrowing from the then popular 'Beaujolais Nouveau' run, a day would be designated as the start of the potato season, and growers and marketeers would 'compete' to get the first potatoes out of the ground, transport them to London by various wacky means, and get them served up the same evening at (I think) Claridges.

Those were the days, of course, when the finance industry was producing so much money for Jersey, that in the words of a senior politician of the time, asking a question in the Island's parliamentary chamber about whether some significant investment in infrastructure could be afforded, replied: 'Of course we can - we have money coming out of our ears.' In 2010, with headlines in the local newspaper of the Island government having to find £50 million in savings, it is unlikely that such jollies will be repeated in the foreseeable future.

When I was the chairman of the Jersey Slow Food group, I recommended successfully that the Jersey Royal be included as part of Slow Food's 'Ark' designation of local produce 'at risk'. As Jersey's early new potato, and its most famous export, it might seem curious to nominate a product that can be

found in most British supermarkets in the season – Easter to mid-summer – every year, and which is acclaimed regularly by celebrity chefs as being the top, their most favourite potato. At the time of my nomination, the Jersey Royal potato industry was going through a struggle for survival that, at times, appeared terminal. In this struggle, a long-term tendency of small, traditional growers to leave an increasingly unprofitable industry accelerated. A decade or so ago the number of potato growers in the Island could have been counted in hundreds; nowadays, commercial growers can only be counted in tens, and many of these have willingly foregone their independence by joining a single corporate farming structure, in the interests of taking advantage of economies of scale.

But since those early years of the new century there has been something of a renaissance in growing the Jersey Royal - even if the present cultivation of the crop is quite far removed from the traditional way of cultivating the potato crop: independent smallholders (in mainland terms), fertilising the ground with 'vraic' (seaweed) collected from the Island's beaches, and harvesting the crop without benefit of forcing the harvest date earlier by covering the field with sheets of grey polythene. In the early spring, these days, the Island's fields all seem to have been mysteriously flooded, and on closer examination the 'floods' turn out to be fields covered with polythene.

But farmers need to run a viable business and they are not museum curators, so of course means of production have changed. But one might speculate whether the current production methods need – or will be forced – to change again in the future, in the light of high-priced oil and some of the threatened future environmental disasters. Jersey has grown potatoes commercially since the early 19th Century, and it was already exporting them to the British mainland in the days of sailing ships. In 1880, a Jersey potato grower called Hugh de la Haye was walking near the Harbour in Jersey's capital, St Helier, and saw, in the window of a potato merchant's store, some comical looking potatoes with an unusually high number of sprouts, which were being shown off as an amusing curiosity. He took them home with him, and showed them to his friends at a farmer's dinner held that evening.

Afterwards, he cut the potatoes up, and planted the pieces, each with its own sprout, in his garden. When he dug them up at harvest time, and boiled them, he found the taste much superior to his commercial farming crop. So he saved some as seed potatoes, harvested again the next season, gave his friends seed potatoes, and within a few years the so-called 'Jersey Fluke' potato was being sold commercially.

This was the high tide of British Imperialism in the late Victorian era, when anything good, or above average was christened 'royal' in respectful tribute to the Queen, so very soon the Jersey Fluke had become the Royal Jersey Fluke, and, for the past 100 years or so, the Jersey Royal. For around 70 –80 years it had no competition within Britain. It was earlier than anything that mainland Britain could produce. In the Island's many small mixed farms, spreading dung from the many small dairy herds on to land to be used for potatoes was a perfect way of using waste from one sector to enhance the productivity of another sector. However, by the 1960s and 1970s, potatoes were being imported from far-flung climes, thus the Jersey Royal was no longer 'the

earliest potato' in UK retail outlets, and that helps to explain the progressive decline of the Jersey Royal.

In recent decades the traditional small mixed farm in Jersey has virtually become extinct – as it has everywhere else in the progressive western world. Nowadays, those few commercial farming units that survive are almost mainly either totally dairy units or totally potato production units.

That decline of the Royal is due almost entirely to globalised trading patterns. In its heyday, it was the earliest potato you could buy. Now no longer – early new potatoes come from Israel, Egypt, and a host of other places. The pages of Jersey's newspaper often contain 'letters to the editor' from consumers up and down Britain complaining that the taste is now not what it was, blaming this degradation variously on using modern fertilisers as opposed to the traditional 'vraic' or dung, forcing the crop under polythene, or on other factors.

However, at the same time, other potato varieties elsewhere have been developed and improved, so that the unarguably delicious taste has now closer competition from other varieties in other places, and it is not quite so unique as once it was. This, combined with a certain amount of nostalgia, goes a long way to explaining these complaints. It is claimed by the industry that actually modern farming methods and modern standards of quality control the taste of the Jersey Royal better and more consistently than has ever been the case before – there has never been a better product. In this respect one can again make analogies with modern wine production techniques that produce far greater quantities of commercial drinkable wine than ever before, but perhaps with less emphasis on the truly great and the truly awful. Also, social trends at the moment do no favour to the potato, the Jersey Royal or any other type. People, sadly, as a whole no longer enjoy regularly family meals of a meat-and-potato-and-veg type. They eat pasta, or take-away-Chinese, or Mark & Spencer's finest ready-made meals, or anything else that decreases meal preparation time after a long day at work.

Jersey, of course, is not in the EU, and its farmers do not enjoy the subsidies that EU farmers enjoy, and production costs are already far higher in the Island, because, simply, it is an Island – separated from the mainland by a very expensive bit of sea. However, after a period of decline in the years spanning the turn of the century, there has been something of a renaissance in the fortunes of the Jersey Royal, due to the strenuous activities of two marketing organisations. The marketing of the crop has always been fraught with problems, mainly with farmers blaming the marketing 'middle men' with profiteering at their expense. Sometimes these accusations were richly deserved – but with each proven accusation fuelling yet more accusations and suspicion, that was sometimes richly undeserved. It was often said that the fortunes of the Jersey Royal would not improve until growers and competing marketing organisations could sink their differences and work cooperatively to make the best of the annual crop. This might sound like elementary common sense, although it does not take into account that sense of individualism and independence that must surely characterise most farmers everywhere.

One of the two marketing companies, the Jersey Royal Company, was founded several years ago, as a coming together into one commercial corporate entity of separate farmers and marketing organisations. Other growers not happy to lose their own individuality were happy to support a slightly different concept. The very big Albert Bartlett company, Britain's leading grower and packer of potatoes, has invested £14m in a giant potato handling and packing station in Jersey. They have contracts with local potato growers, and the growers remain independent.

Both organisations stoutly maintain that they are not in direct competition with one another and that the market is big enough for both. However, they are certainly in competition when it comes to finding sufficient land to grow a sufficient quantity of potatoes to satisfy the needs of supermarkets in the UK. The cost of farmland has shot up in Jersey - to the satisfaction of landowners, and the grave concern, for example, of dairy farmers who find it difficult to find rented land to graze their herds.

Both the Jersey Royal Company and Bartlett's have laid great stress on their environmental and social responsibility credentials. Both have been great supporters of the local produce promotion organisation, Genuine Jersey; the Jersey Royal Company has won awards for its environmental projects and for engaging the interest of school children in food and farming; Bartlett's new packing station is the *dernier cri* in sustainable and environmentally friendly operation.

This brings the story up to date. If we assume that 'business will continue as usual', then the Jersey export potato industry is likely to continue on present lines, with, in Jersey, a continued decrease in the number of individual independent potato growers and further integration into the UK potato production market... all of which might have seemed very foreign and bizarre to previous generations of Jersey growers and farmers, but which is similar to the sort of tendencies happening everywhere. As far as the short-term future is concerned, then it must be acknowledged that the industry has evolved to take best advantage of present market conditions.

The length of time that 'present market conditions' might be expected to last, however, is a subject about which readers of this website might have a certain view. Many people are sufficiently aware of the cocktail of environmental difficulties forecasted for the mid- to long-term future; they do not need to be repeated here. However, among these is the threat of 'peak oil'. Whether or not the long-term geological depletion of oil is a justifiable fear for our own times or not, there is always a short-term risk that political events might suddenly deny the industrialised west its accustomed supplies of oil. Some event, for example, that might aggravate Iran, could lead to that government blocking the Straits of Hormuz and impeding oil export traffic from the Persian Gulf. A few days before writing this piece, Tony Blair's evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry included a warning that the West might have to 'take on' Iran in the future in the same way that it took on Iraq... a chilling thought, not least for the economic implications.

Many writers have eloquently sketched out the consequences of an interruption in oil supplies, as regards, among much else, deficiencies of oil

for agriculture, to operate machinery, to power transport and to import and to distribute food supplies. One can only suppose that Jersey, being one step further removed from the sources of global food supply, would be subject to increased difficulties as far as its food production and export are concerned. The Jersey Royal industry is geared almost completely to export and to the UK supermarket trade. An interruption to oil supplies, even for any political or short-term reason, would be disastrous for it, and the disaster would only be compounded by any future environmental difficulty. Thus, with the best will in the world, the long-term success of any major potato export initiative from Jersey is something that needs to be questioned.

In Jersey, there are more than 90,000 people crammed into a small area of only a few square miles, and there is tremendous pressure to develop agricultural land for housing. It was difficult enough to feed the Island from its own productive capability during the wartime Occupation – when there was a population of only around 40,000 and the possibility of doing so nowadays – well, even if it were possible (as Colin Tudge might suggest), such a revolution is the stuff of nightmares, especially if forced upon the Island without sufficient or deliberate preparation.

In the past few years, Jersey, as elsewhere, has seen resurgence in interest in local food production, organic production, a diversification of agriculture, farm shops, and allotments. It is a start in what could be a change of direction to a more localised system of farming. If this trend were to be followed and accelerated in response to changed economic conditions, one might suppose that the export of potatoes would fall dramatically, and that the famous 'Jersey Royal' would be produced in far less volume, with the slack in land usage taken up by other crops and livestock, being produced for mainly local consumption. At the moment, potatoes from within the sterling zone have a certain sales advantage to potatoes grown in the euro zone, and this has helped the current improvement in the UK market for Jersey Royals, despite these reversionary times.

As far as local producers are concerned, they deserve a continuation of the present advantageous market factors – they have certainly worked hard enough for it. Time will tell how long this resurgence will continue. Assuming the future to be less than apocalyptic, it is feasible to foresee an improvement in Jersey as a holiday destination – less expensive to reach compared to other destinations in other currency zones, and the Jersey Royal, grown in a far smaller volume, perhaps organically, as a local speciality that is one of the treats of a spring or early summer holiday. If a mid to long-term exported trade were to continue, then it might most likely be as a gastronomic item prized by lovers of good food, to be sold, metaphorically speaking, not in the 'bargain basement cash and carry', but in the 'charming delicatessen in the high street' or in fine restaurants.

Whatever the future, the current arrangements for growing and exporting the Jersey are likely to be only an intermediate step in a continuing evolution of what is now justly referred to as 'an industry'.