

keeping it **real**

how producers put the 'special' into speciality food & drink



Annie and Hugh Laughton: labour-intensive process

Shropshire Fine Herbs: rosemary biscuits

The producer

Trained chef Annie Laughton and her husband Hugh, a former wine shipper, began making their cheese biscuits with fresh herbs in true artisan style – hand-rolling and cutting the products in their farmhouse kitchen at Alderton Hall Farm, Shropshire.

Their plan was to create a few year-round sellers to offset the seasonal nature of their fresh herb business, which supplied thyme, rosemary, tarragon and other fresh herbs from the two-acre walled garden they rent at Loton Park, a nearby stately home.

The couple began baking at Christmas 2006, making just 100 or so packets a week for sale locally to their herb customers. In 2007 they entered the Great Taste Awards and picked up gold stars for four of their recipes. Since then, their client list has grown to over 300 UK delis, farm shops and food halls, including Daylesford Organics and Scotland's House of Bruar, and they have begun exporting too.

Now, after converting a stable block into a commercial bakery, capacity has risen to 3,000 packs a week and it could reach over 20,000 when a new purpose-built continuous oven and cooler arrives this month.

Annie says: "I have a restaurant background, but food production involves a whole different set of skills. Our biggest asset now is Paul Andrew, who came to us last October and has been a baker for 25 years."

The product

Like most of Shropshire Fine Herbs' products, these rosemary biscuits began with an old-fashioned recipe – in this case, from a family copy of the classic *Modern Cookery* by Lydia Chatterton, first published in 1917 – which was then

adapted by Annie Laughton with input from customers. "Carole [Faulkner] at the Cheese Shop in Chester has been marvellous," she says. "When we started we really didn't know how much herb to use. As a grower you naturally want to make the herbs the main thing, but Carole would say: 'You need to use a bit less – you don't want to overpower the cheese'."

How it's made

While deciduous green herbs like parsley are picked in summer, then frozen and stored, rosemary can be picked all year round from the 800 or so plants at Loton Park. It is first washed, then the leaves are stripped from the stalks and chopped by hand (1) before being added to a dry mix of wholemeal flour, oatmeal, white flour, Anglesey sea salt and cracked black pepper. The oatmeal and whole wheat flours come from Ginny Mayall's nearby Pimhill Organic Farm.

Butter is rubbed into the dry ingredients in a Hobart mixer (2) before milk and water are added to produce a batch of dough sufficient for around 40 150g packs of biscuits.

A lump of this dough (3) is shaped into a rough square and placed on the conveyor belt of a pastry brake. With the baker controlling the semi-automatic machine, the dough is shunted back and forth through the rollers (4), gradually reducing the thickness to about 2mm before a rotary cutter is engaged, which stamps out the biscuit shapes. "Most people use formers, which can do thousands of biscuits very quickly," says

Annie. "Ours is a much more labour-intensive process." Hugh adds: "We make our biscuits extremely thin, which you can only really do with a roller."

Excess dough is peeled off by hand and added into the next batch. Finally, the biscuit shapes are dropped from the conveyor on to trays (5) and are carried straight to the oven (6) to be cooked for 20 minutes at 180°C before cooling, weighing, flow-wrapping and boxing.

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Ingredients

Wholemeal flour, butter, oatmeal 17.2%, white flour, rosemary 6.9%, water, milk, Halen Môn sea salt, pepper

By MICK WHITWORTH