

# Strawberries and dreams



**By Lorna**

**Maybery:** Lorna is Countryside's deputy editor who has a love of the great outdoors

A passion for farming, branding, and a desire to produce top quality food has helped Yorkshire mum-of-two **Annabel Makin-Jones** achieve success, writes **Lorna Maybery**

**ANNABEL MAKIN-JONES** grows 400km of strawberries. This impressive figure is reinforced by the realisation that the 180-acre site near Micklefield in Yorkshire, produces, in high season, an average of 160 tonnes of strawberries each week. And that's going to need a lot of cream.

Heading up the business, Annabel is a fifth-generation farmer with an infectious passion for the business. Not prepared to stand still, she's just launched her own brand – Annabel's Deliciously British strawberries – aimed at the more discerning shopper. The new brand focuses on supplying Michelin-starred restaurants, specialist wholesalers, all 28 branches of Booths, and more recently, Ocado.

The idea for the brand blossomed during a visit to a trade show in Paris. "I saw a lot of interesting food products there and came back with the idea

for a strawberry brand and a drink. I've launched the strawberry brand, which has been amazingly received. I went to London in March and sold it to two of the best wholesalers in the capital without a product – so they had to buy into me, which they did, and, so far, it's going really well."

There are a number of elements that make it stand out from the crowd. "If you think of a brand of strawberries, well, there isn't really one," she says. "The packaging is also different, it's 100 per cent biodegradable and we are also trialling a biodegradable film for the top. The only strawberry variety we use is Malling Centenary, which is the best variety in Europe at the moment. And every punnet we sell supports the Prince's Trust, as we make a donation.

"I called the brand 'Annabel's' because my name is already on the punnets in Morrisons so that



#### QUALITY CONTROL:

Annabel is meticulous in pursuit of the perfect strawberry

“

I have always had a love of farming and I am passing this onto Oscar and Jemima

people know who we are and can look us up on the website. I'm the grower and people want to know who the grower is and they want to know your story, so it made sense.”

In this, her first year with the brand, she was hoping to sell 100 tonnes – “it's looking more like 200 tonnes now, which is great news.”

As well as keeping up the momentum of her new brand, Annabel has to maintain the high levels of quality and production of the bulk of the strawberries – around 2,250 tonnes will be grown, picked and sold in a season – going to Morrisons and Aldi.

This is a far cry from its humble beginnings. When she took on the strawberry side of the farm in 2004, fresh from Harper Adams University, she planned to stay for a few months to get things up and running before starting her own deli business.

“My dissertation was a business plan for a delicatessen and a take home food company,” says Annabel “and I came back to the farm for four months before getting the premises for a deli.”

This was at a time when the arable farm, which grows mainly cereals, was importing and grading potatoes, meaning winter was a busy time and summer much quieter, so the decision was made to start growing strawberries.

**Taking the helm**

“I started off the strawberries and was moving on in the October and then it became apparent that there needed to be changes, including to staff, very quickly. We started with 15 acres on the floor under poly and we got a good working relationship with Morrisons and so were their first direct growers, and it snowballed from there. I didn't realise when I came back how it would bother me that things weren't done how they should be. So I stayed.

“In the second year, we grew the same amount and had a six or seven week window to get it done



in June and then graded potatoes again in the winter months.

“But from there we just grew and grew. The grading of potatoes was reducing and the strawberries taking over. We got to 150 acres of strawberries and then switched to table top production in 2011. This has many positive impacts as pests will struggle to get onto the berries, the pickers are much quicker so it's more economical for us, and better for staff welfare as they are not bending all day.

“If there's a lot of water about, they are not on the floor; they get less dirty because they are grown in controlled environment in coir, which is a coconut shell compost, and are much higher up. And drip feed irrigation makes sure they get the right amount of feed and water at the right time.

“In fact, the only thing we can't control is how sweet the strawberries are because that comes from the sunshine. It's important that people understand that if it's grey and cloudy you will never get a strawberry to be as sweet as it is when the sun is on it.”

Ensuring the best quality means Annabel has to

**SWEET PICKINGS:**  
Malling Centenary strawberries are the only ones used in Annabel's Deliciously British brand

**FAMILY FUN:** Oscar and Jemima on a strawberry picnic with mum Annabel



keep pests and disease under control and the farm is trying different methods to move away from crop protection products.

“I'm not organic and I eat everything, but I do feel we need to be mindful about things that are on our food, so we are trialling introducing actual bugs to kill other bugs rather than sprays.

“We have built bug hotels around the fields for each site so there's natural habitat for them, and

**HOME FROM HOME:**  
One of the bug hotels that have been built around the site to attract beneficial insects and pollinators

**Strawberry facts**

- The sunshine is what makes the strawberries sweet - the cloudier the weather, the less sweet the berries
- Strawberries are among the first fruits to ripen in the spring
- Strawberries are part of the Rose family - they give off a similar sweet smell
- Strawberry plants are considered a perennial as they grow each back
- Plants are propagated over the summer months and harvested in autumn and then held in freezers ready to be planted in the following spring. They are defrosted and then planted
- Plants must be in an environment of 12 degrees of more to grow
- Daylight hours are extremely important to strawberry plants for their growth
- Roughly 27,000 kilos of strawberries are eaten during the Wimbledon Championships.
- There is more vitamin C in 100gms of strawberries than in 100gms of orange.

we have bought in other bugs that will hopefully take up residence over the winter.”

Annabel, whose husband Chris works in the food industry, is keen to get her children Oscar, five, and Jemima, three, involved in the farm and the bug hotels was a great way to do this, with Oscar spending two days helping to build them.

**Succession planning**

“I have always had a love for farming and I'm passing that onto Oscar and Jemima. Oscar loves coming to work with me but won't sit in the office; he goes into the accounts to do the shredding. Daniel, who runs the packhouse, built the bug houses with him, and he really loved doing that and learning to use tools. When he's eight he will come picking in the summer, more for the work ethic than anything.

“When my Nana lived in the house here on the farm I used to help out. I remember counting out the brown envelopes with pay in them, I did sweeping up and that sort of thing and during combining I would be following the combine on my quad, with the fish and chips for everyone on a Friday.

“I also had a lot of horses and was part of the British dressage team, but the expectation was to feed the animals before yourself, so I have always worked hard and I am very proud to be a woman in this world.

“I always think of myself as a farmer and I'm passionate about everything, whether it's British lamb, beef, strawberries, flowers, whatever it is, but the reality now is that you have to remember farming is a business.

“Oscar says he wants to come and work on the farm and that's all well and good but you have to learn all the elements of business and farming.



If you do it well, then you can make sure you can farm forever.

“The Annabel’s Deliciously British brand is very much about family. It’s about me and my children and shows there are women in farming, working mums, and it shows that if you want to have a go at something and work hard, it can be a success, whoever you are.”

Never one to stand still, Annabel is now turning her attention to the idea of a drink and has formed a new business, separate to the farm, called ‘Tame and Wild Drinks’ to produce a sophisticated adult soft drink based on the fruit she grows.

“Tame is berries and wild is from the hedgerow ingredients we are putting in it,” she explains. “I have three recipes, one strawberry extract, one blueberry and one rhubarb. The first production run begins in September with 9,000 bottles, most of which I will send out as marketing samples.

“It’s really exciting, its non-alcoholic – a lot of people are drinking less, it’s a drink that will replace a gin and tonic and is so low in sugar, only 30 calories a bottle. So it’s for people who are more health-conscious and it tastes absolutely amazing.” On leaving university, Annabel never dreamed she would be a strawberry farmer and business entrepreneur, but now she has learned that by dreaming big, working hard, and injecting passion into what she does, the future really is bright. Bright red, in fact. 🍓

● Visit: [annabelsdeliciouslybritish.co.uk](http://annabelsdeliciouslybritish.co.uk)

PICTURES: JOHN COTTLE



**OFF TO WORK WE GO:**  
Oscar and Jemima love being on the farm with their mum

## Strawberry, elderflower & basil tart

Annabel works closely with a number of chefs, who have developed recipes using Annabel’s Deliciously British strawberries. Try this gorgeous summer tart from winner of MasterChef The Professionals in 2018, Laurence Henry.

**Makes:** 8

**Time:** 35 minutes plus chilling

### Ingredients

#### For the sweet pastry

- 250g plain flour
- 125g cold butter (unsalted)
- 75g icing sugar
- 1 egg + 1 yolk

#### For the elderflower crème patisserie

- 80g egg yolk
- 60g caster sugar
- 15g plain flour
- 10g corn flour
- 200ml milk
- 100ml double cream
- 1 tsp vanilla bean paste
- 25ml elderflower cordial
- Pinch of salt
- 1 leaf gelatine (bloomed)

#### To finish

- 1 punnet of British strawberries (finely sliced)
- 25ml elderflower cordial
- 50g apricot jam
- Fresh baby basil leaves



### Method

#### For the pastry

- To make the pastry, sieve together the flour and icing sugar.
- Dice the butter into small cubes and rub together with the flour mix to a fine breadcrumb consistency.
- Lightly beat the egg. Add to the mix and bring together to form the dough (don’t overwork the pastry or it will become chewy rather than short).
- Wrap in cling film and chill in the fridge for 30 minutes.
- Dust your work surface with flour and carefully roll out the pastry until 3-4mm thick.
- Line 8x 6cm fluted pastry cases (or 1 large one) making sure to push the pastry right into the corners of the tins
- Take a sheet of baking paper, scrunch it up and place on top of the pastry followed by ceramic baking beans (rice or dried chickpeas will also work).
- Blind bake the tart cases for approximately 15 minutes.
- Remove the beans and bake for a further 10 minutes or until golden brown and crisp
- Brush lightly with the remaining egg yolk, this will seal any small holes in the tart case.

#### For the filling

- To make the crème patisserie, whisk together the egg yolk, flours, sugar and cordial
- Bring the milk and cream and vanilla to a simmer and pour over the egg mix.
- Return to the pan and gently cook until the mix begins to thicken - keep tasting as it’s essential not to rush the cooking or you’ll end up with a floury tasting mixture.
- Once cooked out and thickened, add the gelatine leaf and a pinch of salt.
- Set the crème patisserie in the cooled tart cases just below the rim.

#### To finish

- Finely slice the strawberries (either sideways or lengthways is fine depending how you want the tarts to look).
- Carefully arrange in layers around the outside, working inwards.
- In a pan, bring the apricot jam and cordial to a simmer until dissolved.
- Use this to glaze the strawberries.
- Finish off with leaves of baby basil placed around the tart.