

# Good food, good farming, GOOD BUSINESS

BENJAMIN PARKER VISITED RIVERFORD ORGANIC'S HQ  
IN SOUTH DEVON TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE  
LOCAL BUSINESS THAT HAS EXCELLED

Nestled just off the A38, a farm tucked away in the South Devon countryside quietly bustles at the heart of this multi-million pound business. What started in the 1980s as a means of distributing home grown produce to 20 friends, now delivers around 47,000 veg boxes across England and South Wales.

I met Guy Watson, founder of Riverford Organic, who showed me around the site, exposing the well-oiled machine that is the staff packing the veg boxes ready for delivery. Next, the two of us made our way outside, into a 4x4 and away down the country lanes to explore the farm.

Guy's story is that of a local business that has thrived. After his family took over the farm in the early 1950s it wasn't until the 1980s that Guy converted it to organic. As an effective system of distributing produce, Guy began his weekly veg box scheme – the rest is history.

As we drove to different parts of the farm it was easy to see why Guy was named BBC Farmer of the Year in 2012. He is so passionate about what he does and it is that passion that has turned Riverford Organic into what it is today.

Stepping out of the vehicle and walking around the fields, I got to see the wide range of food that is grown at Riverford. Organic basil, with its pungent smell filling the tunnels, beautifully ripe red tomatoes with firm skins and juicy, sweet centres, as well as lovely big potatoes.

We stopped for lunch and swapped the wellies on Wash Farm for food in the Field Kitchen, the farm's restaurant. The restaurant has an interesting twist, with set menus and encouragement to share.

Guy and I sat down and shared large platters of food with another family on the table – a nice touch, which comes from Guy and Riverford's all-encompassing nature.

He explained in greater detail the co-operatives that help the farm supply organic vegetables to all of its customers: "They've been such a great thing. It's been useful for us and it helps the farmers sell what they grow." As well as the co-operatives, there are four Riverford farms across the country (Devon, Hampshire, Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire). Riverford franchises then deliver the produce from the fields to customers' homes, demonstrating Guy's enthusiasm for collaboration and profit-sharing. Guy explained: "I had so many ideas when I set this business up, some more achievable than others. For instance, I wanted everyone to be paid roughly the same, whatever their role. We try and keep that and other aims in mind".

As courses come and go, Guy talks about his upbringing on the farm. We discuss the differences between modern kitchens and his childhood farmhouse kitchen. He talks about his experiences on the farm where fresh food shaped the service he wants to deliver. There can be no doubt that Guy is the face of the brand – during lunch, visitors to the farm came to talk to him, to introduce themselves as Riverford customers and thank him for their weekly delivery. One man, visiting from Sussex, told us that although he loved getting his box, the thing he most



looked forward to was reading Guy's newsletter.

"I was lying in bed this morning trying to think what I can include in the next one!" Guy said to me, "I've been in trouble before when writing them, trying to appeal to an audience – customers have emailed me and said 'Guy, just read your newsletter, it's great but stick to the veg boxes!'"

Towards the end of the meal Guy explained that he's keen for Riverford products to change in the future, to match what their customers are looking for. The company already offers a wide range, with the term 'veg box' only scratching the surface. Riverford already provides meat in its boxes, with some designed specifically for BBQs, while others are full of fruit. The aim appears to be that whatever your lifestyle, there is a vegetable, fruit or meat box that can fit in with your schedule, meaning excuses not to use good quality food are harder to come by.

The company's ethos is simple: good food, good farming, good business. And while a shift in attitudes means that consumers now care more about what

they buy and where it comes from, Riverford was arguably an early trailblazer and has successfully built a brand on these values. In 2012 it was named Best Retailer at The Observer Ethical Awards, in recognition of its achievements in the field – pun intended.

The future's looking bright for Riverford. After a period of time adapting to a changing market, sales are now up year on year, with a more diverse mix of people wanting veg boxes than ever before. The company has invested heavily in its IT department, knowing this is the way forward for both customer ordering and the marketing side of the business. Every day the company experiments by growing new and slightly more exotic vegetables – I tasted some very interesting members of the cucumber family. Looking further down the line, I would 'watch this space' as Riverford expands and alters its offerings.

