

# Growing an understanding

Horrified at the scale of supermarket 'farm-to-fork' trips, Anna Turns discovers some more authentic ways to teach our children where our food really comes from.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DARTINGTON DAIRY

Farmer Jon Perkin enjoys showing families and school groups around the cow milking parlour at Dartington Dairy's Parsonage Farm

When one of the UK's leading supermarkets launched a wholesome-sounding Eat Happy Project in 2014, it invested £15m in these curriculum-linked visits in the first year alone.

The first initiative was named 'farm-to-fork' trails... deceptive, perhaps, as schoolchildren are sent to visit and explore the supermarket aisles, rather than get their wellies mucky while watching cows being milked.

Lucky to live amongst such beautiful countryside, full to the brim with organic growers, artisan producers, farmers and fishermen, surely our children should be visiting the front line and seeing food as it's caught or harvested or handmade. And you've only got to dig a little beneath the surface to find an inspiring range of potential days out that will engage, enthuse and make an impression on curious youngsters.

With this in mind, I visited Dartington Dairy's goat herd, based on the Dartington Estate in south Devon. Here, families can enjoy a hands-on experience milking the cheeky goats and then taste delicious ice cream made by owners Jon and Lynne Perkin. "Children visit us from local schools such as Steiner in Dartington and KEVICS in Totnes, we have students on placement here from Bicton College, and challenged children come to us via Lifeworks and they just love helping to muck out the goats," says Jon.

My daughter loved meeting the goats as they clambered on the tractor tyres and tree trunks, and she came up with lots of good 'why' questions as they nibbled our hands and t-shirts. We watched and listened to the clusters going onto Sharpham's Jersey cows as they were milked in the parlour. Jon has been farming for over 25 years and farms his herd of 190 goats to organic standards and produces high-yield, high-quality raw milk for artisan cheesemakers, pasteurised milk, curd and, of course, ice cream, which takes three to five days to produce from goat to tub. We ate the freshest, most natural strawberry ice cream I've ever tasted – creamy, textured and not 'goaty' in the slightest. And food miles were zero. Tasting food where it's produced is quite a powerful thing for a five-year-old to experience, and that's how it should be.

"We teach kids how food gets from the field to their plate, they make their own smoothies using our recycled bike that powers a blender, which is great fun and they get to drink it at the end," says Ben White, general manager at Coombe Farm Organic in Crewkerne, Somerset. "Children are often blown away by what they see here because our farm is different to most conventional farms." This innovative Soil Association farm, originally a dairy business, now also produces its own beef and lamb, plus it is totally off-grid, running off solar energy.

The farm opens its gates to schoolchildren of all ages from the Crewkerne, Ilminster and Chard area, encouraging them to get hands-on tasting seasonal foods, milking the model cow by hand or walking to



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DARTINGTON DAIRY

Little ones love tasting Dartington Dairy's delicious goat ice cream as part of the farm visit experience



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DARTINGTON DAIRY

Adults and children all learn something as they chat to Jon



PHOTO COURTESY OF DARTINGTON DAIRY

Get hands-on at Dartington Dairy's milking experience

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Coombe's fields and observing organic farming in full swing. "They love orienteering, too, and getting unlost on the farm using a map and compass, and all the time we're showing them the wildlife that shares this ecosystem." Ben firmly believes that teaching beyond the classroom should be embraced a lot more, and these trips are all fully funded by the farm's owners, the AH Warren Trust: "Children are enriched when they visit places and understand how things work – it's one thing being told something, another being shown something and yet another speaking direct to the farmer. Education is something we will never deviate from."

Coombe Farm has always offered educational trips to local primary schoolchildren and has showed 500 around the farm over the last two years. "Here, we don't have a great big pool of people ready to work in the farming industry and we want to show more young people just how fascinating agriculture can be – one day, perhaps in 20 years' time, someone might remember their school trip, knock on our door and be keen to carry on the work we are so passionate about doing. Our farm isn't just a means to an end – we want people to live it and breathe it and love it like we do."

Of course, many teachers might say they don't have the time or resources to take the whole class to a real farm, but there are other innovative ways, such as 'lamb

cam', which brings the lambing season on a sheep farm into the classroom. This initiative is just one of many run by The Country Trust, a charity that has enabled disadvantaged children to really connect with the farmers producing the food they eat for the past 40 years. The Trust provides day trips for 25,000 primary school pupils every year to 300 working farms nationwide and also year-long education programmes exploring growing, cooking and even selling of food and produce.

The Country Trust has recently helped a Manchester school to transform its food education to all year groups with a Food Discovery programme that has become so embedded in the curriculum it is also helping children thrive with literacy, maths, science and design technology. The charity trained teachers to deliver the programme (therefore saving the school money and making it viable and cost-effective in the long-term), so now pupils prepare meals with food they've grown, host a playground farmers' market and create their own special harvest festival. The older children even help teachers order the ingredients they need for cookery classes online and learn about budgeting. Because this new way of working has proved so successful, the charity plans to roll this out to other schools.

Children do perform better and remember more when lessons are taken beyond the confines of a

classroom's four walls to become inherently more interactive; the success and rapid rise of forest schools is a case in point. Even a simple trailer ride or pick-your-own session can make a big impact; these experiences can spark children's imaginations and connect them to the land their food comes from. Surely the magic happens when children learn from a tangible experience, out in the fresh air with mud on their boots? **M**

#### VISIT A FARM

**South Penquite Farm**, Bodmin, Cornwall  
[southpenquite.co.uk](http://southpenquite.co.uk)

**Trevaskis Farm**, Hayle, Cornwall  
[trevaskisfarm.co.uk](http://trevaskisfarm.co.uk)

**Dartington Dairy**, near Totnes, Devon  
[dartingtondairy.com](http://dartingtondairy.com)

**Kenniford Farm**, Exeter  
[kennifordfarm.co.uk](http://kennifordfarm.co.uk)

**Riverford Organics**, Buckfastleigh, Devon  
[riverford.co.uk](http://riverford.co.uk)

**Coombe Farm Organic**, Crewkerne, Somerset  
[coombefarm.com](http://coombefarm.com)

**Magdalen Farm**, Maudlin, Chard, Somerset  
[magdalenfarm.org.uk](http://magdalenfarm.org.uk)



PHOTO COURTESY OF RIVERFORD ORGANICS

PTAs can sign up to Riverford's Veg Fund to raise funds for the school, and local veg teams can also go into the schools (free of charge) to teach children about veg and run craft activities such as 'Eat a Rainbow'.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DARTINGTON DAIRY