



The Balgove Larder Story

When they set up Balgove Larder in 2010, Will Docker and his business partner, Henry Cheape had a vision to showcase traditional food in Scotland. It sounds so simple but very few people were doing it in the St Andrews area at the time.

Conceived from a love of fresh, Scottish fayre, Balgove has become a hub for top notch locally reared, grown, stalked, caught, handmade, and prepared foods. Will Docker explained how a livestock concern grew into a shop, a cafe, a bigger cafe and a Steak Barn.

“The convoluted mess that is the supply chain of the food industry in the UK meant that it would be very unlikely that you would be served something from the area on a restaurant menu in St Andrews, let alone be able to buy it in a shop. Visitors want the experience. The French had been doing it for generations. We saw an opportunity here to try and gear the farm up to supply as much traditional Scottish food as possible.”

Will grew up on a farm near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, studied Biomedical Sciences at Newcastle University before being a chef working in some London restaurants and Northern Russia and the Alps. Next stop was a shellfish farm in Essex growing oysters and trading lobsters, crabs, langoustines and scallops from all the Scottish ports. This opened Will’s eyes up to the madness of the trade:-

“I was having to compete with a Spanish buyer or a French buyer who could outbid me to ship the goods all the way to there and then British tourists would then eat it. It just made no sense, why don’t we keep this wonderful product in the country?”

“The Scottish Brand is celebrated globally but had been neglected domestically.”

That’s how the idea of Balgove Larder came about and how Will came to be reunited with Henry Cheape a good friend from his student days in Newcastle. Henry said that he had these lovely old buildings that he was considering flattening, doing them up or changing them around to showcase Scottish produce in Scotland’.

"Traditional has lots of different connotations but in our sense we harness traditional breeds which were on the farm anyway. Shorthorn cross Highland which we then put to an Angus. So they are half Angus, quarter Shorthorn and quarter Highland. We do that for the obvious reasons that it is very hard to make a penny on a Highland carcass.

"The dilution with the Angus and the Shorthorn is not negative dilution. They have better conformation and still have all the benefits of being from a traditional breed in terms of being hardy and not needing that much input.

"They are grass fed for as long as they can be then they are fed on everything else that we grow on the farm - some grain, some beans, some silage. We do not buy in feed, that is one of our rules which means we know exactly what is going on. Effectively we are control freaks."

The farm and the rest of the Strathtyrum estate always had been predominantly arable, so it was geared up to grow animal feed anyway. Will stressed that these beasts are tended to and cared for at every stage of their life, resulting in excellent animal welfare. Happy animals simply taste better!

Every beef carcass is destined for the butchers shop at Balgove. It also ensures that they have total control over what ends up in their counter.

Lambs are brought on from a Texel Blackface cross. They weren't on the farm when the shop opened up in 2010 but they have invested a lot of time and effort into them. Henry's father has Middleton, a hill farm at Kinross where most of the Texel Blackface cross sheep are reared with some outside at Balgove.

Both Pheasants and Roe deer come from the farm. Henry and Will personally source their red deer from Mull. They believe that it is a wonderful source of meat that is still not understood. Demand is growing for it and is something that has much more potential.



James Lothian and his team





Will Docker

Tamworths pigs are crossed on Oxford Sandy and Black, one of the oldest pigs native to Britain. These pigs tidy up the margin land but Balgove are not yet completely self sufficient in pork, that is a bit harder. Will is proud of the father and son team that looks after the livestock.

“David Mayes farm manager on livestock keeps a constant monitor on the fat cover, the conformation just to see how the feed, the different husbandry is working. It is a wonderful feedback loop, it took a while to figure out. To start with we had a lot of fat density on the pigs, it is not an easy game but they have got it really fine tuned now.”

David works closely with Head butcher James Lothian and Will is delighted with the partnership:- “James has not been with us long but he has turned the place around. We have been looking for someone who really gets what we are trying to do.

“What we are doing is simple, we are dry aging for minimum of 28 days on the prime cuts, quicker on the forequarter. All the production is done on site - sausages, haggis etc. There is an element of wholesale into a couple of hotels in St Andrews. The Steak Barn is an extraordinary business which is going hell for leather at the moment but we can’t supply all the steaks for the Steak Barn.

“Prime cuts are carefully selected and bought in when we cannot supply home reared but everything over the counter is our own. We do our ready meal range in the kitchen and sell them online as well.”

The self confessed control freaks lament the closure of their local abattoir. Will sees a small on-farm facility as a solution to this:- “We begged St Andrews (Abattoir) to stay open, we offered to run it at no profit to ourselves purely to keep it going. An on farm abattoir would have to be a pretty selfish offering since we cannot bring others animals on to the farm because that creates a lot of other issues.”

With Great Taste Awards for their sausages and haggis, Balgove are constantly trying to drive the quality really high while still being simple and traditional. Will explained the approach:-

“You are only as good as your last sale and you have got to make sure that the high standards are always maintained. Getting a really bullet proof team is what we are looking for, hence the apprenticeship scheme, hence trying to bring on some young guys to train up.”





The retail aspect has expanded several times in the eight years that Balgove has been open. After the Cafe there followed the Steak Barn and it has grown almost every year since it started from very rustic routes in 2011. Will continued:-

"We got the blacksmith to build a barbecue, we got the sawmill busy for some tables and we put tattie boxes around it and folk came because it was simple quality.

"Since then we have tried to make it more meaningful and established. It is all weather and has been open seven days a week over the summer. It is different, it is fun and not your usual restaurant. We are taking a breather having added on to the cafe before considering the next steps."

There is no shortage of good ideas at Balgove but they spend a lot of time just monitoring what is successful elsewhere. Will added:-

"You get shops on farms and then you get farm shops. What we wanted was to be a really gutsy meaningful farm shop. We have ten acres of cropping fields where we do the veggies, salad leaves and various bits. We are wanting to tie the place into the area. Broccoli is grown at Easter Grangemuir, we grow our own potatoes. All the deli food is cooked on site.

"It is just having control of everything, a single link supply chain and you know what is in it. Knowing exactly where things come from is crucial. That is the main reason we are looking into an onsite abattoir here so that we can control it."

"There is a lot to learn from other countries and other places, it is constantly evolving. You have got to keep ahead of the game, you have to keep on top of it and constantly providing something that is of interest to people and selling the story.

"The story is the sixth sense when it comes to where something comes from. Tom and David, a father and son team, have been rearing the cattle on the farm for a generation - all of Tom's life and David grew up on the farm. That kind of thing adds so much gravitas to what you are selling and eating. It adds the personal aspect."