

# ‘Public pressure does make a difference. We can choose where we shop and what we buy’

*A research report published last year by The Countryside Agency examined the many and varied roles of women in the rural economy and identified them as ‘an important rural resource.’ Susanne Austin is one such woman – a tireless campaigner, cook and columnist who works to raise the profile of English produce and fights for the prosperity of rural England. She told Sandra Ashenford about her passion for the countryside. Photographs by Simon Greetham*

**W**HILE some people make a living in the countryside, Susanne Austin has made it her life. Whether she is speaking at a conference on rural issues, demonstrating her cookery skills with local produce at a show or writing her Cotswold Food and Drink column for Cotswold Life magazine, Susanne is relentless in her role as ‘an advocate for the prosperity of rural England, its producers and their produce.’

It isn't a business in the conventional sense of the word, and it certainly hasn't brought Susanne great wealth and fame, but it is a fulfilling way of life that has proved inspirational to many others.

“I have always loved the countryside and all that it produces,” explained Susanne. “I look at it as a larder – a provider of nourishment in both the physical and spiritual sense – and, of course, as a place of great enjoyment.”

“Sometimes, when I'm at conferences, I hear people talk about living in the countryside, but my philosophy is that you need to really participate, not just live there.”

Susanne describes herself as ‘coming from farming stock’ – with fond recollections of days on her grandparents' farm in Hampton Poyle, a tiny Oxfordshire village, and of relatives' farms in Bletchington and Balscote. Her earliest memories include buying sweets from the village shop, picking fruit and chickens wandering around freely.

Later, her mother moved to Oxford and opened a flower and vegetable shop, “bringing the countryside into the town.” As Susanne

grew up, she pursued a different lifestyle, which saw her living and working in Knightsbridge, and in the USA.

“I was earning lots of money, and driving around in fast sports cars, but I was still a country girl at heart and soon learned materialism was not my destiny,” said Susanne.

With her beloved countryside falling further and further into crisis, Susanne decided it was time to do what she could to help protect it. “Utilising my marketing experience, I saw a need for good food to be promoted, and for local producers to be supported,” she explained, “so in 1999 I launched the Cotswold Food Group.”

But for a long time, Susanne felt like she was fighting a lone battle. “I felt like a failure because I couldn't get any help and terrible things were still happening in the countryside like the Foot and Mouth crisis, which was handled so badly.”

“It felt like I wasn't making any difference. In the end I had to look inwards for help; I took up meditation and went to a retreat where I asked myself a lot of questions about why I was doing what I was doing.”

The tide started to turn and slowly, more people began to realise that the countryside was in crisis, and others began to form pressure groups and campaign for change. “I think people are beginning to realise that the future of the countryside is in our own hands,” said Susanne. “Public pressure does make a real difference. We can choose where we shop and what we buy – we are not at the



mercy of politicians or the giant retailers.”

Today Susanne spends her time educating people at all levels about country produce and countryside issues. No two days are ever the same – she might find herself speaking at a major conference, or demonstrating cookery

at a WI meeting; she might spend time answering emails or writing to MPs.

“I have a very simple philosophy, I believe that we are all different and that beauty is individuality – that's why I love the diversity of the countryside. I value peace and harmony

– but I can be a bit of a wild mare when it comes to talking about what I believe in,” said Susanne. “I do get really frustrated when politicians start running issues where they have little or no experience or expertise.”

“I am happy to stand up and speak out at

meetings. What I say might not always be popular, but I can live with that.”

Renowned for her passion and dedication for keeping it local, fresh and tasty, her cookery demonstrations, however, are always greatly appreciated – but she certainly