

SUPPER MAGAZINE  
A HOLISTIC ENDEAVOUR  
NOVEMBER 2021

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HOTEL FOOD & DRINK



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# A Holistic Endeavour

Going beyond established sustainability quotas, biodynamic cultivation is setting several gastronomically rich hotels apart.

Words: Lauren Jade Hill

**E**nvironmental sensitivity has become increasingly prevalent in hospitality over recent years. Now considered a necessity rather than commendable factor, hotels are going beyond widely recognised sustainability requirements to establish far more ambitious eco-projects. Growing their own produce has long been practiced by chefs, but increasingly, there's a focus on the biodynamic approach.

A term used to describe a holistic, ecological and ethical approach to agriculture, biodynamic farming follows several key principles, from cultivating biodiversity and an ecosystem that includes both plants and animals, to offering regenerative solutions and observing the rhythms and cycles of earth and the cosmos. This idea stems from the work of philosopher and scientist Dr Rudolf Steiner, whose way of combining scientific understanding with recognition of nature's spirit grew in popularity after he introduced the idea in the 1920s.

Earlier this year, Hampshire hideaway

Heckfield Place brought the topic to the fore with the realisation of a four-year endeavour to become entirely biodynamic. Now certified as the UK's first 100% biodynamic hotel, the journey to cultivate a farm running on holistic principles grew from a desire to reconnect the grand Georgian house, its on-site farm and the local community, while ensuring preservation of the land for future generations. The estate's agricultural arm, Home Farm, now demonstrates the potential of having a self-sustaining relationship between the house and its land, capturing the essence of the hotel's approach to luxury hospitality and responsibility as custodians of the 438-acre estate.

"The sustainability of the biodynamic discipline and the fact that it is organic was taken into account," explains Olivia Richli, General Manager at Heckfield Place. "Biodynamic produce is becoming increasingly popular worldwide as consumers begin to recognise its superior flavours, keeping qualities and vigour. We have chosen biodynamic farming because we

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Heckfield Place (top) is certified as the UK's first 100% biodynamic hotel while Cuixmala in Mexico (bottom right) has been practicing biodynamic farming for the past five years

“Biodynamic produce is becoming increasingly popular worldwide as consumers begin to recognise its superior flavours, keeping qualities and vigour. We have chosen biodynamic farming because we believe it to be a method of true integrity and one that improves the land for the future.”

OLIVIA RICHLI – HECKFIELD PLACE

believe it to be a method of true integrity and one that improves the land for the future. People are becoming more aware of the benefits of biodynamic farming; it is a nature-based solution to climate change.”

Head Gardener David Rowley adds: “Being certified as biodynamic allows us a clearer framework and positive intent. If we choose chemical-based agriculture as the programme for our soils, we will destroy the very life we all depend on. Alternatively, we can choose to feed our soils, encourage all the microbiology and the beings and cycles, seen and unseen.”

The estate’s farm now provides arable crops and organic produce for the seasonal menus of the hotel’s restaurants, Hearth and Marle. Both are led by Culinary Director Skye Gyngell – the former head chef of Petersham Nurseries Café in Richmond and owner of Spring restaurant – who is known for championing a root-to-plate ethos. Pared back dishes here span a wild nettle risotto and Heckfield lamb with broad beans, peas, turnips and horseradish.

In 2020, the farm opened its own micro-dairy generating milk, cream and butter from the estate’s Guernsey herd, 20 pigs and 90 sheep. Around 400 chickens supply eggs and 20 beehives are the source of the estate’s honey. It has also launched a Heckfield cheese in partnership with the local dairy, Village Maid. So how do guests of Heckfield Place benefit from this agricultural initiative? “The land at Heckfield Place has been carefully nurtured through years of natural preparations to build a living soil,” says Richli. “Guests can learn about this approach through Market Garden tours as well as at our restaurants, which champion this produce through dishes using only local and responsibly sourced ingredients. Our guests benefit from a return to simplicity, slowing down and experiencing the rhythms of nature.”

A similar approach is taken at the 12-room luxury boutique hotel, biodynamic farm and winery Locanda La Raia in Northern Italy’s Piedmont region. A labour of love by the Milanese Rossi Cairo family, this 180-hectare estate has been transformed into a slow hospitality ecosystem combining sustainability, biodiversity, contemporary art and locavore cuisine. The restaurant serves the seasonal menus of Michelin-starred chef Tommaso Arrigoni, including dishes like pork pluma with Locanda honey, onion, cinnamon and figs, paired with multi-awarded Gavi D.O.C.G. and Piemonte D.O.C. Barbera wines from La Raia Winery.

“The choice to produce biodynamic wines was made by my family immediately after acquiring the estate in 2002,” explains Piero Rosse Cairo, founder and CEO of La Raia. “This choice then determined all subsequent decisions. The vision of a farm as an organic entity that strives to maintain the balance of its components – people, plants and animals – has guided us in the renovation of the estate’s ancient farmhouses, investment in solar and clean energy and the creation of an art foundation dedicated to the landscape, as well as promoting biodiversity.”

Rosse Cairo believes this philosophy is becoming more widespread. “My experience tells me that any method taking into consideration its effect on the planet is becoming more common,” he says. “And this is happening in an exponential way. Not only are the younger generations paying more attention to safeguarding the planet’s future, but the older generations who have not grown up with these sustainability values are also converting.”

In central Italy, the ancient Reschio estate in Umbria pairs Italian hospitality with a biodynamic approach to caring for the land. The 1,500-hectare estate was bought by Count Antonio Bolza in 1994 with the intent

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of bringing this forgotten corner of Italy back to life. In the years since, Count Bolza's son and London-trained architect Benedikt Bolza, along with his wife Donna Nencia Corsini, have set about restoring the land's historic buildings, including a thousand-year-old castle, while also practicing a sustainable way of life.

These restored houses and the estate's Castello di Reschio, which opened as a hotel in May, now lie within pristine wilderness home to fully biodynamic gardens and farmland. Just-picked vegetables, fresh fish and truffles from the forest find their way into the kitchen of restaurants serving traditional Italian dishes with bucolic views. Biodynamic produce is then sold in the shop, Bottega, as well as the wine store, Enoteca, offering tastings.

Across the Atlantic in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, Cuixmala has been practicing biodynamic farming for the past five years. The luxury eco-resort tucked into a 30,000-acre nature reserve works to cultivate produce for the resort and its sister property, Hacienda de San Antonio.

The 5,000-acre mountain ranch of this property in the highlands of Colima also has its own biodynamic gardens and farm, giving guests the opportunity to learn about the biodynamic process and harvest their own produce.

The estate farms now cultivate around 75% of the produce needed by the hotels, with different products thriving in the varying climates of the two properties; from coffee, honey, meat and cheese in the highlands to coconuts, mangoes, passionfruit and avocados in Puerto Vallarta. With so much effort going into the farming and in such rich landscape – from beside the Cuixmala River to the base of El Volcán de Fuego – the vitality of this produce translates directly into each hotel's dining experience.

Across the world, it's pioneering properties like these that are leading the movement of environmentally conscious biodynamic hotels enriching the land they inhabit while simultaneously enhancing the gastronomy and overall guest experience.

Seasonal menus at Locanda La Raia in Piedmont are created by Michelin-starred chef Tommaso Arrigoni and include produce grown on-site at the biodynamic farm

