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Oats remain the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

'As last year's disappointing returns for over contract oats showed, there are considerable swings in the amount of the crop and with it proving to be one of the few spring alternatives to plant on land not sown to wheat in the horrendous autumn of 2023, an increase in plantings saw a fair old glut on the market'



ARABLE MATTERS

By Brian Henderson

WE have an old cow in the herd who is affectionately known by the name of Ugly, a moniker she was given due in no small part of her big boss head and pushy attitude.

She's getting pretty long in the tooth now. Truth be told, she's not likely to be doing much for our carbon footprint, let alone our bottom line and should probably have been down the road a year or two ago.

But my daughter loves that cow and despite Vicki's years as a battle-hardened veteran in a large animal veterinary practice, she still regularly heads for the cowshed whenever she's home, just to check up on Ugly and give her a brush.

So I guess that Ugly isn't always a derogatory term – and that there can be an attraction in something which isn't necessarily aesthetically pleasing.

And I noticed that I'm not alone in thinking that with the recent launch of an 'ugly' advertising campaign by Quaker, the maker of the country's fine porridge oats.

The whole campaign seems to revolve around the grey gloominess of our other national dish, as it's a beige concoction which always defies any attempts to sex it up and give it 'Insta' appeal – it never looks anything approaching the polished attractiveness of most alternative breakfast choices.

Deliciously ugly
And the 'Deliciously Ugly'

campaign pivots on a whole host of derogatory claims about the looks of a bowl of porridge – ranging from 'tastes better in the dark' via 'Fugly', through 'swipe left' to 'like putting sadness in your eyes'.

You might even accuse the PR company handling the account of going a bit over the top when it launched a dress apparently made of porridge for a photoshoot on the streets during London Fashion Week.

Worn by some celebrity internet influencer I'd never heard of, to give them their due the outfit did actually look pretty like the real thing and attracted a small flock of photographers (and probably hungry pigeons as well...).

I can't help but feel that it's a bit of a shame for the poor old humble oat, though, which in truth is probably one of the prettiest crops when, as harvest approaches, it bobs its golden heads in the field (until, that is, a wet year sees you facing the prospect of combining several acres of well-brackled instant porridge).

The crop has had a bad press for a long time, however – famously kicking off all the way back in the 18th century when Samuel Johnson, compiler of 'Dictionary of the English Language', one of the most famous English-language dictionaries in history which was published back in 1755, described oats as 'a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people'.

'Fine people'

James Boswell, his friend and biographer, who was born on this side of the Border, however,

replied: "Aye, and that's why England has such fine horses, and Scotland such fine people."

But this possibly makes it even more shocking that some versions of the staple which feeds our national character has, in recent months, been added to the 'junk food category' by the Advertising Standards Authority.

Under legislation due to come into effect in October, the advertising of junk food, either via paid online adverts or TV adverts, will be banned from being shown before the 9pm watershed in a move aimed at reducing childhood obesity.

All food classified as 'less healthy' by the UK Government will fall under this ban.

While it's still possible to advertise unadulterated porridge oats at any time, the problem has arisen because manufacturers have the habit of dressing instant porridge up with syrup and other sugary concoctions – and this has seen such products fall into the same bracket as fizzy drinks and other high-calorie foods.

And maybe the 'ugly' campaign has been designed to get round this ban and get us back to eating our porridge like a true Scot – either naked (the porridge, not the consumer) or with nothing other than a wee pinch of salt.

Healthiest foodstuff

But despite the bad press, not only are oats the third most grown cereal crop in the UK but they're also probably one of the healthiest foodstuffs out there.

The cereal is rich in protein, minerals and fibre, especially glucan, which is associated with a reduction in cholesterol levels and

post-meal glycaemic responses, a fact which might underlie its old name of 'cheat the guts'.

And the good news is that scientists at the James Hutton Institute, where funding for a new research project has just landed, have estimated that the oat market will grow by 3.7% annually between 2024 and 2032 because of increasing health consciousness and demand for functional foods which are highly nutritious and associated with a number of powerful health benefits.

With oats being a crop which is well suited to being grown in some of the more northern regions of Europe, the new project being undertaken, in association with Scandinavian scientists, will see researchers study the genes of 200 oat varieties and landraces that have been collected from across the Nordic region and grown for a century, surviving changes in climate and agricultural practices.

Dr Joanne Russell, the Hutton's lead on this study, said that with a focus on sustainability, oats are particularly well suited to low-input systems in northern Europe due to their robustness and adaptability. They require low inputs thanks to their low demand for nitrogen, and their low susceptibility to diseases – and the fact that they can cope effectively against weeds.

"The project brings together experts in plant genetics, agronomy, and mathematics to harness the unique properties of oat, with its low carbon footprint and significant nutritional and health benefits."

Meanwhile, as last year's

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disappointing returns for over contract oats showed, there are considerable swings in the amount of the crop planted – and with it proving to be one of the few spring alternatives to plant on land not sown to wheat in the horrendous autumn of 2023, an increase in plantings saw a fair old glut on the market.

I suspect that as a result of these poor prices and the better autumn sowing window there's probably going to be a swing in the opposite direction this year, with

production down and, hopefully, prices up.

Stability in the market

So, one of the key issues for oat producers is certainly the lack of stability in year-to-year supply and quality, largely due to seasonal fluctuations in environmental factors – and getting some stability into the market will help.

Companies selling oats products also seem keen to harness the

sustainability credentials of growing the crop locally – with both the Quaker factory at Cupar and Alpro's new facility for turning oats into oat milk at Kettering both proudly claiming to source all their oats within a radius of 100 miles or so from their factories.

So, with the benefits of being a healthy, sustainable, locally produced crop, who cares if the final product isn't going to win any beauty contests?