

# BUTCHER BY THE SEA

LIZZY DOUGLAS'S THE BLACK PIG  
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARS BRØNSETH



*In an alleyway just off the pebble beach of Deal, a town on the south-east coast with whitewashed brick houses lining narrow streets, a cheerful metal pig dangles above the door leading to Lizzy Douglas's butcher's shop. In this seaside town and in the meat industry, Lizzy has made a name with her locally sourced free-range meat and her handmade products, featuring beach fennel, wild garlic and other ingredients foraged nearby. Josefine Skomars and Lars Brønseth spend time at The Black Pig getting to know Lizzy and the butchery business she has made her own.*







Outside Lizzy Douglas's butcher's shop, a wooden pig stands among geraniums and hollyhocks. Lizzy leans out through blue metal curtains to greet us with blood-stained apron and a smile. It's Monday and The Black Pig is closed, but the regulars pop their heads in as they walk by, complimenting the tender lamb steak they bought last week or asking if she might have some of their favourite things in the fridge today after all. While we talk about her work Lizzy nips out to pick bundles of fennel flowers on the beach, peels garlic in preparation for tomorrow's sausage-making and does a bit of butchery.

It is now six years since a small shop formerly selling knick-knacks became available in St George's Passage, in the heart of Deal, and Lizzy installed a walk-in fridge, a wooden cutting table and a meat counter and opened her own place. Lizzy comes from the Douglas family, counting among its members the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish knight known as The Black Douglas and Lizzy's great-great-uncle Lord Alfred ('Bosie') Douglas, poet and lover to Oscar Wilde. The name of the shop is a nod both to the family history and to a favourite children's book: 'When we were little we all liked the book *Captain Pugwash*, about a pirate ship named the *Black Pig*. I thought it was a good name for a seaside butcher's shop. I've been thinking of painting a flag with a skull and bones for the shop front someday', Lizzy says, smiling. The walls are hung with artworks by local artists and friends, Lizzy's own line drawings of chickens and cows, and small colourful portraits made by her daughter Merlie,

while her former mentor's frayed aprons have been made into flags to line the ceiling. Lizzy's place is intimately hers. She says, 'I feel proud that I set it up from nothing. It was hard learning such a male-dominated trade while having a young family, and I didn't feel confident in the role for a long time. But by the time I took on this shop something had changed, and I think it's reflected in how I put it together. I really enjoyed having a place of my own.'

Lizzy grew up in a big artistic family and went to art college before she started her own family. Now she lives in an old house just off the beach with her three daughters, Merlie, Robbie and Josie, their partners and an elderly dog. She brings her creativity to her shop with her intuitively composed foods, which along with her choice of sustainable, free-range suppliers won her the YBF (Young British Foodie) award in the meat category last year – but it was pure circumstance that led her to the industry 12 years ago. As Lizzy says, 'I made good friends with a local butcher, Alan Doyle, when I was a young mum, and when he started to plan for his retirement he offered his shop to me. He stayed on and taught me and my husband the trade, and we ran his big shop together for five years before we split up and I continued on my own. Alan was with me the whole time, so I had a long apprenticeship with a real old-school butcher. He taught me lots of old-fashioned cuts he'd learnt growing up in post-war London, when the emphasis was on how to make the most money out of the meat that

OPPOSITE — Beside the counter of The Black Pig, selected artworks include: a chicken drawing by Lizzy Douglas, miniature paintings by Lizzy's daughter Merlie and a photograph of Lizzy by friend and local resident Mike Owen





you've got.' These are skills that since have allowed her to use meat in the most sustainable way and run a nose-to-tail kind of business.

Through her shop – and in an industry now characterised by mass-production and supermarket rows of anonymous, plastic-packaged meat – Lizzy has created a close link between local farms, the local abattoir and her customers. Mid-way through sawing a beef carcass, her phone rings and Lizzy answers, short of breath from the physical work. It's Peter, one of the farmers she works with, calling from the field where he stands among 'Lizzy's' cows to discuss one of them. 'My farmer Peter is quite elderly and he primarily supplies me. We have a big commitment to each other because he has about two years' worth of stock for me that he's bringing on', Lizzy says. 'All the meat in my shop comes from farms 15 to 20 miles away, and the animals don't have to travel far to the local abattoir. There's not so much talk about abattoirs – in this business you try and make it all so sort of attractive – but I always feel that it's relevant to bring this part into it as well. Alan was of a generation that thought the customer should be protected from seeing the behind-the-scenes stuff. But I believe in the opposite: showing people all aspects of it.' She explains, 'The abattoirs are as vital to me as the small farms. My farmer is sending four lambs a week and a cow every other week [to slaughter], which is way too small a quantity for the massive abattoirs to take on, because there's not enough profit in it. There are only about 60 small abattoirs left in the whole of the UK, but without them it wouldn't be possible for any of us to run

these small local businesses.' She continues: 'I didn't intend for it to be a political thing – that wasn't on my mind. It has just gradually evolved that way.'

In the shop window, between a couple of porcelain pigs, stands a mug with the text 'If you love animals, why eat them?' When I ask Lizzy about it, she says, 'I question it sometimes. When I was little I had a snail hospital, trying to save snails the neighbours threw out of their gardens. I've always loved animals. I don't know if meat-eating is bad full stop, and I feel like if people are going to eat meat this is the best way – buying from nearby farms where the animals are happily roaming outdoors. My shop provides a connection to what's left of the rural countryside, and the people in town seem to want to support that. I'm proud to make it possible.'

During the lockdown, a period when home cooking was a source of comfort and distraction and The Black Pig was busy with customers queuing up the alley, Lizzy's daughters helped out in the shop. There's a familiar atmosphere of friendly teasing and laughter at The Black Pig, but at the core there are strict routines to make the business work practically and economically. 'It's very cyclic, not only within the days of the week but also between seasons, Lizzy says. Tuesday is the day for sausage-making. Robbie, Josie and Lizzy gather around the table and quickly twist the sausages into neat chains while Danny, Robbie's boyfriend, whom Lizzy has trained in butchery, operates the sausage machine. 'When I came into this industry, at first I didn't see how I could be creative. Now I find it interesting to try and find creative avenues while still being





quite restricted. The thought of selling food with chemicals and preservatives made me uncomfortable, so I started to experiment and make my own recipes with seasonal ingredients', Lizzy says. Her recipes are written down by hand in a black notebook: sausages with spicy homemade kimchi and succulent sea-blite, or 'Hot Italian' with beach fennel and wild garlic, and pork paired with seasonal Kentish apples. Wednesday is the day of the meat delivery, and at lunchtime Jack from the abattoir, in white butcher's coat, leather boots and speedy glasses pushed into his hair, draws up in a van. For a frantic 15 minutes Lizzy, Danny and Callum carry the heavy bodies through the alley, which echoes with their banter and jokes. The new deliveries are butchered towards the end of the week and the counter fills up with a tempting display of steaks, cured bacon, plump sausages, faggots and burgers. Over the weekend the shop is busy with customers and by Tuesday the counter is close to empty, and the process of filling it starts again. 'We only get meat once a week so there's very little stock half of the week and only a small amount of the cuts that everyone traditionally wants - the fillets and sirloin and stuff like that. It's a bit nuts, but the customers have got used to the rhythm. My sister, Dalziel, who had a café around the corner, taught me an important thing about running a business. Her ethos was that she would do what she wanted to do, her own way, and it would attract people if they liked it. That has proven to work for myshop, too. It has created real customer loyalty and a lot of trust, everyone understands the reason for this way of working'.

Continuing to talk about the cycles of the business, Lizzy unfolds a handwritten list of Christmas orders, as tall as her, and tells about the busy time when the turkeys line the narrow staircase to the small upstairs and the whole family spends the December evenings making Christmas puddings at home. 'I've got a webcam installed by the fridge temperature meter so I can keep an eye on things from home, too', Lizzy says. But during the nights before Christmas she sets her alarm and cycles down to the shop every fourth hour to make sure the fridge, filled to the brim, keeps the right temperature. It's an intense period when there's a lot at stake: a third of the year's activity happens then. 'It's crazy, like going into labour each time!'

When I ask if she ever regrets getting into the tough butchery business, Lizzy thinks for a moment and says, 'The shop has tied me down enormously, but the payoff is security. For a long time I struggled with the thought of applying myself to something that I'd have to do every day for the foreseeable future, and in the beginning I couldn't see how it was possible to be creative within the industry as I do now, with the way I source the meat and the way I make my products. I'd loved being at home with the kids, who were still quite small when we took over Alan's shop, and the work turned out to be hard. When you haven't got the skills, everything takes so much longer - what Alan could do in five minutes might take us two hours. I feel like I've come a long way in viewing it positively now, and that I'm lucky to be able to provide financially for my family through this shop and lucky that I am able to do it my own way.'

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