

# Meat maestros

Cousins of Newnham has a reputation for serving high quality meat with a good portion of friendly banter on the side. Lisa Millard visits the local shop that boasts bags of personality.

Pictures by Keith Jones





Cousins of Newnham has been part of the community for a long time – since 1916 – and has a well-loved air about it. Pass the traditional awning-fronted shop, with crates full of fresh fruit and veg spilling out to the pavement, and locals are buzzing in and out at all hours throughout the day.

Newnham bagged top spot on *The Sunday Times* Best Place to Live list this year (it was runner-up last year) and the clutch of local shops serving the community played a significant part in the suburban ‘village’ earning the accolade.

Friendly banter is the signature dish at Cousins, as much as finely-honed butchery skills and knowledge. When a queue forms, winding its way from the main counter into the street – Christmas attracts hundreds of people collecting their festive birds – customers are not moaning about the wait but chatting to each other and catching up on news.

“This is where they learn who has bought the house round the corner for a million-and-a-half pounds. These details might not make the *Cambridge News* but you get the story in the queue,” says Andrei Bgatov, who took over Cousins in 2013.

“When I first saw a line of people queuing out of the door I was shocked and panicked. I said to the guys behind the counter ‘We need more tills, we need to sell online, we need a strategy.’” Fortunately, Andrei was persuaded otherwise.

“Tony Eales, who is a very English gentleman butcher, gently said to me: ‘We appreciate your vision and fresh ideas, Andrei, but may I ask that you work with us in the shop for a couple of days before you do anything rash?’” Andrei did as asked and changed his mind: “Why fix what’s not broken?”

Tony works with Colin Baldwin and Peter Birch behind the meat counter and, between them, they’ve clocked-up 100 years’ butchery experience. Meat is sourced as locally as possible – Colin is the master of Cousins’ home-made sausages (now on the menu at the local primary school) and the butcher boys are quick to offer tips and suggestions so customers make the most of the meat they buy. When someone pops in for some lamb they will be asked what it’s for, guided to the right cut and packed off home with a recipe and cooking instructions. You simply don’t get that at Tesco, do you?

Quality is a religion at Cousins and Tony has been known to turn a meat delivery away and send it back to where it came from if it does not meet his exacting standards. This approach has attracted the shop legions of loyal fans and the posts they receive on their Facebook page give rapturous reviews.

As well as shelves packed with pantry staples – pasta, sauces, rice, Belvoir cordials, cheeses, cakes, pastries and deli treats – there is a chilled cabinet full of Inder’s Kitchen ready-to-eat dishes and a choice of home-made quiches and award-winning pies.

The certificate for the Best Steak Pie award is

displayed on the wall and Sharon O’Neil, who is Tony’s daughter, joins the shop floor three days a week where she manages to make her pies and quiches on a tiny table in the shop.

“I love working here,” she says (at this point dad Tony chips in with “Yes but you’re not getting any more money my girl!”. Sharon shakes her head and raises her eyebrows while deftly removing a spot of flour from her chin). “I used to make pies for a couple of places but now I make them exclusively for Cousins. People seem to love them – they certainly don’t stay on the shelves for long.” This is modesty on Sharon’s part – when it’s pie day the customers are literally waiting in the wings for the shortcrust bakes to come out of the oven. “We can’t make enough of them,” says Andrei.

A Newnham resident of many years, Andrei, who hails from Russia, is also a long-standing customer of the shop he now owns: “I’ve always loved Cousins’ Three Fruit Marmalade that’s made exclusively for the shop. I would sometimes buy other brands but none of them were as good. I used to work as a sales director in the corporate world and was sent over to Moscow for a couple of years, but I made sure I took an entire box of marmalade with me.”

Andrei has left the corporate world behind him now; when I arrive at the shop he suggests we chat in the Cousins’ boardroom, directing me to a bench by the postbox over the road. He is happy taking care of shop business, stacking empty shelves when needed and even making some of the local deliveries. “I am immersed in this now. What I love about this business is that it is real – real people buying real food.”

Every Saturday morning the shop rings with the sound of 1960s music: “People have a singalong and dance in the queue,” says Tony. Last January, to mark Burns Night, the Cousins crew arranged a piper, resplendent in kilt, jacket and sporran, to play the pipes outside the shop and herald the arrival of the haggis (vegetarian haggis was available too). Christmas sees Tony, Peter and Colin dress up to add festive cheer to their traditional striped aprons. As Tony tells me about Christmas, a customer interrupts to request a little drink and nibbles be served while they queue this season. “You’ll be lucky,” says Tony, but I wonder? Andrei appears to have a sparkle in his eye . . . there’s an idea.



**Tony Eales and Colin Baldwin**

Cousins of Newnham is at 36 Grantchester Street, Newnham. Contact (01223) 352856 and see [cambridgebutchers.com](http://cambridgebutchers.com) and search Cousins Butchers on Facebook.