

WATERCRESS

Festival has the winning recipe

■ Record number of visitors enjoy fun-packed event

RECORD crowds turned out at this year's Alresford Watercress Festival, now in its eighth year.

The town played host to 15,000 visitors – up by 3,000 on last year.

Charles Barber, of the Watercress Alliance, the main sponsor of the festival, which took place on Sunday, May 15, said: "It was a tremendously successful day.

"The festival is a fantastic event that's now highly recognised in the food calendar – it just seems to get bigger and better every year."

The ever-popular watercress eating competition was won by Rajesh Peter, who munched his way through two large bags of watercress in 59.2 seconds.

In so doing, Rajesh, 31, landed the World Watercress Eating Championship.

Rajesh was slightly slower than last year's winner, fellow Alresford resident Sam Batho, who completed the challenge in only 42 seconds.

But watercress eating has only just been recognised by the *Guinness Book of Records*, which means that Rajesh auto-



GOOD EATING:

Jerrinder Laing, Nathan Bedford and Elizabeth Smith-Bingham, of Cresson Creative, with watercress and watercress soup.

matically becomes world champion.

The champion said: "I love cooking but I'd never eaten watercress before today. I only came down here for a bit of fun."

Rajesh, a housekeeper who works for Meon Valley MP George Hollingbery, was presented with a bottle of Champagne and two free tickets to the Alresford Music Festival.

The championships were the highlight of the nationally-acclaimed festival, held every year to celebrate one of Hampshire's best-known products.

Beef and watercress burgers, watercress soup, and pork, watercress and ale sausages were among the foodstuffs sold at dozens of stalls lining town streets.

Morris dancers, classic cars and live jazz all added to the carnival atmosphere.



CHAMPION: Rajesh Peter, 31, winner of the World Watercress Eating Championship. (Left) Crowds fill the streets at Alresford.

Growers cope with challenging conditions

FIRST it was too cold. Then it was too dry. In the past few months Hampshire's hard-pressed farming industry has been hit by the worst winter in decades and the longest drought for many years.

Not everyone is doing badly. This has been a spectacular year for blossom, which means apples, pears and plums should do well, and this year's strawberry crop could be the biggest and earliest for years.

But the past six months have not been the best of times for watercress. The Arctic conditions last December resulted in many watercress beds freezing, cutting production by up to 50 per cent in some areas.

products, including award-winning vegetarian sausages.

"Watercress has more vitamin C than oranges, more iron than spinach and more calcium than milk," she said. "But just before Christmas we had the coldest weather for decades. Temperatures dropped to minus-16 and the water froze. I was struggling and had to find other suppliers."

Since then the weather has gone from one extreme to the other, resulting in watercress flowering three weeks earlier than normal.

However, the long dry spell is unlikely to have an adverse impact on production – thanks to the location

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