

more than welsh rarebit

ON A WHIRLWIND GASTRO-TOUR OF WALES, DOUG WALLACE
DISCOVERS THE RICHES OF ITS BACK-TO-THE-LAND FARE



Eating my way around Wales and marvelling at one locally sourced taste sensation after another, I couldn't help thinking about the cooking of my very Anglo, Canadian-born maternal grandmother — a proponent of nose-to-tail eating — very rustic and very British. The smallest whiff of roast pork reminds me of her and the pork rolls she would throw together, half-soaked in pork crackling. The freshest oatmeal date cookies were kept on the kitchen counter in a small tin, within easy reach

of our short arms. And though just the thought of it now makes me queasy, her pickled cow's tongue had a real refreshing kick. All these "taste memories" swirled in my head as I chewed up the scenery and the food through this underrated and unspoiled part of the United Kingdom, which will be home to October's Ryder Cup 2010 golf tourney. With the success of its largest trade mission ever to the United States last year, Wales is bursting with a renewed economic and cultural energy.

Culinary Braveheart

As the original form of Wallace meant "Welsh-speaking" and the famous William Wallace's ancestors were like as not of Welsh origin, I began to feel oddly at home during a pitstop at the West Wales Food Festival at the National Botanic Garden. Perhaps it was the hope that "old Uncle Bill" (my brother's name for William Wallace) had Welsh blood like the clan societies argue. At the festival, I found taste explosions: boar burgers, Pemberton's chocolates, Ralph's Cider ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM STEWART; WALES TOURISM (POWYS)



Greener Pastures.

Clockwise from top: the harbour view at Aberaeron; fresh limpets from the shoreline; Betty Adams of Caws Cenarth Cheese at Glysithinog Farm (Cenarth cheese is a favourite of the Prince of Wales; photos of him are on the wall); "little paper castles" of veggies. Opposite: the author at Ynysir Hall gardens; the Gospel Pass in Powys.



and Drunken Dragon's goat cheese from Caws Teifi Cheese. Demos from some of Wales' top chefs and a screening of the documentary film *Food, Inc.* had everyone talking about the return to local farming, embracing simpler traditions and moving away from industrialization. A turn through a small side garden named for botanist Alfred Russel Wallace, a contemporary of Darwin, had me Googling him back at the hotel for signs of kinship. If William Wallace can have Welsh roots, so can I.

Yes, It Was That Fresh!

A culinary dream came true for me at Fairyhill Hotel and Restaurant in Reynoldston in the Gower Peninsula, when I found a small piece of buckshot in a delicious breast of roast pigeon, a compelling example of "field-fresh." Situated on rolling acres of lawn and woods, which are complete with stream and lake, this eight-room haven dates from the 1720s, when it was built for the newly wed son of a wealthy local landowner (nice wedding present!). The hotel's restaurant uses the best of regional food (even the buckshot was local). "We use organic produce where possible — wild garlic, broad beans, strawberries — and work with the seasons," says co-owner Paul Davies. "And we've been going to our local butcher for 17 years." Other highlights: crispy duck breast with raspberry jus, turnip mash, a lemon tart with Devonshire clotted cream and more than 500 bins of wine in the cellar.

Living Off the Land

An afternoon of foraging with survivalist Andrew Price from Dryad Bushcraft revealed the fresh and wild (and free!) side of the forest and roadsides, as he pointed out edible salad greens like hedge garlic, sorrel and bittercress. "What most people call weeds, we call food," says Price. Memories of my prairie upbringing came flooding back as our bushman fashioned a whistle out of a green twig, just as we did as kids. Price also introduced us to a local legend, salt-marsh lamb farmer Rowland Pritchard, who keeps 1,500 sheep on the tidal salt marsh spread out below Weobley Castle, the 13th-century fortified manor house

that's also part of the farm. His lambs are known for their distinctive flavour due to the timothy grass, marsh samphire and purslane they graze on.

Star Bright

After a charming stay and fabulous Welsh Black beef (with thick-cut fries) at Aberaeron's Harbourmaster Hotel, we headed up the coast to Ynysir Hall, a nine-room Relais & Châteaux inn near Machynlleth in Powys. Once a manor house and shooting lodge on 2,000 acres of land, the storied hotel dates back to at least the 15th century, with its core going back possibly to the 12th-century Cistercian monks who forged a self-sustaining community. With tourism and farming now the mainstay of the area, sustainable living is popular again with alternative lifestyle communities that pepper the surrounding area, many off the grid. "It's not glitz, it's character that makes us special," says manager Joan Reen. But the glitzy Michelin star certainly helps. A sublime seven-course luncheon prepared by chef Shane Hughes, ending with a vanilla soufflé with hot passion-fruit sauce, left us breathless.

Meanwhile, Back at the Farm

Out of the soufflé, into the farm. Surviving the harrowing drive straight over the Powys mountain range, in all its misty, sheep-covered glory, complete with hair-raising roadside cliff-drops, we arrived at Bryn Derw Farm near Llandinam. Welsh farmers are leaders in the return to quality versus quantity, and this relatively new farm has quickly become an award-winning purveyor of high-quality free-range chicken, rare-breed pork and traditional free-range Herdwick lamb. Grandma would have swooned. All the animals are slow-growing breeds, and the return to traditional methods makes for enhanced flavour all around.

A stop into Caws Cenarth Cheese at Glyeithinog Farm near Llandinam revealed some of the most prized cheeses in Wales (and indeed the world), including the fabled Cenarth, developed by now-retired proprietor Thelma Adams, and a favourite of the Prince of Wales who invited himself over for a

taste test one day. Thelma's son Carwyn runs the farm today. "Just like making wine, cheese is an art, taking years and sometimes generations to get it to what it is today," says Carwyn's aunt, Betty Adams. "There are no secrets, just attention to detail." A perfect balance of richness and levity, the mellow Cenarth now comes in a handful of flavours, including a spicy sundried tomato version and one laced with brandy and apricot.

Gray's Cooking Anatomy

Returning to south Wales where my journey began, I had to concede that I sorely wished I had more concrete Welsh roots. But before taking off for home, we got down to work on roasted vegetables trussed up in parchment to resemble "little paper castles" while in an actual castle — Fonmon Castle near the Cardiff airport. Welsh food legend Angela Gray has taken over the kitchens and extensive gardens at the 13th-century showplace, now owned by Sir Brooke Boothby, making it one of the three sites of her new cooking school. Our vegetables went in the oven with a rack of French-trimmed salt-marsh lamb, coated with herbs, bread crumbs and lemon zest, along with a fresh rainbow trout caught by Gray's dad.

Gray is in yet another phase of reinvention, having been a caterer, a personal chef (to Andrew Lloyd Webber no less, during the '80s), a restaurant consultant, food writer and TV presenter. "The cooking school is a culmination of everything I've done," she says. "Here, we can bring people together to reconnect with the simple things in life."

Gray's grandmother was a huge influence. "There was always something baking, something on the table and something bubbling," she says. "Everything would be from the garden and all the farms within a couple of miles. The big revival of that is really lovely — it's come full circle." Her advice to the home chef? "Go fresh, go seasonal — and enjoy yourself. I've gone back to the real essence of flavour. As people get older, they want the real flavour of things and less fuss."

Grandma couldn't have said it better herself. www.visitwales.com



Fresh Fare. Clockwise from top, this page: Fairyhill Hotel and Restaurant; fresh trout at Fonmon Castle; a salt marsh-raised sheep gives us the eye; survivalist Andrew Price from Dryad Bushcraft. Opposite: Welsh cakes at Swansea Market; the author with his maternal grandparents; a sign of the times.