

Food Islands prepare for first culinary festival



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From ocean to platter

Martin Hesp returns to Scilly for another food forage and finds freshness to the fore

What a difference a decade can make. There may be a few folk who won't like my

saying this, but there was a time in the not too distant past when the Scillonian archipelago was a kind of food desert. It was, for example, almost impossible to buy local caught fish – just about all of it was brought in chilled or frozen from the mainland, which was the same for most other fresh produce.

Given the amazingly rich waters that surround the islands and the archipelago's kindly climate and fertile soils, this was something akin to a crime for those of us who knew that so much more could easily be achieved.

However, in the same place where a chef once told me it didn't matter what was on a plate, it was the view that mattered, the Scillonian food scene has undergone a quiet revolution.

Now fresh local caught, island grown, food is beginning to pop-up throughout the isles as businesses large and small emerge like saplings in a wild wood.

You cannot walk more than 200 metres along one of the little off-island lanes without coming across some sort of honesty

box or farm-gate stall offering fresh eggs, herbs, veg, or more unusual items like local sea salt.

Many of the island hotels and restaurants have long since upped their game, and you get the feeling that what you can see occurring in the islands today is just a beginning. There are more plans being hatched as movers and shakers, producers, farmers, fishermen, chefs and others begin to realise that one of the most fortunate corners of Northern Europe (sometimes known as The Fortunate Isles) is so amazingly blessed in geography and natural conditions that the far flung place could and should be one of the UK's premier food destinations.

It is a theory supported by the fact that the Isles of Scilly will later this year stage its first festival of food and drink (see Foodie News column). The *WMN* will be reporting on that event in September, but in the meantime I was there last weekend for another festival – the successful WalkScilly, which is now in its 12th year.

As I hiked around various islands in every weather condition known to man, I made a quick and very unscientific snapshot of a few of the micro food scenes that are flourishing out there, 28 miles west of Land's End – and my journey began in a cosy cottage kitchen, high on a hill on the windswept isle of Bryher. It was, by the way, perhaps the first time any food editor has had to walk from one island to another in order to research an article. The spring tide

was so low, boats couldn't reach Bryher so we had to stroll across the damp sands from Treco instead.

It was a year ago that the Pender family set up Island Fish and these pages featured an article about the enterprise after Amanda Pender and her brother Mark took me razor-clam hunting and sprat fishing. It was one of the best days out I'd ever spent in 41 years of journalism, so I wanted to see how the family business was getting along.

Amanda designed the business so she could begin selling the shellfish caught by both her brother and father direct to local chefs and visitors. It seemed like one of those no-brainer options – why send fresh live crab and lobster off to the mainland when there was a ready made market right on the doorstep?

I was not surprised to find that Island Fish is doing well, but a year ago Amanda was talking about the need to add value to the raw product like whole shellfish and picked crab. One idea was to use some of those seemingly useless crab shells to make a product like crab soup – and that is precisely why I was in her kitchen last weekend.

Amanda shares her recipe for the delicious crab soup with us today. It is a tasty winter warmer that is a triumph of island resourcefulness and I was glad, also, to hear that she is going to experiment with a lighter summer-style soup. And I was even more impressed to hear that she has invested in equipment to make huge

seafood paella dishes which it will be creating on a regular basis throughout the coming visitor season.

"We want to do more when it comes to adding value to what fishermen like Mark and my father catch," said Amanda. "There is a bit of a gap for more ready-made food in the islands during the season, so we've bought some kit in order to start our take-away paella-nights.

"Paella is interesting because it makes the most of whatever the fishermen have landed. We went to Falmouth Oyster Festival last year and bought some from a stall and we thought – we can do this. So I did a lot of research and got hold of some recipes and we've been experimenting throughout the winter."

Echoing the ancient mantra of the islands which basically states that, because there's no one else around to do it for you, you must get on with it yourself, she added: "I am quite nervous about it, but it can't be insurmountable."

It is the kind of attitude that has taken Island Fish to the New Business of the Year shortlist of the Cornwall Business Awards.

Since I last visited, Amanda has been running regular stalls on Treco and also on St Mary's quay where she joins forces with another local start-up food business, Salakee Duck, which sells everything imaginable related to those delicious birds.

But getting back to the crab soup, Amanda told me: "We started playing around with it just before Christmas when



we wanted something warming – and I came up with a type of broth instead of a thinner more classic crab soup. I felt it was the kind of instant ready-to-eat dish that was lacking in the islands, especially at special events where we serve it and where it's been very popular.

“Using the crab shells to make the stock has made all the difference – right at the beginning I experimented with some bought-in stock, which was nowhere near as good.”

Good seafood soup deserves something special as an accompaniment, and the Isles of Scilly can even supply that nowadays in the form of some excellent wine from a vineyard located in the sheltered heart of St Mary's.

I was invited on tour by winemaker and all round enthusiast (about wine, Scilly and most things, that is) Robert Francis, who told me his Holy Vale Vineyard was planted in the spring of 2009 after a couple of years “trying to beg, borrow or steal redundant farm land” on St Mary's.

“With co-operation from the Duchy of Cornwall and local farmers we were able to set about obtaining the land we had found that suited the planting of the vines, mostly sloping and facing south,” Robert told me after I'd walked to the vineyard through one of the heaviest rainstorms local farmers had witnessed in years.

Central St Mary's was flooding fast, but nothing dampened my own enthusiasm for both the wine

tasting and for the amazing lobster lunch that Robert seemed to have rustled from nowhere. Actually, I know exactly where he rustled it from – he happens to own the Star Castle Hotel, which is one of the premier hostelrys in the archipelago, and the night before I'd enjoyed a first class dinner up in its pleasant conservatory restaurant located amid the fortifications.

It is easy for a journalist to say someone like Robert is an enthusiast, but this is the sort of thing I mean. He not only grew the grapes and made the wine, he also caught the lobster I had for lunch in his own pots, using his own fishing boat. And Robert is a great evangelist when it comes to both talking-up the islands and for doing anything and everything needed to pursue their wellbeing. Halfway through the stormbound lunch, he raced off to oversee the launch of the RNLI lifeboat on its first call-out of the year.

I was left alone in the vineyard shop to finish my lobster and help myself to wine, but that is typical Isles of Scilly. I'm talking about trust, openness, a relaxed attitude – married to a sudden all-hands-on-deck mentality that requires determination and zeal. And when you come to think of it, those are the kind of ingredients that can take any food scene from one level to the next – which is why we look forward to reporting on the archipelago's first festival of food and drink in the autumn.

Foodie NEWS



Food and drink from the high seas

A visitor standing at Land's End gazing out at the Atlantic could be forgiven for feeling a little mystified if suddenly told those distant waves were about to host a unique festival of food and drink, but that is exactly what will be happening 28 miles towards the sunset this September. As mentioned in the main article, the Isles of Scilly will host its first festival of food and drink this autumn and organisers say it will be the “ultimate in slow food and low food miles”. David Jackson, executive director of the Islands' Partnership, said: “On Scilly you not only know where your food has come from, but you can often point to the fishermen or farmer who has provided it. True to this provenance, the festival will feature a melting pot of local flavours and truly distinctive foodie experiences as the islands bring together local bakers, brewers, fishermen, foragers and chefs to share their stories, passions and creativity to really get the taste buds tingling. Expect special island-hopping food trails, foraging walks, talks and demonstrations, masterclasses, wine tastings, crab and lobster evenings, restaurant promotions, local produce markets, beach barbecues and the very unique Tresco low-tide experience.” As plans develop over the coming weeks, visit visitislesofscilly.com for further details.

Scilly fish, seaweed and chips

As part of the WMN's foodie adventures in the isles last weekend we were supposed to attend a foraging walk on St Martin's, followed by a special banquet at the island's newly revamped Karma Resort, which would feature all the beach delights we'd picked. However, the weather had other plans, as it so often does on Scilly. So, on hearing the truly terrible forecast which meant the event was sure to be abandoned, we decided to take a sneak preview on St Martin's the day before the storm. And I'm very glad we did, because we not only got to meet the lovely Rachel Lambert who would have been leading the walk – and sample and learn about some of the seaweeds she was planning to collect – we also managed to grab some lunch at the resort and this fitted nicely with the theme of today's main food article. As I mention in the feature, the Scillies for years suffered a less than glittering press for its food offering, but here was an example of how, nowadays, you can enjoy a terrific lunch in elegant surroundings for a reasonable price. My posh fish, chips and mushy peas at the Karma Resort cost £12, which is on a par with posh fish 'n' chips on the mainland. Indeed, I know one well-known Cornish takeaway that charges slightly more and you must eat your portion out in the street. The real difference, though, was that my beautifully cooked, generous fillets of whiting had been caught by an island fisherman just a couple of hours before in waters right outside the restaurant. I never mind parting with cash if what you get is good value for money – and it is heartening to report that nowadays you can get that in the isles. As for Rachel Lambert, we will be featuring a special article about her seaweed foraging this summer when the Penzance-based writer launches her second book on the subject. But for now, why not visit wildwalks-southwest.co.uk for more information on foraging walks and other things Rachel has planned in mainland Cornwall.

Room with a view

I know I moan on about the Scillonian chef who a dozen years ago told me that the food on the plate didn't matter to anyone – it was the view that people were happy to pay for. But if you really want a meal accompanied by one of the best views in the whole of Northern Europe, have lunch or supper at Juliet's Garden which looks out over Hugh Town on St Mary's from a vantage point above the bay. Sunsets don't get any better anywhere, and the new menu at the restaurant is top notch. My slow braised beef cheek was truly melt-in-the-mouth and the oysters in tempura batter eclipsed even the view.