

GO WEST

IS WALES' SUCCESS PART OF A GROWING EAST-WEST DIVIDE WHEN IT COMES TO FOOD? ASKS LAURA ST QUINTON

If there is one area of the United Kingdom that feels particularly dynamic in terms of producing and consuming new food right now, it is surely Wales. Of course other areas that have reinvented their gastronomy continue to do well, but judging by nomination from the food experts as *The BMW 1 Series Good Food Ride* was researched, Wales is finally achieving the profile it deserves.

To be fair, Wales began innovating 40 years ago, when the gastro-pub revolution began at The Walnut Tree Inn in Abergavenny, but in recent times it has really excelled at combining the new interest in local produce with an unpretentious sense of style and enjoyment. In establishments as diverse as the Penmaenuchaf hotel, the Cors and even the Centre for Alternative Technology, there is a feeling of individuality and passion that somehow chimes with the contemporary mood.

Daniel Butler and Bel Crewe moved to rural Wales from London in 1993 and documented the transition in *Urban Dreams, Rural Realities*. They are perfectly placed to witness the evolution of a food scene, especially given that they claim to live in the only county in the UK that is not serviced by a major supermarket. "The quality of the food has gone rocketing up," says Butler. He draws attention to a particular trend in which Wales is "doing" well, namely the combination of dining and accommodation, with venues such as The Felin Fach Griffin Inn or The Harbourmaster Hotel helping to lure diners away from the culinary hotspots of Cardiff and Abergavenny.

One food guide editor confided that the total number of entries for Wales in his publication is creeping up too. He attributes this to great produce such as Welsh Black beef and he applauds the way, "Wales is quite nationally proud of its food heritage". As Daniel points out, people "have become really quite enterprising" in the face of a decline in farming.

"Glasu" ("to green" in Welsh) is an EU-funded rural development initiative which has pumped money into farm diversification and much of it is going into food. Daniel cites examples in his area such as a local company producing organic smoothies, The Organic Smokehouse and a friend who has set up a mail-order mutton business.

While these enterprises have already attracted the interest of the food press, there is also a level of celebrity activity that will probably help to raise the area's profile among a more general audience. Charlotte Church is in the process of securing a restaurant with rooms in the outskirts of Cardiff and Neil Morrissey is the proud owner of Hurst House in Laugharne, Carmarthenshire.

As far as that audience is concerned, Wales looks set to follow other regions such as the South West, Cumbria, East Anglia, and parts of the West Midlands whose appeal has been reinvigorated by food. In the 21st century, towns such as Padstow in Cornwall, Ludlow in Shropshire, Cartmel in Cumbria and Laugharne in Wales have shown how potent food can be as an attraction, creating a new category of tourist destination.

It is striking how many of these lie to the west, in areas where the troubles affecting traditional livestock-based agriculture have prompted many resourceful farmers to rethink food production and supply, and where tourism has provided a ready market.

It has been argued that in future the proximity of Europe will mean the right-hand side of Britain booms at the expense of the left, and the new socio-economic fault line switches from north-south to east-west. Could it be that resulting overcrowding and suburbanisation in the east, ends up driving an even greater number of people to take stress-busting holidays in the more soulful, holistic West? It is food for thought, at least. **GFR**



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