

DeSoto

Exploring the South

MARCH 2012

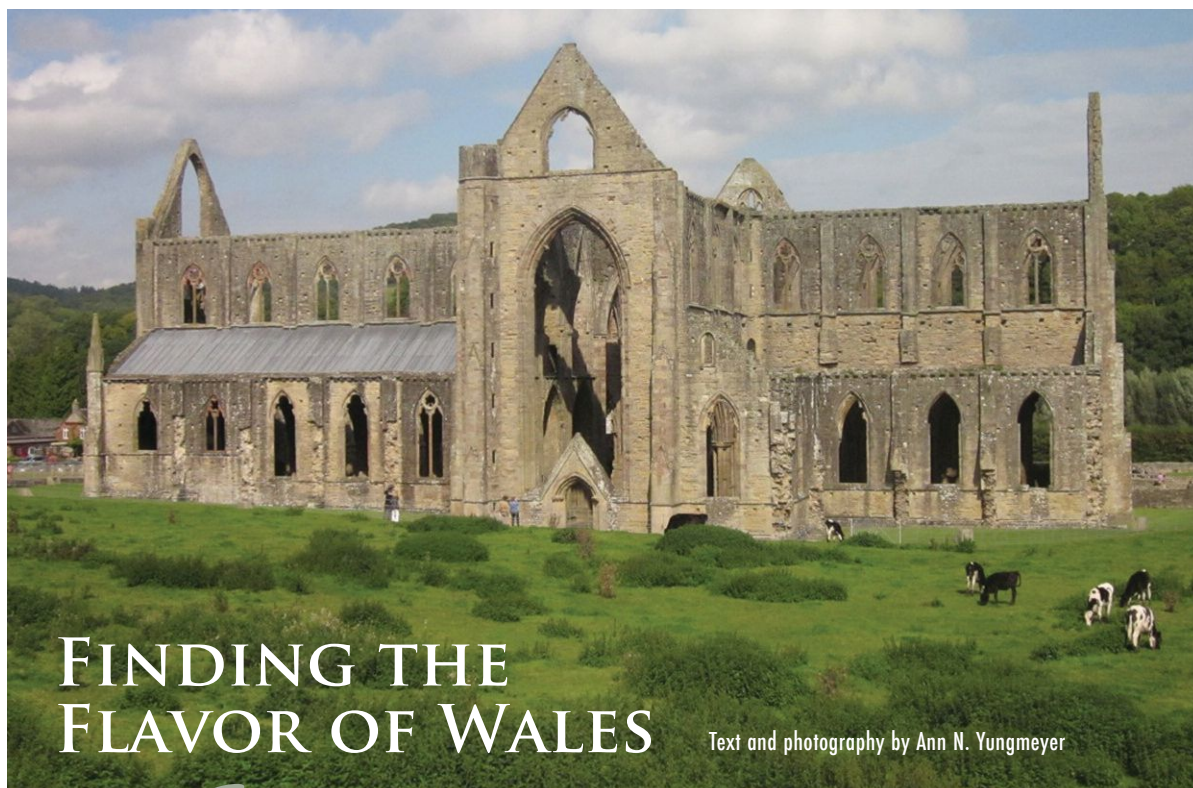
A Home with Greener Pastures:
Dark Horse Rescue

Traditional
IRISH RECIPES

TITANIC!
100 Years Later



John Alexander



FINDING THE FLAVOR OF WALES

Text and photography by Ann N. Yungmeyer

Wales is better known for golf than gastronomy, thanks in part to hosting the 2010 Ryder Cup, and its unspoiled countryside has long been a favorite escape for Londoners seeking a rural retreat. But Wales' culinary landscape is ripe for discovery for anyone who enjoys fresh, flavorful cooking and homegrown produce, seasoned with a hint of Welsh heritage.

Like the Londoners who come to ramble in the countryside, I was drawn to Wales for its pastoral scenery and excellent network of walking trails. Exploring the south and mid regions, I traveled with friends through fertile valleys and rolling pastures, along dramatic coastline and village gardens – all which set the stage for our introduction to the local food and drink.

We sampled artisan breads and handmade cheeses, teatime Welsh cakes and organic cider. From chatting with wellie-clad Welshmen foraging mushrooms along a wooded trail to watching wheat being ground at a historic mill, we could see that Wales is rooted in a distinct food culture, dedicated to premium flavor and heirloom methods. Simply put, the Welsh are passionate about preserving the special skills of artisan food production.

Culinary Highlights and other Rarebits

The Bell of Skenfrith is one of Wales' renowned restaurants in a former 17th century coach house that

also offers well-appointed rooms. Chef Rupert Taylor, who trained with London's celebrated Heston Blumenthal, presents a creative and colorful plate using seasonal produce from his organic kitchen garden and locally sourced meats. The Bell's 'mile-long' wine list includes selections from around the world, along with amusing wine-themed sketches by a local artist.

I chose the New White Lion Inn in Llandovery to try the traditional Welsh rarebit, a dish best described as a grilled cheese fondue, followed by salt marsh lamb with laverbread – another Welsh delicacy with the quintessential ingredient, seaweed. After dinner, our hostess of the five-star, folklore-themed inn graciously showed us photos of a recent teatime at the inn with Prince Charles, who owns a country home nearby. Our walk the next morning near the village of Myddfai took us through woodland and gated pastures past Prince Charles and Camilla's house, called Llwynwywermod, which is available as a self-catering vacation rental when the Royal family is away.

Notwithstanding availability of Prince Charles' digs, renting a farmhouse or village home is a delightful way to experience the vitality of Wales. Our cottage in Crickhowell at the edge of Brecon Beacons National Park was a perfect location for walking to the village pubs, exploring beautiful parkland and indulging at the nearby Abergavenny Food Festival.

Among the top rated food festivals in Great Britain,

Abergavenny is a pure culinary celebration with endless produce stalls, demonstrations, master classes, pop-up yurt restaurants, soapbox races and entertainment. It's a true homeland event, but fun for tourists too, with opportunities for guided mushroom forays, fishing excursions, and walks to nearby vineyards. My best discovery was Shepherd's Ice Cream, a fresh, smooth tasting ice cream made with sheeps milk, which is naturally homogenized and low in fat.

History, Legend and Literary Bites

The quaint town of Hay-On-Wye is a must-see town on the English border, famous as the "town of books." With more than 30 bookshops, it is the largest second-hand book center in the world and makes for a wonderful rainy day browse. Cozy cafes and clothing boutiques are also a draw, and the town's historic castle is lined with outdoor bookstalls selling books on the honor system.

With more than 600 castles and historic houses in Wales, you can't travel far without coming across some of the legendary landmarks. The Roman fortress and amphitheatre ruins at Caerlon are believed to be the location of King Arthur's Camelot, one of countless sites associated with the infamous king and his magician, Merlin. Nearby, Tintern Abbey stands as Wales' first Cistercian monastery, founded in 1131. And most spectacular, Carreg Cennen offers views across the green Carmarthenshire hills and a scenic five-mile walking trail around the castle ruins. On a nice day, it is a fine place to take a picnic spread from one of Wales' unique farm shops.

Wales' most celebrated poet and author, Dylan Thomas, grew up on the south coast in Swansea, where his life is commemorated in an excellent exhibit at the Dylan Thomas Center. Fans can walk in his footsteps and sleep in his bed at his birthplace, a lovingly restored 20th century home, available for rent as a self-catering guesthouse. South coast menus feature cockles, a kind of mussel, and further west, the picturesque harbor town of Aberaeron



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is famous for lobsters and spider crab. Fish and chips are standard fare, served with “mush peas” that are surprisingly textured and tasty.

Wales' Wine and Spirits

Despite the selection of local ales, it's hard to pass up the signature brew with a name like “Brains.” Welsh-made ciders are also popular, but I was curious to try the unimaginable – Wales' wine. Open for tastings, the family-owned Ancre Vineyard is set in the Wye Valley, apparently ideal for grape growing with an unusual mesa climate. Specializing in boutique wines from Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Albarino grapes, Ancre produces a sparkling rose and pinot noir that stand up to the best.

Penderyn Distillery opened in 2000 and revived whiskey production in Wales after more than a century of naught. Known for its award-winning single malt whisky, the distillery also makes gin, vodka, and a smooth tasting cream liqueur called Merlyn. Penderyn prides its distinctive taste on its mountain spring water and the aging in barrels from Kentucky and Madeira. And Wales produces a



premium mineral water, Tynant, easily recognizable by its artistic blue bottle.

A country once known as a “culinary desert,” Wales is becoming an oasis for farm-to-table cuisine, as a number of highly trained chefs from Michelin starred restaurants return to the source and inspire more producers. And now, when in Wales, a journey to culinary adventure is reason enough to raise a toast.

If you go: Wales' capital, Cardiff, is a two-hour train ride from London, and a convenient gateway and attractive cultural center. Signage and brochures are generally printed in both English and Welsh, with about 20% of Wales' population speaking the native Welsh language. For travel planning, visit www.visitwales.com. ■