

Guernsey

St Peter Port

GUERNSEY FOOD

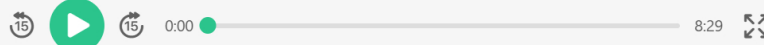
Amy Mcpherson attends The Big Eat event on Guernsey to meet the producers and makers of the Channel Island's foodie scene



ABOVE With its crystal-clear waters, long stretch of white sands and great places to grab a bite, Cobo Bay is one of Guernsey's most popular beaches

Coast

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As the Channel Island's foodie scene becomes increasingly impressive, Amy Mcpherson attends The Big

Eat event to meet the local makers and producers





The Guernsey sky is a blanket of glorious blue and the sea sparkles in the sunshine as I step out of my taxi from the airport to the hotel in the heart of St Peter Port. The island is stunning. No wonder it has attracted the likes of French Old Master Renoir and was also the place of exile chosen by Victor Hugo, who wrote many of his works at Hauteville House, his hillside home overlooking the town and sea.

This second-largest Channel Island is already well known for its excellent coastal walking, but this time I'm visiting for the Big Eats festival. For a month, special events will give locals and visitors alike the chance to sample the island's culinary delights – and for me, it's a great opportunity to meet some of the people behind Guernsey's produce.

GUERNSEY DAIRY



PREVIOUS SPREAD Fort Grey, in Rocquaine Bay, is known locally as the 'Cup and Saucer' ABOVE Castle Cornet, a St Peter Port landmark OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ben and Naomi Tustin's Guernsey Seaweed stall; the Guernsey cow is a distinct breed; Surf & Turf champions local seafood and produce; St Peter Port's Town Church and seafront; the Wheadon's Gin distillery; low tide at St Peter Port's harbour

As part of my sightseeing tour of Guernsey's capital, St Peter Port – known locally as 'Town' – I take a stroll over to the harbour front to visit Surf & Turf (01481 722707). Owned by Jason and Nikki Hamon, the shop specialises in local seafood and also sells a variety of produce, with a focus on supporting Guernsey's own fisheries, farmers and producers.

First, Jason introduces me to the Guernsey Dairy. The Guernsey cow – a distinct breed – is known for its higher ratio of fat to muscle than the average dairy cow, giving its milk a thick and creamy taste.



‘The milk is thicker and more yellow, because of its fat content,’ says Jason as he hands me a glass of fresh milk. Judging by its consistency, I could be drinking cream, but its taste is wholesomely delicious. I also learn that Guernsey cows are one of those rarer breeds that can be bred for their beef as well as for dairy. With a naturally more marbled meat, Guernsey beef is favoured for its tenderness and flavour. ‘You have the likes of Rick Stein who raves about our beef,’ says Jason. ‘Once, he came over from Cornwall for a party and, as he was going back in the morning, I had to come back to work early in the morning to give him a bit of beef to take home!’

GUERNSEY SEAFOOD

Being an island, Guernsey’s next big thing doesn’t come as a surprise. ‘Our seafood is great – you are looking at scallops, skates, crabs, lobsters, all sorts of fish,’ Jason says, as the subject changes to the waters off the island. Traditionally, Guernsey has been known for its crabs, lobsters and mussels, but over the past decade, the variety found in the local catch has shifted towards species that are more accustomed to warmer seas.



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‘The water temperatures have changed and the crabs are moving out, but octonises are

The water temperatures have changed and the tides are moving out, but octopuses are coming in,' Jason explains. 'We hadn't had octopus for years, but in the last two, we've had an abundance. We are also seeing a lot of tuna, too, but at the moment we don't have the licence to catch them, so that's still off the menu for now'.

I couldn't take any beef away with me, but as a parting gift, Jason hands me a small parcel of butter that has been folded with local seaweed. 'Now this is pure Guernsey! Guernsey milk, Guernsey seaweed,' he says. 'We owe our diet to what nature provides us – it's wonderful.'

A SEAWEED REVOLUTION

It's true that Guernsey is not short of natural wonders, and seaweed is one superfood that surrounds the island. In the past, it was mostly used as fertiliser by local farmers and growers, and if eaten, it was considered to be food for the poor. Today, however, it is valued by chefs as an ingredient.

'We have hundreds of species of seaweed in the waters surrounding Guernsey, all of them edible,' says Ben Tustin of Guernsey Seaweed (guernseyseaweed.com).

I head over to meet Ben and his wife Naomi at their Guernsey Seaweed stall during one of St Peter Port's Seafront Sundays – an open market event that turns the picturesque harbour front into a lively community day out. The couple has been producing skincare and spice products using foraged seaweed. They say they have seen a huge increase in interest in seaweed as an ingredient.

I taste some of their offerings, including tapenade and seaweed salt, and enjoy the seaweed's flavour, which is subtly savoury, yet not overpowering. Ben tells me there are more uses for seaweed than can be imagined. 'We use it in a Bolognese sauce, on chicken or, in the morning, I put it on my fried eggs. It isn't just a seaweed flavour – it brings out the natural taste of food more'.





GIN FOR GUERNSEY

In the evening, I attend the main event – a Meet the Producers Dinner. Here, celebrity chef James Strawbridge hosts a delicious five-course dinner, and I get an opportunity to talk to those behind the ingredients of the dishes served.

First, a cocktail. Luke Wheadon, founder of Wheadon's Gin, welcomes us to the venue. Guernsey-born and raised, Luke's passion as a former chef has taken him on

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infatuated with flavour. In Guernsey, we have a lot of wild flavours

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a path to find what Guernsey naturally provides for his gin flavours. We are treated to his signature Rock Samphire & Pink Grapefruit gin – one of his most popular varieties, made using rock samphire foraged locally, and served with handpicked elderflowers. 'My passion is flavour – I am absolutely infatuated with flavour,' he says. 'In Guernsey, we have a lot of wild flavours for me to experiment with, such as yarrow flower, mugwort and alexanders.'

Although most of his gin is made on Jersey, Luke's special small-batch gins are still made in his distillery at the Vivier Bunker on the Castle Pier at St Peter Port Harbour, where he runs gin-tasting workshops (wheadonsgin.com).

GUERNSEY CHEESE

No fancy dinner is complete without cheese, and with good Guernsey milk comes good Guernsey cheese – however, it's not easy to produce. Beverley Whattam, whose brand Caillebottes et Lait Sur (07781 413297), named after the Guernésiais (Guernsey French patois) for Curds and Whey, says it can be a little touch and go working with milk that is so different from other types.

'It can be challenging because the fat content is so high – a small mistake can ruin a whole batch,' she says, as

I try a wedge of the Bllu Fromâge, a creamy soft cheese made with full-fat Guernsey cow's milk with a small vein of Roquefort. It is very creamy and delightfully delicious. She offers another rich and delicate morsel, of Bllu Fromâge au Saumur – very similar in type but made with buttermilk, which is an uncommon base for cheese.

THE ROYAL GOLDEN GUERNSEY GOAT

Of course, cheese isn't only made from cow's milk, and Mandy and Peter Girard own a goat farm where they produce milk and cheese that are used as base ingredients by many of the chefs in Guernsey.

'Happy goats make happy milk,' Peter says, 'and I believe our goats are so laid-back and relaxed that the milk they give us makes such great cheeses.' Unlike other goat's cheese, which can have a strong and sharp taste, cheese made using milk from Guernsey goats is mellow and creamy, just like its cow milk-based counterpart.

In fact, the Golden Guernsey goat breed is so celebrated that King Charles III came to the island to bestow it with a regal title – the Royal Golden Guernsey – as one of his first official ceremonies, following his coronation.

'Although there are many of these golden goats around the world, in Guernsey, we only

have about 15-16 breeding pairs, so we are in quite a precarious state on the island,' explains Peter.

'We need more younger generations looking at keeping these goats,' adds Mandy. 'We can't carry on forever and at the moment, there is no interest in the future of the farm, or in expanding on the farming of the goats, but we are still hoping some younger people will come forward.' (theguernseygoatsociety.org).

THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Speaking of the younger generation, I am joined at the event by one very youthful producer. Noah, 12, is possibly Guernsey's youngest farmer, with a seasonal growing garden of herbs, veg and eggs that he sells throughout the island. He started out simply wanting to earn himself some extra pocket money, but now Noah's Veg Patch (noahsveg-patch.sumupstore.com), has become a wellknown small business which won him the Pride of Guernsey Sustainability Hero Award last year.

From the land to the sea, from young entrepreneurs to seasoned producers, from lifetime locals to those who have moved back after years of living away, Guernsey's growers, fishers and producers are shaking up the culinary scene with their creative and adaptive methods of serving quality cuisine that showcases their island to the world.



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