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(R)evolution in Scottish Food



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by C.Flisi

Scotland's culinary fame has always been based on its eponymous drink (scotch), with perhaps a nod to its salmon (fished, not farmed). Experienced travelers might also note the role of haggis on the Scottish table — for literary, not gastronomic, reasons, as anyone knows who has ventured to try it. (For those non-ventured, haggis is a pudding made of sheep's heart, liver, and lungs minced with onion, oatmeal, suet, spices, salt, and stock, then

cooked in the animal's stomach. See, you probably didn't want to know.)

But the domestic diet of the Scots was not centered on haggis. The local population ate lots of seafood, raised very good meats, grew veggies like kale, used fresh herbs, and had healthy diets producing tall, healthy — and disproportionately red-haired — people, according to Wendy Barrie, a Scottish chef, food authority, author, and commentator on all things food-related in her country. She even has blazing red hair.

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, life in Scotland became poorer, and the food became as industrialized as the lifestyle. The English tried to rub out the Scottish food culture, reports Barrie, and locals wound up eating “stodge and fried Mars bars.”

But the Scottish table has improved tremendously in recent years. Currently there are 11 Michelin-starred restaurants in the country, including a two-star establishment since 2006 — Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles. Barrie has been tracking these changes over the last two decades not only as a teacher but as the chief inspector for a national food guide in the 1990s, overseeing 800 establishments each year.

“Things were getting better in Scotland but there was still a lot of rubbish,” she recalls. She saw the need for a more selective guide that included quality producers as well as places to eat, and that maintained high standards of food, service, and quality. So in 2002 she created the Scottish Food Guide (<https://scottishfoodguide.com/>).

After all, improvements were due not only to better trained, more

adventurous young chefs and more sophisticated customers, but also to the quality of Scotland's raw materials. Cognoscenti understand that the best dishes are made with impeccable ingredients, and Scotland has claim to many: milk above all, and its corollary products (butter, cheese, cream), as well as beef, lamb, seafood, and crops such as oats, barley, and heritage grains.

No industrial farming in Barrie's guide! "Today we see chefs bringing back that healthy food and lifestyle we once had," she exults. Plant farmers must use the principles of sustainable agriculture and grow their crops with a minimum of pesticides. Livestock farmers must favor pasture-fed diets for their animals. Indigenous and autochthonous breeds are preferred, because they are best-suited to Scotland's demanding climate and topography. Cheeses listed in the guide have to be traditionally made on a small scale with high animal welfare, made from animals that graze outdoors in the summer months. The resulting products must *not* be sold in supermarkets, and the business model must be a family operation not attached to a conglomerate.

Barrie gives an example of a dairy farmer who keeps young calves with the mothers rather than removing the former at an early age. The calves are separated only at night so the farmer gets the morning milk, which is qualitatively better for butter and cheese. The evening milk is left for the cows and calves. Dairy farmers elsewhere may mix the morning and evening milk, with the result being uneven, with unwelcome "marbling" that impacts cheese production in a negative way.

Can a qualitative difference be perceived? Barrie cites a test of various

milks, ranging from super industrial to absolutely artisanal, done by 10,000 school children in the UK. Invariably they ranked the highest quality artisanal milk as the best and the most industrial as the lowest. “Even children can taste the difference,” she emphasizes.

Children and adults alike can taste the difference between artisanal versus industrial breads. You don't need to be born in Scotland to understand that the aroma, taste, and texture of, say, a home-baked sourdough loaf are worlds apart from an industrial product. This was driven home to Barrie when she was asked to serve as a judge at a bread competition around 2017. The chief judge told her not to mind the taste. “Give me a good looker,” he said.

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She decided that enough was enough, and contacted a baker named Andrew Whitley, an expert in grains who had moved to Scotland and was experimenting with heritage grains. She asked him to join her in creating

the Scottish Bread Championships. “We wanted real bread, proper sourdoughs, proper yeast, no added crap,” she emphasizes. “After all, barley, wheat, and oats are part of Scottish agriculture. But wheat and barley in Scotland had been focused on alcohol, not bread. So we were filling a gap that needed to be filled.”

Today the Scottish Bread Championship takes place annually at the Royal Highland Show, an agricultural exposition held in Edinburgh each summer. There are six categories. Five of them focus on ingredients “granny would recognize,” explains Barrie: sourdough, enriched sourdough (with nuts or seeds), health, heritage grains, and cottage loaf (so home bakers can enter). The sixth is called diaspora to encompass Scots of continental European or Asian heritage for focaccia, nan, or similar. “They are welcome as long as they are natural products traditionally made without additives,” she insists.

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