



BEYOND THE FARM GATE

THE CLWYDIAN RANGE FOOD TRAIL IS A GROUP OF PRODUCERS AND RETAILERS WHO ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT PROMOTING THE GASTRONOMIC DELIGHTS OF THE SCENIC CLWYDIAN RANGE IN NORTH WALES. IT'S MORE THAN FOOD FOR THOUGHT

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Llaeth y Llan yoghurts; the view from Denbigh Castle; pop in at the Shepherd's Hut for tourist information and cupcakes.

From the top of Moel Fenlli, an Iron-age

hillfort in the Clwydian Range in North Wales, you can see clear across the Clwyd Valley. The hillsides are speckled with grazing sheep, while lower down a patchwork of farms divides the land into bite-sized chunks. In every direction a lush green blanket cloaks the rich agricultural soil, and the Shepherd's Hut in the fort's car park sits ready to dispense tourism information or a locally baked cupcake. It's easy to see why this part of Wales, designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, produces such phenomenal flavours.

The upland lamb found at J Williams & Co Butcher of Denbigh has foraged on these hills and is tinged with heather, a distinctive flavour that also creeps into the honey, as beekeeper Brian Dacre from The Celtic Woodsmith explains. The ice-cream here is rich and creamy, travelling short distances from cow to cone, and fruit and vegetables move seamlessly from paddock to plate. Farmers everywhere are turning their hand to value-added products, and cafés and restaurants are supporting these ventures. Farmers, producers, suppliers and retailers are working together, creating a sense of community and a strong foodie culture.

This is the purvey of the Clwydian Range Food Trail, a collection of food-related

endeavours offering a path through the gastronomic delights of the scenic Clwydian Range. But it's about more than food. At every step the trail highlights the connections between the produce and the environment – without the upland-grazing sheep, the hilltop-heather is unmanageable, and heathland is fast disappearing. It's the heather that makes the lamb special.

"If you like the scenery here, eat the lamb," says David Shiel, senior countryside officer for the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The Food Trail connects the dots, guiding visitors through spectacular views from Loggerheads through the picturesque market towns of Ruthin, Denbigh and beyond. Members of the trail range from farmers and butchers to the outlets committed to serving those products. So, whether you buy your scrumptious chicken liver pâté directly from The Patchwork Traditional Food Company or eat it on home-made crusty bread at the Sugar Plum Tearoom, you're taking a bite of the Clwydian Range.

It's easy to see why this part of Wales, designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, produces such phenomenal flavours.

Behind every tasty morsel is a story. Village dairy and producer of velvety-smooth yoghurts Llaeth y Llan has sprung up around the family farmhouse where Gareth Roberts was raised, on the outskirts of Llanefydd. In the 1980s, Gareth and wife Falmai attended courses to extend their knowledge of food-production, looking to diversify in tough times. This led to the launch of Llaeth y Llan in 1985, and while the brand is now managed by the Roberts' offspring, Llior and Owain, Gareth still checks the yoghurt at 2am daily and puts it to bed like a caring father.

The Patchwork Traditional Food Company is another family venture, producing pâtés that have won more than 80 taste awards. Yet, according to Rufus Carter, the pâté was a product born from necessity that only later became a passion – Rufus taste-tests products regularly and continues to eat the pâté at home. His mother Margaret kicked off the business to support herself and her three children, investing just GBP 9 saved from the housekeeping. Now the pâtés live in a purpose-equipped factory, but despite the commercial scale, everything is still



hand-made in small batches, without artificial colouring, additives or preservatives, and to Margaret's original recipes. And the innovative flavour combinations are taste-bud champions.

Not every food-trail business has a long history. Chilly Cow has been operating all of two months – and already demand for the luscious ice-cream has exceeded production. Just beyond the converted garage where Anna Taylor creates her delicious treats is the family's herd of 80 Brown Swiss cows that generate her main ingredient: organic milk. It doesn't get much fresher than that. Or much tastier.

Then there's Leonardo's Delicatessen. In the heart of Ruthin, this is the favoured stop-off for hungry visitors after touring the town-sights, including Ruthin Gaol, the only purpose-built Pentonville-style prison open to the public as a heritage attraction. Had masterchef Andreas Brunzel been making his delicious home-made pies back when prisoners were marched from the gaol to the gibbet in the square, the chicken, leek and laverbread combination may well have been a favoured last meal.

A number of farms, estates, fisheries and fine-goods retailers make the food-trail list. Hawarden Estate Farm Shop is a firm favourite, providing a selection of produce, from fresh cuts of meat to vegetables, pastries and sauces, as well as pick-your-own opportunities. There's nothing quite like pulling a plump red strawberry straight from the plant. For the less DIY-inclined, the on-site café provides home-made delicacies served in a bright and breezy atmosphere.

Diners at The SugarPlum Tearoom overflow outdoors, due to the café's popularity. Situated

in the picturesque village of Rhewl, the eatery boasts a magnificent view of the Clwydian range. Tearooms are a British tradition and while the designation is somewhat antiquated, the concept works equally well in a contemporary setting. SugarPlum is attached to Homewood Bound Collections, an eclectic interiors showroom with an array of objets d'art, vintage furniture and gifts.

"What's so great about the Food Trail is that we are all working together," says Jane Russell of the Black Lion Inn at Babel. The country pub features produce from Food Trail members, as well as local and Welsh regional suppliers. These three supply-chain priorities are something members must share to become part of the Clwydian Range Food Trail. "We have some really active members now and people are creating opportunities for our fantastic produce," Jane adds.

Janet Monshin-Dallolio of Edenshine Restaurant is another Food Trail member and avid supporter. The restaurant has carved a name for itself with home-made cakes, cream scones and puddings freshly made on the premises inside the Afonwen Craft & Antique Centre. "The family-run centre sprawls over two floors, with hand-picked antiques, a blend of quirky and traditional gifts and accessories, and space for visiting artists. It's a lot to take in, so it's no surprise that customers take a break for sustenance.

The Ruthin Craft Centre, home to Café R, is a contemporary, airy eatery. Like all Food Trail members, Café R's Silas Jones is keen to promote locally sourced ingredients and local suppliers, but it doesn't end there. The

FROM FAR LEFT: Leonardo's Delicatessen in the heart of Ruthin is the favoured stop for hungry visitors after touring the town-sights; pâté from The Patchwork Traditional Food Company; inside the SugarPlum Tearoom; fresh fare at the Hawarden Estate Farm Shop.

purpose-built centre houses three galleries, six artist's studios, a retail gallery, education and residency workshops and Café R, all wrapped around a courtyard terrace. It's a crossroad of art meeting creative cuisine, and it works.

What often draws people to North Wales is the outdoors, and Loggerheads Country Park is a major attraction with its wooded river valley, dramatic cliffs and outcrops. Loggerheads was once an important lead-mining area and evidence of the industrial past remains, along with fabulous pastoral views. Naturally there's a food connection, too. Caffi Florence within the park's boundary is the perfect spot for a Welsh afternoon tea – or perhaps a decadent slice of moist chocolate cake so good that it's hard to believe it's gluten-free.

Denbigh, the largest town in the area, cites its finest feature as its striking triple-towered great gatehouse. Gazing from the castle walls over the countryside, it's clear that it's the environment that is North Wales' greatest asset – it's this land that allows the creation of fabulous produce. "You can come to Wales and you don't have to visit a park, you don't have to see a farm, but you have to eat and drink," concludes Robert Price from Denbighshire & Flintshire Agricultural. 🍷

For information on the Clwydian Range Food Trail see www.foodtrail.co.uk