

Feeding frenzy

What is it with the British and food festivals?
This month the season kicks off
with masses of events across the country

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'Whaat??? You didn't have a dragon's breath bap?'

And so I discover, after a day of sniffing and tasting my way around the 180 stalls heaped with everything from fat curls of spicy *boudin noir* to puffs of baby-soft meringues, that I have missed the best mouthful to be had at the Abergavenny Food Festival.

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that food festivals are multiplying faster than yeast in a sourdough starter – almost 100 around the country. There's no sign yet of punters tiring of home-griddled rosewater and marshmallow Welsh cakes (simplywelshcakes.com, 01559 370318) or chilli-infused honey (hilltop-honey.com, 01686 627337).

Abergavenny Food Festival, launched in 1999 with just 39 stalls, was one of the first in Britain, and is a favourite of *Saga* Magazine cookery writer Diana Henry. It was here that I hoped to uncover the secrets of the great feeding frenzy.

These days between 30,000 and 40,000 people come to this Monmouthshire town for the festival weekend, and 20,000 of those will descend on Saturday alone. 'We generate £4 million for the Welsh economy', says Heather Myers, chief executive to the festival's board of directors. 'That's not just in sales or through hotels and restaurants but because we are showing the area to people who have never been to Wales, or don't know the Brecon Beacons, and who come back again as tourists.'

Food festivals, then, make money for their surroundings. But, unlike other more commercially run festivals, Abergavenny is a non-profit-making limited company and tickets and stalls are reasonably priced, with stallholders charged from £150 for the weekend and special deals to help local start-ups.

'In a good year, when we have good weather, any surplus profit is reinvested. In bad weather, we struggle to make a profit,' says Myers, who explains that the

THEY'RE SCOFF AND RUNNING

PREVIOUS PAGES James Walters of Arabica Food and Spice (*main pic*); Sam Wells crosses over the border from Chipping Sodbury's Hobbs House bakery; Tracy Dugan from the Love Patisserie at Hay-on-Wye

THIS PAGE The Abergavenny Food Festival in full swing
OPPOSITE The Galloping Cuckoos 'fisherwomen' from Kent performing *Driftwood*, sea shanties about festival-goers' own stories and memories; Amy and Fran of Shepherds Ice Cream tuck in to their sheep's milk treats, brought all the way from Cwm Farm in Herefordshire; the future's surely orange for carrot-wielding Oliver Lewis from Court Farm Leisure in Herefordshire; these seemingly *faux* French onion sellers (check out the stripy T-shirt and berets) are, in fact, the authentic thing – Ronan and Yann





EATING AND GREETING
The indoor market at Abergavenny;
Jessica Herbert of Hobbs House (right)

◁ festival was set up by two local farmers in the wake of the BSE and foot-and-mouth crises of the Eighties and Nineties. Their aim was to put farmers and producers in touch with shoppers who could, over a friendly chat, find out exactly what went into the food they were buying.

Abergavenny has stayed true to its original ideals and is very much the place to mingle and make contacts. (The Two Fat Ladies came here in their day, as did Heston Blumenthal and, last year, it was the turn of Scandi chef Magnus Nilsson to wow the audiences.) The festival is equally popular with farmers and producers.

'We do farmers' markets regularly and between 20 and 25 food festivals a year,' says James Swift, of Trealy Farm charcuterie, producers of that delicious *boudin noir* (trealyfarm.com, 01495 785090). 'But nowhere equals the sales we do at Abergavenny.'

PS: A dragon's breath bap contains goat sausages (chestnutmeats.co.uk, 01829 260437) and Anadl y Ddraig, a hot chilli and Welsh ale cheese from the Blaenafon Cheddar Company (chunkofcheese.co.uk, 01495 793123). ◆

Abergavenny Food Festival, Sept 20-21. Visit abergavennyfoodfestival.com, or call 01873 850805 for tickets

OUR HANDPICKED SELECTION OF FOOD FESTIVALS IN 2014

Ballymaloe LitFest of Food and Wine, County Cork, May 16-18

There are many reasons to clear the diary for this festival. The astonishing line-up of top food and wine writers, the late-night parties... but I am counting the days till I can drink the finest coffee I've ever come across, roasted on site, mostly at night, so that when you climb into bed yet more heady smells filter your dreams. When you are almost too full, you can wander around the lovely vegetable gardens and take in the good air, until you are ready for the next round.

litfest.ie, 00 353 21 464 5777

Chosen by Alys Fowler, gardener, forager and author of Abundance:

How to Store and Preserve your Garden Produce (Kyle Books, £16.99)

Sturminster Newton Cheese Festival, Dorset, September 13-14

We always look forward to the Glastonbury of West Country cheeses – it's much more than 'just' a cheese festival. You'll also find Punch and Judy, the Stour Valley Brass Band, mini-carousels for the kids and there are dogs everywhere. There's always a band playing some kind of country and western music but, best of all, there's a real-ale tent and a real-cider tent.

When the weather is good, you can find yourself sitting on a hay bale, cider in hand singing along to *Coward of the County*, with some cheese of course.

It's the sort of place that Gabriel Oak might hang out at. **cheesefestival.co.uk**

Chosen by Jonathan Goodall, Saga Magazine drinks writer

Dartmouth Food Festival, Devon, October 24-26

This festival is small and perfectly formed. It showcases the best food producers from the South West (which has a plethora of great artisans). There are talks and demos by some of the finest (baker Richard Bertinet and wine writer Susy Atkins) and of course you can book yourself in to chef Mitch Tonks' smashing restaurant, The Seahorse. **dartmouthfoodfestival.com**

Chosen by Diana Henry, Saga Magazine cookery writer



Cornwall Food and Drink Festival, Truro, September 26-28

It's really hard to choose a favourite food festival, but this is the one that springs to mind immediately. It showcases the fantastic things produced throughout Cornwall and there's a mix of old favourites and new producers. Heaven for foodies!

cornwallfoodanddrink.co.uk, 01872 865101

Chosen by Nathan Outlaw, chef and author of Nathan Outlaw's Fish Kitchen, published in May (Quadrille, £20)

Broadstairs Food Festival, Kent, October 3-5

Visitors snack their way around the hundred or so stalls overlooking Viking Bay, then take in a cookery demonstration or shop for produce to take home.

Local restaurants, food producers and festival regulars serve up Kentish classics and dishes from around the world.

broadstairsfoodfestival.org.uk

Chosen by Melody Rousseau, Saga Magazine online food editor

AND ONE TO LOOK OUT FOR IN 2015 **Bra Cheese Festival, Piedmont, Italy**

Every other September, you can eat as much cheese as you want here. In 2013, that meant 150 of the best cheeses in the world and 800 wines to pair with them. You just buy a programme and a wine glass, wander and taste. What could be better? **cheese.slowfood.it** *DH*

For a huge list of food festivals around Britain, visit saga.co.uk/magazine