

Great Scots

In the final extract from his new book on regional food, **Mark Hix** heads north of the border – and discovers the joys of smokies and bashed neeps. Photography by **Jason Lowe**



British Regional Food Week 3

What characterises most Scottish food is the canny frugality of a northern European peasant tradition. As in Wales, the inhospitable terrain and climate made oats the staple grain, giving rise to the oatcakes, bannocks and porridges at the heart of Scots eating. Warming and filling broths based on barley or lentils and flavoured with mutton; offal dishes such as mealie pudding and the world-renowned haggis; tasty preserved fish like smoked salmon, kippers, finnan haddies or Arbroath smokies. They all speak of a need to make the very best of what is available and to set food by for harsher times.

Of course, in season, the Highlands are also rich with many types of game bird, such as red grouse, partridge, pheasant, grouse and snipe; there is magnificent venison from the deer; and the fast-flowing burns teem with salmon and trout. Highland livestock, like the famous Aberdeen Angus cattle and Scots Blackface lamb, provide some of the tastiest meat in the world. There are also surprising pockets of market gardening, like the cultivation of those fruits that thrive in a cooler climate with long summer evenings (such as raspberries, tayberries and loganberries).

Scotland also has a strong tradition of baked goods, from Forfar brides (the Scottish “pasty”) to delicate shortbread and glorious Dundee cake. Finally, Scotland has given the world whisky – the “water of life” – which is used judiciously in some of its favourite dishes, as in whisky sauces for venison and in Atholl Brose, the sublime honey and oatmeal dessert.

Of all the regions of the British Isles, Scotland must boast some of the finest produce. Is enough use made of it, though? Having travelled through the amazing countryside, my answer has to be “No”. I’m convinced that the majority of restaurants and pubs are not making use of what’s around them. I struggled to find a local restaurant that was proud to serve local cheeses. I know for a fact that produce such as squat lobsters, langoustines and razor clams goes straight to France and Spain, as you rarely see them on menus these days.

One of my memorable Scottish feasts was years ago in Port Appin on a shellfish “recco” to check out scallops and langoustines (or prawns as they are called in Scotland and Ireland). We lunched at The Pierhouse, a modest local restaurant on the quay; as we sat, a local fisherman happened to walk in with a creel full of prawns straight out of the water.

That brief moment was memorable enough, but when the large ones – known as “Number Ones” in the business – were split in half almost immediately and simply grilled with butter, and the smaller ones brought to the table just boiled, it became a complete gastronomic pleasure.

It was so simple and so fresh, and no one had tried to mess around with it, and we saw the product arrive, live and kicking. If this type of eating was more common, maybe prices would be lower and there would be no excuse to export any more of our finest fare.

Fillet of Venison with Haggis and Bashed Neeps Serves 4

Confusingly for the English, the Scots refer to turnips as swedes and vice versa. As it happens, you could use either white turnips or yellow swedes for this dish – both are delicious when mashed up, or “bashed” as the Scots put it, and combined with meats such as game or, traditionally, with haggis. I quite like to add a few spoonfuls of haggis to neeps, which gives them a real taste of the Highlands. In this recipe I have decided to bastardise a classic Scottish recipe with blanched turnip leaves, which often get chucked into the bin. I think that’s a bit of shame. After all, in Italy, turnip tops or *cime di rapa* are a much sought-after and popular vegetable.

4 trimmed venison saddle fillets or under-fillets, each about 150g
A glass of good red wine
6 juniper berries, crushed
A few sprigs of thyme, chopped
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
150ml beef stock (or a quarter good-quality stock cube dissolved in that amount of hot water)
A little cornflour (optional)
30g butter (for the sauce)
Vegetable oil for frying
150-200g good-quality haggis, skinned and meat crumbled or spooned into pieces
500g swedes or turnips, peeled and roughly chopped, plus the leaves, if available, de-stalked and roughly chopped
60g butter (for the bashed neeps)

The day before, put the venison fillets to marinate in a non-reactive dish with the wine, juniper and thyme. Cover with clingfilm and place in the fridge overnight.

The next day, remove the venison from the marinade, pat the fillets dry on kitchen paper and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

To make the bashed neeps, cover the turnips with water and season with salt and pepper. Bring to the boil and simmer gently for 10-15 minutes until they are soft enough to mash. Drain in a colander, then mash coarsely with a potato masher. Adjust the seasoning, if necessary, and stir in the butter.

While the neeps are cooking, cook the leaves in a separate pan of boiling salted water until just tender. Drain and toss in with the neeps. Keep warm.

Also, while the neeps are cooking, put the marinade into a saucepan and boil it rapidly until it has reduced to about a tablespoon in quantity. Add the stock and any juices from the venison and boil for about 5 minutes or so until the sauce has thickened. If the sauce is not thick enough, dissolve a little cornflour in some water and stir it in, a little at a time, until it thickens. Strain it through a fine-meshed sieve and whisk in the butter.

Heat a little oil in a heavy frying pan and cook the fillets for 2-3 minutes on each side for medium-rare, or a few minutes longer for medium. Let them rest on a plate to catch the juices, covered with foil to keep them warm.

Re-heat the bashed neeps if necessary and fold the haggis into them. Spoon into the centre of each plate. Slice each venison fillet into 4 or 5 pieces and arrange on the neep mixture, then pour the sauce around. →