

On the road: Devon

From a rustic café doing a piping-hot trade in pulled pork baps to the offshore restaurant dispensing local gin and scallops to kite surfers, this corner of the south-west does quirky eats with as much finesse as it does fine dining

Words CLARE HARGREAVES

“At The Fat Duck, Heston Blumenthal gives his customers seashells playing the sound of crashing waves while they eat fish. Here we have the sounds and smells of the sea all around us.”

I'm with chef Chris Dayer inside the **River Exe Café**, set on a barge in Devon's Exe Estuary (riverexecafe.co.uk). Outside, a few brave souls clutch their Yellow Hammer ales as the wind whistles across the decks. I understand what Chris means.

Getting here by water taxi from Exmouth is part of the adventure. Most visitors have to book months in advance, but there is some passing trade. “Kitesurfers land here in their wetsuits and come in to warm up,” says Chris.

The fruits of the estuary's waters don't disappoint. Chris buys much of his seafood direct from local fisherman and, if you want to sample them all, he does a mixed seafood platter, including sensational scallops in port and parmesan. There's local booze, too, notably **Copper Frog** gin, distilled in Exmouth (copperfrogdistilling.co.uk).

Quirky is what this little corner of Devon does well. **The Pig & Pallet** café, inside a former sail loft on the quay at Topsham, claims to be a marriage of East Coast USA and West Country UK; meat, rather than fish, is king (pigandpallet.co.uk). The café's owners crafted it – out of discarded pallets, hence the name – as a stall from which to sell their nitrate-free Good Game charcuterie (bestsellers: rabbit salami and Devon fire chorizo). But their hot offerings became so popular that the stall quickly morphed into a rustic dining space. I tackle a beefburger made from Devon's own Red Ruby breed. The meat is reared a few metres away at **Darts Farm**, also home to an excellent farm shop (dartsfarm.co.uk). Pigs – outdoor-reared in Powderham, across the estuary – also make an appearance in The Pig & Pallet's pulled pork, served in spectacularly good cornbread baps baked in nearby Shaldon ([facebook.com/thesurfingbakers](https://www.facebook.com/thesurfingbakers)).

There's plenty else to detain foodies in pretty Topsham, whose high street of small independent shops (including the lovely **Cooks Aweigh** kitchen shop) feels a world apart from nearby chain-bound Exeter. I nip into **Country Cheeses**, one of a trio of cheese shops originating in Tavistock (countrycheeses.co.uk). I try some Sweet Charlotte, Country Cheeses' own emmental-style cow's milk cheese. “Charlotte may be called sweet but she has quite a bite,” the woman serving warns. »



Back on the waterside, I discover wood-fired pizza and wine in the cellars of **Pebblebed** winery (pebblebed.co.uk). Beginning in 1999 as a half-acre community-run plot, it now has 25 acres and produces some seriously good sparkling wines. Sign up for a tasting with tapas in the cellars, or for a tour of the vineyard at nearby Clyst St George.

For booze with a longer history, stop at the **Bridge Inn**, largely untouched since the 18th century and famous for hosting the queen's first outing to a pub, in 1998 (cheffers.co.uk/bridge.html).

But the Exe estuary is not just about ancient inns and street food from make-do-and-mend cafés. Clotted-cream-hued **Lympstone Manor** was recently opened by Michael Caines in a ringside position overlooking the estuary – proof that East Devon can scrub up as smart as Devon's better known South Hams (lympstonemano.co.uk). Michael has transformed a tired Georgian mansion into a triumph of New England-style design in palettes of taupe and dusky blues. He's even planted a vineyard (its first vintage should be on sale by about 2022).

Michael is clearly enjoying his dual role of chef and hotelier. "This is it," he tells me, straightening a pot on the verandah as we watch the sunset sky turn raspberry-coulis-pink over the estuary. "There's nowhere in the world I'd rather be than here." I'd struggle to disagree, especially after enjoying his eight-course tasting menu in one of the hotel's three dining rooms. Its classic dishes attest to a chef at the top of his game: sumptuous but not over-elaborate, packed with multi-layered flavours. A standout is the fillet of Darts Farm Red Ruby beef, perfectly balanced with a horseradish and shallot confit and silky celeriac purée. But the showstopper (which anyone who ate Michael's food at Gidleigh Park will remember) is the chocolate orange dessert, in the uncannily lifelike form of an orange.

Michael's influence does not stop at Lympstone. In 2004 he founded the now annual **Exeter Festival of South West Food & Drink** and he's trained many of the chefs in the region's inns. At Topsham's **The Salutation Inn**, for example, protégé Tom Williams-Hawkes produces top-notch food both for the coaching inn's evening restaurant and its daytime Glass House café (salutationtopsham.co.uk). When I visit, the great-value set lunch in the café includes a choice between Darts Farm Red Ruby beef and tarragon gnocchi, followed by crème brûlée.

Gidleigh-trained chefs are impressing inland, too. At the thatched **Five Bells Inn**, Ian Webber produces bold-flavoured specials, such as duck leg confit with celeriac purée, alongside burgers and steaks (fivebells.uk.com). The roadside location of **The Jack in the Green** at Rockbeare (jackinthegreen.uk.com), amid a sprawl of new housing, may be less appealing but Matt Mason's cooking is equally assured, drawing on East Devon's rich larder for anything from Kenniford Farm free-range pork to edible organic flowers from Maddocks Farm.

After stocking up on more local goodies at **Greendale Farmshop** (including fish caught by its own boats; greendalefarmshop.co.uk), my next stop is Ottery St Mary, famed for its magnificent St Mary's church (often dubbed a miniature Exeter cathedral) and its flaming Tar Barrel ceremony on Bonfire Night. I'm here, though, for the porcine delights of **The Rusty Pig**, a relaxed 'feasting house' named after the hue of the Oxford Sandy and Black pigs that owner Robin Rea turns into charcuterie (rustypig.co.uk). Belted breakfasts are the big thing here, and in the evening, hedgerow cocktails and pot-luck suppers.

There are more piggy pleasures at **The Pig at Combe**, the latest addition to the Pig hotel chain's litter (thepighotel.com). Housed in an Elizabethan manor, its red-brick-walled gardens supply the kitchen with everything from tree spinach to shiitake mushrooms. "We have great produce here, so there's no need to over-complicate things," says head chef Daniel Gavrilidis. "The garden is boss, so we're driven by what's in it at any time, and the same goes for our suppliers. Being limited makes us more creative." Seated under the glass chandeliers in its grandiose yet laidback dining room, I tuck into featherblade of Red Ruby beef from nearby **Pipers Farm** (pipersfarm.com). It's an ingredient chef is particularly excited about. "The cows are slow-growing, and not slaughtered until three years old. That creates meat with wonderful marbling." If you want a more informal vibe, grab a wood-fired flatbread in the old garden folly.

As well as antique shops, the market town of Honiton, a few miles north-east, has a pleasing number of traditional food shops, as well as **Toast Café** and **The Holt** tapas bar/restaurant (theholt-honiton.com). The latter two are owned by Otter Brewery, which takes its name from the river valley in which the town stands. »

Dishes attest to a chef at the top of his game. A standout is the fillet of Darts Farm Red Ruby beef, perfectly balanced with a horseradish and shallot confit and silky celeriac purée



PREVIOUS PAGE: THE VILLAGE OF BEER'S BEACH. ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): THE RIVER EXE CAFÉ; LUXE INTERIORS AT LYMPSTONE MANOR; A RED RUBY COW. OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): THE RUSTY PIG IN OTTERY ST MARY; THE PIG AT COMBE; BURGERS AND CHIPS AT THE PIG & PALLET; HAULING IN THE DAY'S CATCH

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK ASHBE, MATT AUSTIN, NICK HOOK PHOTOGRAPHY, GETTY, ALAMY, REBECCA BERNSTEIN, CLARE HARGREAVES

EXPLORE

The same holds true for **Otter Farm**, run by former River Cottage gardener Mark Diacono (otterfarm.co.uk). Mark has made a name for himself by cultivating unusual fruit and veg. He now runs courses from his Kitchen Garden School, employing top talent to teach anything from food writing (Diana Henry) and food photography (Patricia Niven) to preserve-making (Pam 'the jam' Corbin). I did the food photography course, and with former River Cottage chef Tim Maddams cooking our food, it wasn't hard to feel inspired.

Down river is Otterton, a village of whitewashed cottages just west of the Regency seaside resorts of Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton that is home to **Otterton Mill** (ottertonmill.com). This ancient watermill has been restored to its original purpose of using water power to stone-grind flour. In the shop you can buy flour, and bread and cakes made with it, or, in the café, homebaked crab-shaped rolls crammed with Devon crab.

I head along the shoreline, known as the Jurassic Coast for its rocks (they span 185 million years). Food stops include the thatched **Old Bakery Tearoom** (nationaltrust.org.uk) and **The Masons Arms** (masonsarms.co.uk) in pretty Branscombe and, near the Dorset border, **Trill Farm** (trillfarm.co.uk) and **River Cottage** (rivercottage.net), both famous for their cookery courses and feasts of homegrown produce. My final destination is the fishing village of Beer, tucked beneath wooded limestone cliffs. On the shingle here are four brightly painted fishing boats, the last working vessels of what used to be a much larger fleet. I buy their crab catch from the shack at the top of the beach and settle on the pebbles. It might be blowing a gale, but savouring East Devon's seafood to the crashing of the waves is hard to beat. I think Chris Dayer would agree.

HOW TO DO IT

Clare stayed in the self-catering Shepherd's Hut at Coombe Farm, Northleigh, which costs from £99 per night for two (airbnb.co.uk). The 2018 Exeter Festival of South West Food & Drink will take place on 4-7 May (exeterfoodanddrinkfestival.co.uk). More info: visidevon.co.uk. Follow Clare on Twitter and Instagram @larderloutUK, #olive travels.



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: THE SHEPHERD'S HUT AT COOMBE FARM; SALMON AND PRAWN ROULADE AT THE JACK IN THE GREEN; OTTERTON VILLAGE; TRILL FARM; CHEF TIM MADDAMS AT OTTER FARM; CREAM TEA, THE DEVON WAY, AT OTTERTON MILL