

On the road: THE SEVERN AND WYE VALLEYS



These two mighty rivers and their fertile valleys, woods and orchards produce everything from eels and salmon to apples, cheeses and wild boar

Words CLARE HARGREAVES

Around now, the Severn wakes up. Millions of transparent eelers (baby eels) arrive here at the end of their epic journey from the Sargasso Sea, south of Bermuda. In days gone by they would have been turned into a fishy fry-up by locals. In the '70s, food writer Jane Grigson helpfully advised anyone buying them: "Take along an old pillowcase so that the fishmonger can tip them straight into it." With eels now endangered, such shopping tips are redundant.

One resident, though, is trying to save the river's eels: Richard Cook, who owns the **Severn & Wye Smokery** (severnandwye.co.uk) on the western banks of the Severn, south-west of Gloucester, which is where I start my gastro-tour of the lower Severn and Wye valleys.

The Smokery is netting eelers and raising them to maturity in tanks, a process that takes just two years, compared to the 16-plus it would take in the wild. Most are kept for breeding but a few are smoked and sold in the shop-café-restaurant, which is moving into new state-of-the-art premises this spring. The highlight, as ever, will be a gleaming fish counter run by Clive Rowlands while the new restaurant, headed by Mike Benjamin (ex Calcot Manor and Gidleigh Park), will offer fishy delicacies from kedgeree to salmon sides cured with yuzu, ginger and shiso and Mediterranean fish soup. Wye valley asparagus and Welsh coracle-caught sea trout join the menu shortly, too, and from June you might even find wild Severn salmon – but get in quick as only 200 are licensed to be caught each year and many of them get snapped up by London's Ritz.

Heading south, I stop in stately Newnham-on-Severn, one of the vale's best-kept secrets; grab a homemade brownie in **The George** café-cum-gallery (01594 510741), or Gloucester Old Spot sausages at **Cameron's Butchers** (cameronsqualitybutchers.com). Blakeney, next along, houses **Legg Barn** (leggbarnco.uk), a chic b&b run by Paddy Harris. Paddy used to teach cookery and hasn't lost her culinary touch, so breakfasts – including home-reared eggs, Cameron's meats and homemade jams – are a feast. Twist her arm and she'll cook you dinner, too.

In Awre, on a bulge of the river, I meet Nick Bull, whose family has been making cider there for three generations. By next month, their four acres of orchards will be a riot of blossom. Nick tells me how his father bought the smallholding after being forcibly retired as a pilot. Sid, the »



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EXPLORE



labourer whom he inherited with the property, was used to receiving tots of cider at lunchtime and after work, so the tippie had to be made. The hobby turned into a business, **Severn Cider** (severncider.com), and now uses unsprayed fruit from the family's and neighbouring orchards to make cider, perry and cider vinegar. This time of year is awaited with particular excitement as it's when the new draft ciders and perrys are released, many from single local varieties including the Box Kernel apple, thought to originate from Awre itself.

There's further celebration of a native species at Birdwood, due north, only this time it's a chocolate-coloured cow – the Gloucester – rather than apples or pears. In the '70s the Gloucester, whose milk was traditionally used to make single and double Gloucester cheeses, nearly died out. Happily, cheesemaker Charles Martell rescued it from the brink, and now six farmers are making cheeses from Gloucesters' milk once again.

Among them is Rod Smart (smartsinglegloucestercheese.com) who, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, you can watch pressing curds into cloth-lined moulds in his dairy. Double Gloucester is now made everywhere, but single Gloucester has a protected name, which means it can only be made on Gloucestershire farms

with pedigree Gloucester cows. "Traditionally farmers skimmed the cream off the evening milk to make butter, then mixed the skimmed milk with the morning's whole milk to make single Gloucester, so it has less fat than double Gloucester, which is from whole milk," Rod explains. "Single Gloucester was ripened for just two or three months and was what the farmer and his workers ate, while the richer double Gloucester was sold to provide an income." I nibble a sliver of Smart's single Gloucester. Its flavour is gentle, like the Gloucester cow itself.

From Birdwood I head over the hill to my next river, the Wye, which forms the natural boundary between England and Wales. I stop at **St Briavels**, on the English side, which on the first Saturday of each month hosts a small **farmers' market**, then at a wooden building between Brockweir and Hewelsfield that houses a thriving **community shop/café** (bandhwillageshop.co.uk). Run by 60 volunteers, it stocks a feast of local produce, from **Preservation Society preserves** (thepreservationsociety.co.uk), to wild boar sausage rolls from **Cinderhill Farm** (cinderhillfarm.com), which manager Alison Macklin tells me are a hit with local workmen, her husband, and Offa's Dyke walkers alike.

The valley's star attraction, of course, is Tintern

Abbey, on the Welsh side, whose romantic ruins sent Wordsworth and Turner wild. Its Cistercian monks may well have cultivated vines at the site of **Parva Farm vineyard** (parvafarm.com), high on the hillside, whose wines (notably its Dathliad Sparkling) are winning serious prizes.

For booze of the real ale sort, I head next door to **Kingstone Brewery** (kingstonebrewery.co.uk) where Edward and Tori Biggs brew 10 happily hoppy beers in their microbrewery-in-the-woods, including a Tudor Ale based on a recipe from 1503. Try their Brewery Experience days, which include lunch and a box of ales, or stop off on the first Saturday of the month, for stone-baked pizzas in the log-cabin taproom (try the meat feast, peppered with salami from Monmouthshire's Trealy Farm). Winding back to the road, pick up vegetables, fruit and eggs from **Medhope Organic Garden** (01291 680069; open Fri-Sun from Easter).

Next stop is Whitebrook, where Chris Harrod draws on the valley's produce in his stylish restaurant-with-rooms, Michelin-starred **The Whitebrook** (thewhitebrook.co.uk). It is, along with the **Tudor Farmhouse** (tudorfarmhousehotel.co.uk) over the river at Clearwell, one of the Wye's culinary high-flyers.

"We serve the Wye valley on a plate," says

Chris, a protégé of Raymond Blanc. Star ingredients include wild boar, which is slow-cooked until meltingly tender and served with pine-roasted cauliflower. "Boar's a pest around here, so locals are delighted we have it on the menu," he laughs. Chris's passion, though, is locally foraged plants, such as menthol-scented mugwort, which he partners with pork or oily fish. Another favourite is sweet woodruff – Britain's answer to vanilla – used at The Whitebrook to flavour a white chocolate ganache to fill nettle macaron petits fours. They're so delicious they almost eclipse the meal I eat here. Almost.

On the windswept plateau above, TV presenter Kate Humble's 117-acre farm accommodates both Welsh mountain sheep and the **Humble by Nature** (humblebynature.com) rural skills school. Come here to master sausage-making or meat-curing with local charcutier Graham Waddington, make wild salsa verde with forager Liz Knight or crack the art of breadmaking or cooking in a wood-fired oven. If you don't fancy driving afterwards, stay overnight in the farm's accommodation – which includes the Humble Hideaway with its lovely shepherd's hut. Kate provides recipe books and gear for campfire cooking, but if you're not in the mood, head

to **The Inn at Penallt** (theinnatpenallt.co.uk) for top-notch pub grub.

For fresh, seasonal vegetables and honey to take home, I head west to the farm shop at **Old Lands** (old-lands.co.uk), an ancient eco-minded estate whose owners, the Bosanquet family, have revived its walled garden and orchard, before making a final stop at sedate Monmouth.

A border town, on the crossing of the Wye and the Monnow, it has recently upped its gastronomic game. In pretty, pedestrianised Church Street, for instance, **Munday & Jones** greengrocers (mundayandjonesmonmouth.co.uk) has been joined by **#7 Church Street** (numbersevenchurchstreet.co.uk), a café-restaurant owned by Roux-trained Mark Turton, former head chef at The Whitebrook, whose gutsy pulled beef main and buttermilk panna cotta dessert hit the spot; and nearby is **Madeleine's** (madeleinesbakery.co.uk), a dinky artisan bakery run by illustrator-turned-baker Dilly Boase (yes, her repertoire includes Proust's favourite sponge cakes, too).

In Monmouth Priory, another sourdough supremo, cookery tutor **Katherine Marland** (katheriskitchen.co.uk), hosts a fortnightly cooking club. And down the road you'll find all things

honey-related at the charity-run **Bees for Development** shop (beesfordevelopment.org).

Monmouth's main drag, Monnow Street, is home to two more foodie stalwarts, **Fingal-Rock** (pinotnoir.co.uk) wine merchants and **Salt & Pepper** kitchen shop (saltandpepper.co.uk) whose upstairs café does brilliant cakes, plus ice cream made in the valley by **Brooke's Dairy** (brookedairy.com), using milk and cream from their pedigree Jersey cows (Welsh Gold honeycomb is my winner). Other must-visits include **Monteas** (monteas.co.uk), for over 80 loose-leaf teas, and **The Marches Deli** (marchesdeli.co.uk) – if you're lucky you'll find both single Gloucester and **Wye Valley mature cheese** (lowergockettfarm.co.uk) in stock; a fitting final taste of these two mighty rivers.

HOW TO DO IT

Double rooms at Legg Barn cost from £80, b&b. The Humble Hideaway shepherd's hut costs from £220 for three nights, including basic breakfast provisions.

More info: wyedeantourism.co.uk

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