

# Movers, bakers & shakers KENT

Ruby-red blackthorn liqueur, seaweed-flecked sourdough and stuffed roast mallard are on the menu in this coastal county

Words and photographs CLARE HARGREAVES

**M**any of us take the frothy white blossoms of the blackthorn tree as a sign that spring has finally sprung.

But for forager **Miles Irving**, the thorny leaf shoots that follow are even more exciting ([forager.org.uk](http://forager.org.uk)). He gathers them from Kentish hedgerows for customers, some of whom blend the leaves with red wine and brandy to create épine (thorn) aperitif, a drink that hails from France.

The ruby-red liquor tastes, surprisingly, of almond, as I discover when I join the locals (and resident cat Monty) at the bar of **The Red Lion** in Stodmarsh, a traditional clapboard building buried among the lanes of north-east Kent. The only passing traffic is wellied walkers visiting the neighbouring nature reserve. “You only come here if you want to be here, or you’re lost,” says front-of-house Mark Winstone. Bottles of épine join the rainbow of homemade infusions that line the bar’s shelves. There’s vodka infused with watermint (an edible plant found in streams), horseradish gin (used in the pub’s bloody mary, alongside foraged wild celery) and spirits flavoured with anything from moss to porcini and wild passion fruit. As I sip my aperitif, its subtle almond flavours remind me of amaretto – this is the homemade, Kentish, version.

Épine is just one of many collaborations between Miles, who’s been foraging professionally for nearly two decades, and The Red Lion’s chefs, Morgan Lewis and John Young. This is a pub that’s always had a reputation for being eccentric. But now, thanks to enthusiastic chefs and a wild larder, its eccentricity has an off-the-wall flavour – nothing is ordinary here. Wood ants that taste of balsamic vinegar give an acidic crunch to salads, Whitstable oysters come with seaside succulents, and if you order a dirty martini it will be made not with olive brine, but with gin infused with wild sea greens. I kick off my dinner with a poached duck egg ringed with foraged sea cabbage, and marble-sized sprouting bulbs of three-cornered leek that add a garlicky sweetness. “I’d stored the bulbs to plant, but discovered they’d sprouted... so I decided to use them in a dish,” smiles Morgan. »

LEFT: KINGSGATE BEACH, NEAR BROADSTAIRS



The Red Lion's position at the heart of Kent's eastern nose means it draws on coast and woodland alike. At Swalecliffe, near Whitstable, I meet Miles's picking manager, Fred Rother, who swapped his drumsticks (Fred used to play in the rock band, Syd Arthur) for a forager's knife after developing hearing problems. An icy wind gnaws our bones as we crouch on the shingle, but Fred seems unperturbed as he gathers glossy green sea beet. "At home I cook beet like spinach – it's great in a saag aloo," he says. Later, I scour the woods around Stodmarsh for winter chanterelles with Nick Robinson, who, when he's not supplying The Red Lion, runs mushroom foraging courses from his **Oast Smokehouse** in Sandwich. In spring the search begins for his holy grail: honeycomb-fleshed morels. "They're sublime in a poulet aux morilles [chicken breast with morels]," he says, grinning through his handlebar moustache ([theoastsmokehouse.com](http://theoastsmokehouse.com)).

There's plenty of fish, fruit and game here, too. Dover sole, sea bass and skate are landed at the tiny port at Broadstairs, and delivered to the pub by **Chapman's** fishmongers ([chapmansofseveonoaks.co.uk](http://chapmansofseveonoaks.co.uk)). In autumn, Miles and Fred forage for citrusy sea buckthorn berries and medlars that, when left to rot or 'blet', turn gooey. Then, in winter, game arrives as and when it's been shot. I also notice a brace of mallards being presented to The Red Lion's kitchen, by **Stour Valley Game's** owner Daran Byrom – they'll be cooked for the pub's Sunday roast ([stourvalleygame.co.uk](http://stourvalleygame.co.uk)).

The birds are later stuffed with foraged treasures and served with a zingy pickled walnut relish, made from walnuts grown in St Mary's Platt (west Kent), where I meet grower **Alexander Hunt** ([walnuttrees.co.uk](http://walnuttrees.co.uk)). "To pickle walnuts, you pick the nuts green, around late June, before a shell has started to form," he says as we tour the walnut groves behind his cottage. "My family always ate pickled walnuts with cheese and cold meat." With just eight acres of trees, Alexander is one of only a handful of people cultivating walnuts in the UK. "Squirrels make it notoriously difficult, which is why we like selling the walnuts green," he says. Luckily it's a growing market, with green walnuts demanded both by makers of preserves and bitters, and by companies manufacturing dyes.

As for the pub's dairy produce – including creamy milk, and primrose-yellow cream so

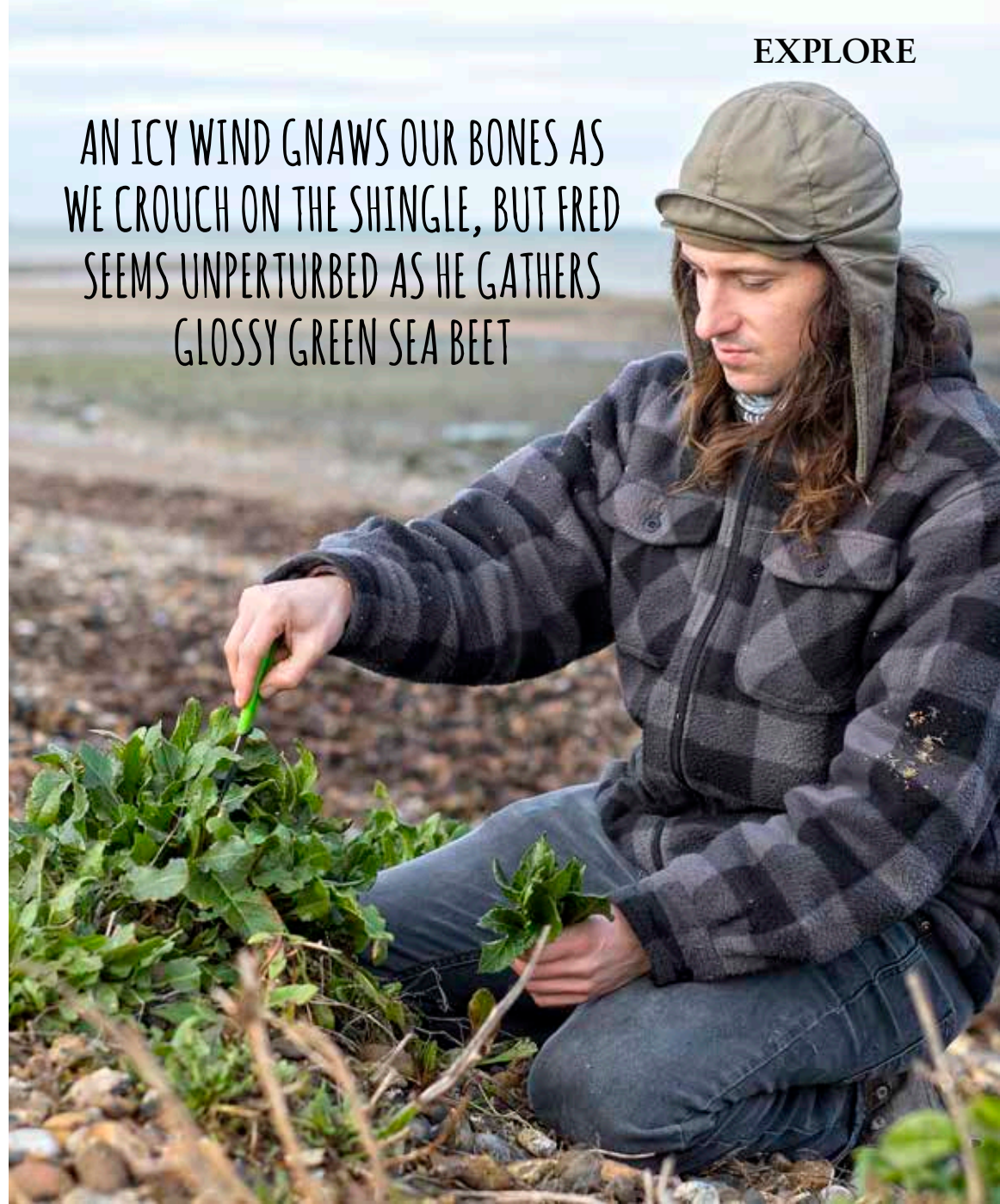


thick you can stand a spoon in it – much of that comes from the pedigree Guernsey cows at **Hinxden Farm**, also in west Kent ([hinxdenfarmdairy.co.uk](http://hinxdenfarmdairy.co.uk)). What John and Morgan don't use in indulgent desserts (including juniper and marshmallow chocolate sponge) they churn into butter, which is delicious slathered over sourdough bread made from flour stone-ground at **Eckley Farm** outside Staplehurst ([purekent.wordpress.com](http://purekent.wordpress.com)). As you'd expect, sourdough at The Red Lion is far from ordinary – local seaweeds, herbs or chanterelles are thrown in for extra flavour.

If you fancy something to accompany your épine, there's Ancient Ashmore cheese from Jane Bowyer at **Cheesemakers of Canterbury** ([cheesemakersofcanterbury.co.uk](http://cheesemakersofcanterbury.co.uk)). The cheddar-style hard cheese is crafted by hand to an old smallholder's recipe, using unpasteurised milk from two local dairy farms. Cheeses are left to mature on pine shelves in the dairy's maturing room, and are continually turned and rubbed to ensure an even spread of rind mould. Bowyer's Farmhouse and Ancient Ashmore are well known cheeses, but The Red Lion serves Jane's 24-month-aged Top Shelf vintage version – it's as caramel-y, crystalline »



ABOVE, FROM TOP: THE RED LION; DUCK EGG WITH WILD SEA CABBAGE AT THE RED LION; NICK ROBINSON FORAGING FOR MUSHROOMS. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE RED LION'S BLOODY MARY, MADE WITH HOMEMADE HORSE RADISH GIN; FRED ROTHER FORAGING FOR SEA BEET; RUBBING ASHMORE CHEESES; ALEXANDER HUNT'S SHELLED WALNUTS; SUNDAY ROAST OF STUFFED MALLARD AT THE RED LION; MORGAN LEWIS MAKING BREAD FROM ECKLEY FLOUR





and crumbly as an aged gouda. Pair it with a slice of sourdough and a chunk of the house plumbrillo, and you'll make even the fussiest ploughman happy.

Of course, this corner of Kent doesn't have a monopoly on great local food. Over in the west, Will Devlin, chef-owner of **The Small Holding** in Kildown, is launching farm and forage days this May, to cater for a surge of interest in the produce he uses (*thesmallholding.restaurant*). Starting with coffee and homemade pastries at the restaurant, the experience will include touring Will's smallholding before heading out to forage further afield (dandelions and wild garlic in spring; elderflowers and wild strawberries in early summer; and damsons, sloes and cobnuts in autumn). Finally, guests enjoy a seasonal tasting menu that might include hogget with fennel and chilli; and strawberry with basil and elderflower.

In the county's northern reaches, the Isle of Sheppey, I meet two more entrepreneurs just as enthusiastic about Kent's varied larder. Georgina and Gareth Fulton accommodate

## THE CAKE IS MADE WITH ORANGES AND CLOVES PREVIOUSLY USED TO CONCOCT A SPICED KENTISH DAMSON SHRUB

guests in modernist-style shepherd's huts on their 3,300-acre **Elmley** nature reserve (*elmleynaturereserve.co.uk*). After a night snuggled under luxury bed linen and **Romney Marsh Wools** blankets (*romneymarshwools.co.uk*), you wake up to scarlet sunrises illuminating Elmley's vast marshland wilderness and, if you're lucky, barn owls flying off to find breakfast.

Fortunately, guests don't have to hunt for their food, if they opt for Elmley's food-delivery service. Brought in wicker hampers to your hut, a thoughtfully chosen range of local foods is mostly sourced from **Macknade's** state-of-the-art foodhall in nearby Faversham (*macknade.com*). A breakfast bircher muesli made using local Duskin apple juice kicks off the day nicely, while a pie made from Kentish pasture-fed beef makes for a satisfying supper. But the highlight is a terrific dahl, peppered with carrot and courgette, which arrives with a side platter of rosy-hued pickled radishes at lunchtime. It's made by Katy Newton as part of her **Wasted Kitchen** business, which turns spoiled or surplus fruit and vegetables (mainly from Macknade but also from local

farmers) into delicious ready meals, dips and pickles (*mightyfinethings.co.uk*). Equally full of flavour is her fragrant orange and almond cake, served in Elmley's magnificent American-style barn for afternoon tea. Enjoy this from the comfort of a slouchy sofa strewn with rugs and hot-water bottles. The cake is made with oranges and cloves previously used to concoct a spiced Kentish damson shrub, part of Katy's **Coxy's** drinks brand that's on sale in the barn's honesty bar. As in so much of this food-loving county, nothing is ordinary here.

## HOW TO DO IT

Doubles at **The Red Lion** start from £75, room only (*theredlionstodmarsh.co.uk*). Elmley Nature Reserve huts start from £105 for two, self-catering (*elmleynaturereserve.co.uk*). For more information see *visitkent.co.uk* or follow **#oliveeatskent**. Follow Clare @larderloutUK.

FROM TOP: SUNRISE AT ELMLEY; KATY NEWTON OF WASTED KITCHEN; BIRCHER MUESLI FOR BREAKFAST AT ELMLEY



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