

A FOOD MILE

Chef-musician Piers Lewin set himself the challenge of eating just the wild and locally farmed food of his tiny island home of St Agnes for a year. How did he fare?

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS CLARE HARGREAVES

Porth Conger
harbour, with Gugh
Island on the right



Chef-musician Piers Lewin shops for food with his ears. Like the other 80 inhabitants of tiny St Agnes, the southernmost island of the Scilly archipelago, he's always listening for the gentle sputter of fellow islander Harry Legg's boat, *The Pioneer*, as it returns from the Atlantic-lashed Western Rocks with a cargo of lobster and crab. Meanwhile, the bellowing of the Jersey cows at Troytown Farm, down the track from his granite cottage, reminds him that their milk has just been turned into cream and butter. If these sounds combine into a foodie symphony, lobster and crab tart may be on the menu.

In his twenties Piers trained as a chef under Terence Conran, and clocked up experience as a filleter at the fish counter of Harrods food hall, before moving to St Agnes with his partner Rachel who had holidayed on this mile-long island as a child. Today, Piers makes a living cooking for visitors renting the cottage next door, as well as by composing music, playing the recorder in a band and doing carpentry jobs. Surviving on an island requires a portfolio of talents.

LOCAL FARE

Getting food supplies, though, can be tricky. Bringing them from the mainland is costly, and touch-and-go when boats can't run because of stormy



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weather, so Piers and his fellow islanders are used to being self-reliant. 'Fork to fork is a fact of life,' he says as he bisects an orange lobster with the dexterity of a surgeon. 'Just look at the names of some of our rocks, like Barrel of Butter, The Fennel, and Apple Carn.'

Last year he decided to go one step further – to try to live exclusively on the produce of the island, and record his attempt in a book. He contemplated what this challenge would mean. No lamb or chicken, and exotic fruits like mango and pineapple, and spices such as star anise and pink peppercorns, all

off the menu. There were a few non-local naughties that Piers decided to allow though, including flour, olive oil, vinegar and lemons. 'I also permitted myself saffron as this was historically grown in Cornwall,' he says.

Piers got cooking. Getting hold of Troystown's beef, pork, milk and cream was straightforward – even if it was at times a little disconcerting to be eating a cow he'd seen grazing on Castella Downs. The availability of most other ingredients changed with the seasons, the weather or islanders' comings and goings. 'I soon realised I had



TOP Piers harvesting fennel in the sunshine
ABOVE Wildflower honey from Westward Farm was a sweet gift for Piers



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
LEFT Panna cotta using
cream from Troytown Farm
on St Agnes and Tamarisk
Farm organic strawberries;
Piers preparing a lobster;
sea cabbage on the shore





to be flexible, and build recipes around the ingredients I had, rather than the other way round,' says Piers. 'It was a new way of cooking.' There was lobster and crab whenever Harry managed to get his boat out, which meant between Easter and Christmas except when the weather was too treacherous – or when Harry was embracing fatherhood. 'Just as I was starting my experiment Harry had a baby, so that disrupted supply for a while,' adds Piers, laughing.

NEW DISCOVERIES

When he did manage to get Harry's shellfish, he threw their porcelain-white meat into tarts, or served them with Tamarisk Farm new potatoes that were, he says, 'even better than Jersey Royals' and a mousse made from the glossy leaves of sea beet (also called sea

spinach) foraged from Periglis Beach beside the island's church. 'I don't believe in foraging for foraging's sake,' says Piers. 'I'll only pick wild stuff if it's superb in its own right. Happily, sea spinach is. You just have to get it while the leaves are still tender, before they turn bitter. It's like spinach, only firmer, and richer in flavour.' Sea spinach soon became a staple, starring in dishes from baked eggs to Eggs Benedict and crab and saffron tart, all of which fast became hits with guests staying in his holiday let.

Other wild plants spiced up Piers' dishes too. On Beady Pool, so-called because 400 years ago a ship was wrecked on the rocks sending its cargo of Venetian glass and ceramic beads to the bottom of the sea, he found sea kale, cabbage, orach and rocket. In spring these, plus shoots of Alexander ➡➡➡



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Piers' cottage on the Scilly island of St Agnes; foraging on the island yields some great finds; dinner using supplies from the island producers plus foraged items; Piers picking some ingredients

Courgette & Mint Pancakes

SERVES FOUR

- 500g organic Tamarisk Farm courgettes (small) coarsely grated and squeezed dry
- 100g flour
- 3 island eggs, beaten
- Very large handful fresh mint, finely chopped (Save some to garnish)
- Ditto fresh parsley
- Fresh chilli (to taste)
- Salt and pepper
- Olive oil
- Lemons

1. Mix the first seven ingredients in a large bowl to make a messy mixture.

2. Form into small flat cakes and fry in batches in hot oil, turning halfway until golden brown on both sides.

3. Serve with fresh lemon and extra sprinkled fresh herbs. These go with almost anything; barbecued mackerel and hot chilli sauce is one personal recommendation, chilled rose is another.



Island Eggs Benedict **SERVES TWO**

- 1.** Steam a small handful of sea (or regular) spinach.
- 2.** Make hollandaise. With freshly laid island eggs and 125g creamy local butter, this is as simple as melting the butter and, when hot, whisking it very slowly into two egg yolks until slightly thickened. I add nothing else, letting those two deliciously rich ingredients do the talking.
- 3.** Take the tail meat from one small (500g) lobster which has been boiled for approx. eight minutes, left to cool and split in half. (The leg, claw and brown meat can

be saved for an incredible sandwich or tart.) If you don't have lobster to hand, this dish is also fine without it.

- 4.** Grill four rashers of streaky Troytown Farm bacon.
- 5.** Poach two island eggs until just set.
- 6.** Toast and butter two English muffins.
- 7.** The only remaining task is to balance these delicacies on one half of the muffin (I go for spinach on the bottom followed by bacon, then lobster, then egg, then a blanket of hollandaise and the other half of the muffin to cap it all off), eat and marvel.





ABOVE Sunset over Annet, Western Rocks, and Bishop Rock lighthouse viewed from Troytown Farm

and three-cornered leek, were perfect in a horta frittata. 'This is really a Greek dish – *horta* means garden or greens. The joy of it is that you can throw in pretty much anything that's green and edible,' says Piers. 'It's a food mile no-brainer.'

FISH FEASTING

When it came to fish, Piers learned to adapt recipes to whatever appeared at the end of his fishing line or was brought by friends to his door. In summer there could be mackerel, pollock, monkfish, John Dory, even the occasional turbot or red mullet. But the fish that dominated was grey mullet. 'People often turn their noses up at grey mullet, saying that it's muddy,' says Piers. 'Ours are surprisingly delicious, particularly in a pasty with sea spinach, which – in my opinion – is far truer to the soul of the original Cornish pasty than its traditional ingredients. A miner's wife would surely have found it easier to forage these ingredients than to get her hands on steak.'

On the drinks front, Piers was in luck. Three years ago Westward Farm, next door, diversified into making gin using its own essential oils, and botanicals that include gorse flowers from the island's Wingletang Down – Wingletang means gorse (whynds) and kelp (tang). In summer

Piers made jellies from Westward's Rose Geranium gin, or used it to sousé freshly caught mackerel. Meanwhile its honey-sweetened panna cottas, served with Tamarisk Farm's organic strawberries, provided a sweet treat.

Autumn brought fruit – mostly apples, including Scilly's indigenous Scilly Pearl. Westward Farm pressed them into juice and cider, which Piers gratefully saved for his winter braises. He was frantic preserving island apples in any way he could for the barren months ahead, his favourite being an apple and rosemary jelly to his mum's recipe.

Piers admits those long dark winter months, when rain and gales blast the island and boats are sometimes grounded meaning St Agnes can be cut off, were the toughest. 'When the only local produce available is frozen grey mullet and apples, you have to be resourceful,' he says. I ask him what he most missed on those bleak days. 'Coffee and chocolate,' he replies without hesitation. 'I make a coffee version of River Café's lemon polenta cake, topped with chocolate. I could have murdered a slab of that with a cappuccino.'

Book into Piers' holiday cottage, or buy his book, *An Island Food Mile* (£17.50), via scillycottage.com.

PIERS LEWIN'S FAVOURITE ST AGNES PRODUCERS

• **TROYTOWN FARM.** 'Rich and delicious clotted cream and homemade dairy ice cream – I love the rose geranium, made with essential oil from Westward Farm. Great quality meat too, from the UK's most southwesterly farm.' (troytown.co.uk).

• **WESTWARD FARM.** 'There are risks associated with ultra-local produce. Whenever I pass the fragrant distillery it's likely I'll be spotted and dragged in to taste the latest ethereal gin or delicious earthy cider. Or to test the occasional jar of fragrant honey, more precious than gold.' (westwardfarm.co.uk).

• **TAMARISK FARM.** 'Ben and Tonya Hicks' honesty stall is 27 steps from my cooker – I've counted. Squeaky-fresh baby courgettes, tiny cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, freshly dug potatoes, fragrant leafy basil. The impeccable produce from this certified-organic farm changes as the seasons pass.' (01720 422363).

• **DOWNS FARM CURING COMPANY.** 'Tom and Sophie Smith, who live next to me, transform Red Ruby and Hereford cattle into top-quality cured meat, thinly sliced and flavoured with sea salt and rosemary. Perfect with a St Agnes G&T and a sunset.' (downsfarmios@gmail.com).

