



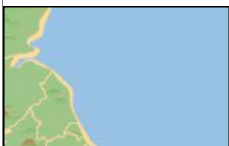
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ACTIVITY PLANNER



Rose Prince celebrates new harvest festivals

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Rose Prince on how harvest celebrations have come a long way

If, as the hymn goes, we plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, why was there a pyramid of canned Del Monte peaches and Green Giant Niblets on display next to a packet of Omo in the church at harvest festival? These were my bored thoughts in chapel when I was 12 and reluctantly back at school after summer holidays. The toasted dust of harvest had hung permanently in the air through August and scratches from the field stubble were still on my shins after endless play on straw bales. Were chocolate digestives and toothpaste really a suitable celebration of the safe gathering in of crops? They were for the old folks in town, our parents told us firmly. They didn't want to deal with whole cobs of corn.

Harvest festival was then almost the only official "do" in festival-shy C of E Britain, but now we've gone celebration crazy. There are dedicated music and arts festivals, delightful "lit-fests" and now, at the traditional harvest time, we have food festivals to look forward to. Up and down the country, market towns, cities and regions will be devoting themselves to celebrating local produce with lavish speciality food markets.

These offer workshops teaching such skills as butchery, bacon-curing and cheese-making; demonstrations by chefs; heated debates tackling major food issues; and often a plump lady in Elizabethan dress tempting you to try authentic sweetmeats. Expect sample heaven: taste is central to a good festival.

Food festivals happen because food in Britain is a lot less embarrassing than it was when I was growing up. Showcasing Butterscotch Instant Whip would not have been an option, but a stall piled with sticky toffee puddings made with real butter? Bring it on.

The greatest change has come from farmers who no longer flog their produce to whichever marketing board will sell it for them, but now sell direct to the people who roast joints of meat they butchered themselves, bake bread with wheat flour they grew and milled, munch the cheese made in the farmhouse dairy or crunch on an apple, plum or cobnut picked from the old orchard. A food festival is a chance to meet these renaissance farmers, taste their food and ask questions. Taking children along is not only educational for the young consumer, but could guarantee that the next generation will continue to fight for good food against the ever-present spectres of industrialisation and GM.



Set fair for a good show: food festival celebrations under way at Snape Maltings, near Aldeburgh

• Food and Drink features

The food festival season runs from now until late October. Many happen simultaneously in the customary harvest week at the end of this month (see Festival Guide, right). The season culminates with the biggest festival of all in Europe - Slow Food's Salone Del Gusto. Held every two years in Turin, northern Italy, it is a celebration of artisan producers all over the world.

At Slow Food's expense, 300 presidia, or food communities, from 50 countries attend an extraordinary event that sees Tibetan yak farmers chatting with British fishermen, Madagascan vanilla growers meeting the peasant saviours of the Ischian rabbit and

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honey gatherers from Ethiopia rubbing shoulders with Sicilians who harvest manna, a natural sweet tapped from a type of elm.

Surreal is not the word, but Slow Food describes the Salone as an Ark for a reason. Without its encouragement, many of these esoteric food producers will disappear forever.

- For more information about the Salone del Gusto in Turin, which takes place on October 23-27, call 00 39 0172 419611 or see www.salonedelgusto.com).

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Festival Guide - 5 of the best

Aldeburgh Food & Drink Festival, Suffolk

Sept 19-28 (www.aldeburghfoodanddrink.co.uk). Tickets: £5, children free. Parking free.

The most significant food festival in Britain, Aldeburgh showcases more than 70 artisan producers and celebrates all that is local. The festival takes place over 10 days, all along the Suffolk coast, culminating in a weekend of events at Snape Maltings. Fergus Henderson of St John's restaurant will feature along with Ruth Watson, Tom Aikens, Tom Parker Bowles and local chefs Rory Wheelan and Sophie and Mark Dorber. I will be doing a cookery demonstration on Sept 28 (1.30pm) and on Sept 27 (2.15pm) I will take part in a debate on the supermarket's role in local retailing chaired by Sheila Dillon of Radio 4's The Food Programme and eco champion and farmer Caroline Cranbrook. On Sept 20, Cranbrook's son, the artist Jason Gathorne-Hardy, will host a sumptuous festival feast of seasonal, local and wild foods (01728 663531; www.foodadventures.co.uk).

Abergavenny Food Festival, nr Newport, South Wales

Sept 20-21 (01873 851643; www.abergavennyfoodfestival.com). Tickets: £5.50, adults; £2.

Wander through the town, visiting producers in the Market Hall. The line-up of chefs and food writers giving demonstrations and talks includes Shaun Hill, Allegra McEvedy, Barney Haughton, Fuchsia Dunlop and Mark Hix.

Festival of Food, London

Sept 18-21 (www.southbankcentre.co.uk). Free.

Organised by Slow Food London, which has selected 50 producers that include Holker Farm Dairy, Farmer Sharp mutton and beef and Sillfield Farm cured pork. Plenty of activities, especially for children. There's also a bee tent - this year's theme is honey.

The York Festival of Food & Drink

Sept 19-28 (01904 466687; www.yorkfoodfestival.com). Tickets from £5.

One of the best of all the northern festivals, this takes place all around the city and features excellent workshops for schools.

Shetland Food Festival

Oct 3-12 (01595 744960; www.shetlandfoodfestival.com). Entry free; workshops ticketed.

Learn cheese-making, bannock-baking and beekeeping from local artisans in the first food festival to be held in the Shetlands.

Recipe of the week

Autumnal winds suggest a soup of mushrooms, cream and a dash of spicy fino sherry. Plan ahead by leaving two red birdseye chillies to steep in ½ pint/300ml sherry for a few days. To serve 4, chop a large white onion finely, then sauté in 2 tbsp butter with 1lb 9oz/700g chopped chestnut mushrooms. Cook until soft. Add 1¾ pint/1 litre chicken stock. Bring to the boil and cook for a minute. Add ¼ pint/150ml double cream and liquidise. Season with salt and black pepper and serve hot, stirring in a little sherry.

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