

A Feast of Food and Drink Trails

BY BOB BARTON



“ I FELT LIKE A GUILTY SCHOOLBOY AS I ENTERED THE ROCOCO CHOCOLATE SHOP ON LONDON’S KING’S ROAD AND GAZED IN AWE AT SHELF UPON SHELF OF TEMPTING DELIGHTS. FRESH CREAM TRUFFLES; DARK CHOCOLATE BARS FLAVOURED WITH LAVENDER, GINGER AND CHILLI PEPPER; CHOCOLATE COVERED COFFEE BEANS AND SOFT NOUGAT—ALL HAND MADE AND ARTISTICALLY WRAPPED. NEXT WOULD COME CHOCOLATE BROWNIES IN THE CHOCOLATE SOCIETY CAFÉ AND A BROWSE IN CHARBONNEL ET WALKER OF NEW BOND STREET, BEFORE I WOULD COLLAPSE, FULLY SATIATED, AMID THE EXQUISITE RANGE IN FORTNUM AND MASON ON PICCADILLY. “

I was following a London chocolate trail which actually expands into Five chocolate-y things to do around Britain -on tourist board VisitBritain’s website. With the country’s growing reputation for fine cuisine, the number of food and drink trails has multiplied since the Malt Whisky Trail was set up around the distilleries of Speyside, north-east Scotland, several decades ago: it is still going strong. Whether your passion is for cheese, sausages, ice-cream or wine, you will find a trail leading you around the most mouth-watering locations on that theme. There are few pleasures that beat motor-ing through the ever-changing countryside, calling in at specialist shops, farms, vine-yards or producers which are usually well off the usual tourist routes.

If your chosen theme is whisky, wine, cider or beer—other British specialities—a non-drinking driver is a prerequisite, of course!

The Seafood Trail

Being an island nation, there are many places where you can enjoy the finest fresh and smoked fish, and shellfish. A new route through some of Scotland’s most spectacular scenery enables foodies to enjoy it in 11 waterfront establishments. The Seafood Trail covers the rugged scenery of Argyll, reached off the A83 highway west of Glasgow: a ragged patchwork of land jutting like huge fingers into the sea, with mountains and long sea-lochs. This combination of scenery and great food is almost intoxicating and I shall never forget my first visit to one of the establishments, the Loch Fyne Oyster Bar, literally a ‘gourmet oasis’ set in isolation beneath towering mountains and beside

a lonely loch, appearing magically out of swirling Highland mist.

South East England Wine Trail

The wine producers of the south-east, proud of the ever-increasing quality of their produce, have published a free map-guide to 20 of the best vineyards and placed them on a large map. Being only 88 miles north of the French Champagne region, with almost identical geology, it is no surprise that wines from England are rivaling that region in blind tastings. The trail ranges from the tiny Painshill at Cobham -set in landscaped parkland known for its grotto, Turkish tent and other exotic follies -to the massive Denbies estate at Dorking: England’s largest, where visitors are taken round by tractor-train.

The Cider Trail

Two of England’s most rural counties, Herefordshire, which borders Wales, and Somerset in south-west England, are known for their cider production and have both produced cider routes. These are beautiful in the spring, when the apple trees are full of blossom, but equally appealing in October, when the cider making festivals are held. Herefordshire boasts the biggest cider mill in the world and Hereford Cathedral has a Cider Bible among other historic books -notably Mappa Mundi-in its chained library. The county even promotes a series of quiet ‘cider cycling routes’ through pretty villages, and renting a bicycle is probably the best way of sampling the ciders and seeking out meals made with them.

As locally made ice-cream often rounds off a meal perfectly, I shall finish this article with the Ice-Cream Trail in the Heart of England. Featuring ten producers from Coventry to the Welsh border, examples include Shepherds in Hay-on-Wye, the ‘town of second-hand books’ and Just Rachel, near the black-and-white town of Ledbury, which makes elderflower, sloe gin and lavender flavours, among others! Perhaps even more fun is to be had by making up your own a la carte food trail using a combination of the above, and by studying VisitBritain’s detailed website, www.visitbritain.com/taste. Bon appetit!



The Lake District Tea Trail

The tradition of taking afternoon tea, complete with home-made scones, cream, cakes and delicate sandwiches, was an English creation and not confined to the Lake District, but the people of Cumbria - land of romantic poet William Wordsworth - have selected some of their best tea shops and put them on a trail. From a mountain tea garden specialising in home-made cakes and local ice-cream, to a ‘tea barn’ set in an open-air sculpture park, all boast quality farmhouse produce and a few local recipes to try when you get home.



The Sausage Trail

Sausages are one of Britain’s favourite foods: Queen Victoria was reputed to be an enthusiast, though they were introduced to the country by the Romans in 500AD and, 1,500 years later, ‘bangers and mash’ (sausage and mashed potato) still vies with fish and chips and curry as a national dish. Heart of England Fine Foods, whose fiefdom includes the West Midlands conurbation around Birmingham and the rural counties of Shropshire and Staffordshire, has its own Sausage Trail, taking visitors to the producers of quality sausages, many of whom have won awards. The selection available ranges from traditional pork and lamb to beer and spicy chilli flavoured varieties.

North-West England’s Fine Foods organisation is also Serious about Sausages to quote the title of one of its free publications, which includes 52 butchers, farms and other shops scattered from medieval Chester north to Carlisle, near the Scottish border. Cumberland sausage is especially noteworthy in this region and butcher W.H. Frost’s of Manchester uses a century-old family recipe including local pork, ground peppers and secret ingredients for their best-selling version.

Trails mentioned in this article:

Chocolate (UK):
Malt whisky (Scotland):
Wine (South East England):
Tea (Lake District):
Seafood (Scotland):
Sausages (Heart/ North-East England):

Cheese (Wales):
Cheese (England):

Cider (Herefordshire/Somerset):

Ice-cream (Heart of England):

The Cheese Trail

There are probably more trails for cheese in Britain than for any other food. Traditional cheese making has been revived and there is a growing number of artisan varieties.

The Cheese Trail in Wales takes you to every corner of this Celtic land, but probably its best known variety is Caerphilly, now produced by only one company, Castle Dairies, in its namesake South Wales town. Caerphilly is also renowned for its 13th century castle which has a leaning tower -thankfully, it is not as crumbly as the cheese.



Back in England, The Stilton Trail allows visitors to explore and taste the famous Stilton cheese, only produced in three East Midland counties: Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. Known as the king of English cheese, its production is entrusted to just six specialist dairies. A trail booklet is available from local tourist offices. North-West Fantastic Foods also has a free booklet, Choosy About Cheese which includes producers of the two great cheeses of the region, Cheshire and Lancashire. These trails, and the Heart of England’s Cheese Trail, are also available on the Internet.

www.visitbritain.com/chocolate
www.maltwhiskytrail.com
www.BuyLocalFood.co.uk
www.golakes.co.uk/teatrailcumbria
www.theseafoodtrail.com
www.sausagelinks.co.uk
www.nw-fine-foods.co.uk
www.wda.co.uk
www.stiltoncheese.com
www.nw-fine-foods.co.uk
www.visitherefordshire.co.uk
www.somerset.gov.uk
www.remotemedia.co.uk