

Spectrum Magazine
Circulation: 57,571
5th May 2007
Weekly

Appetite for adventure

Equipped with just a bicycle, curiosity and a passion for food, the *Woman Who Ate Scotland* embarks on an extraordinary culinary journey

BY NELL NELSON, PORTRAIT BY WALTER NEILSON

THAT'LL BE HAMISH THE THIRD", SAYS Angus MacKay of Brig Farm Shop as he hands over a vacuum-sealed pack of dark red meat. Angus cannot only tell you the name of the piece of Highland beef you are buying, but its parents and its grandparents – and if you probe further, he'll even give a character assessment of Hamish the Third. Angus gives all his Highland cattle traditional Gaelic names. During filming for the second series of *The Woman Who Ate Scotland*, we went to Brig Farm in Perthshire to meet him and his 300 Highland cattle. I was impressed that the breed has not changed for thousands of years and the cattle are still fed on the same diet of grass and grain as their ancestors – and when it comes to taste, there is so little fat on the meat that it needs very little cooking.

My next stop was the Scottish Crannog Centre on Loch Tay, where I was going to cook Hamish the Third, Iron Age-style, over an open fire. Managing director, Barrie Andrian, who is passionate about crannogs, the ancient circular wood houses built on stilts, was going to show me a typical Iron Age recipe for beef stew. The Loch Tay structure is a replica of one that stood on the site 2,500 years ago. Barrie and I cooked the chunks of Highland beef with water, herbs, mushrooms and carrots in an iron cauldron, adjusting the heat by lowering or raising the cauldron chain.

Angus joined us for our feast of meltingly soft and tender beef stew, eaten off iron plates and mopped up with dried nettle bannocks. As I bedded down for the night under my rabbit skin blankets in

the crannog, with the waves lapping at the stilts, I thought: how amazing that in 2,500 years we have come almost full circle when it comes to eating. In 2007 we are striving to eat local food which is grown organically with no additives and involving the minimum of "food miles", much like our crannog-dwelling ancestors.

One man keen to embrace this local food philosophy is South African chef Pete Gottgens of the nearby Ardeonaig Hotel, who keeps his own herd of blackface lamb on the hills beside Loch Tay. I had a blissful cycle round the loch from the crannog to visit him.

Pete is very committed to using seasonal local ingredients – from local wood pigeon to Rooster potatoes – to the extent that he is often still writing the menu when his guests come in to dinner. Pete demonstrated how versatile and delicious the local blackface lamb can be by whipping up a trio of lamb dishes – shoulder, liver and kidney – in his intense furnace of a soon-to-be-extended kitchen.

I lived in Hong Kong for ten years, working as a food and travel writer, and I've cycled and eaten my way through most of Asia.

When I came back to Scotland three years ago, I was sure that my own country must have the same high level of enthusiastic food

producers, a match for the Burmese noodle maker lovingly hanging up skeins of translucent noodles that he has rolled by hand, or the Balinese cook patiently wrapping turmeric and lemongrass-flavoured fish in a banana leaf, before grilling the oblong green packages over white embers.

To my delight, making *The Woman Who Ate Scotland* has confirmed everything I had hoped to find about Scottish food, showing me how much it has changed for the better in the time I've been away. Filming the series was a fantastic experience – it was an opportunity to meet so many people who are passionate about food, from the actual producers to the chefs, while cycling through some of the most wonderful scenery in the country.

I've had so many great food and cycling moments when filming. I loved the day I went mountain biking with Richard Barclay of Rannoch Smokery on the edge of the Grampians. As I puffed my way up the rough five-mile stony track, Richard told me the story of how Rannoch Smokery evolved. One winter, in heavy snow, the van couldn't get to the farmhouse to collect a deer carcass, so Richard's father smoked it in the dog's kennel – and was so impressed with the result that he took samples to Harrods Food Hall, which agreed to stock it.

Fast forward 25 years and Rannoch Smokery is a very successful business with a shiny, modern smokehouse – and the dog has a new kennel. Richard, a keen mountain biker, was eager to show me where the deer roam and demonstrate how delicious his cold-smoked venison penne is when cooked in the wilds. And it was worth it when we reached the bothy – a tiny stone house by a burn perched on the edge of the hillside



Beef farmer Angus MacKay at Brig Farm, Bridge of Earn, main; Nell Nelson and her trusty bicycle, left

