

Food for thought

Jul 24 2009 (<http://www.journallive.co.uk/lifestyle-news/food-and-drink-news/2009/07/24/>) by Jane Hall, The Journal

[Add a comment \(#sitelife-commentsWidget-bottom\)](#)

[Recommend \(#none\)](#)

Cumbria boasts the unenviable record of being home to three gastronomic treasures on a list of age-old foods in danger of dying out. But as Jane Hall discovers in part two of Taste's focus on the county's food, it's not all bad news

IF you were asked to compile a list of endangered animals chances are whales, pandas, rhinos and tigers would be on it. With a bit of thought you would probably be able to refine the inventory: for whale you might add humpback, precede panda with the word "red", name the black rhinoceros and jot down Bengal tiger.

Sheep would be unlikely to appear. Especially those living out their lives in the Lake District. The white dots of sheep on the fells are as much a part of the Cumbrian scenery as the fells themselves.

They are, quite literally, everywhere from stonewalled fields to roaming freely in the valley bottoms and along the tops of the mountains, clinging on to the slopes with their small, sure footed feet.

But sheep – or at least one particular breed uniquely adapted to the Lakes – are in danger of dying out. The Herdwick, the wild sheep beloved of children's author Beatrix Potter and known as the Lake District's gardeners, have found their way on to a list of endangered UK foods.

These slow-growing and hardy animals aren't the only Cumbrian culinary delicacy on the edge of extinction, however.

Lyth Valley damsons and Windermere Char are also included on Slow Food's UK Ark of Taste, a list on to which gastronomic treasures in danger of disappearing from our menus, are placed. Such delights from other areas of the country as Dorset Blue Vinny, Jersey Ormers, Old Gloucester cattle and Three Counties Perry, have also been added to the Ark.

But Cumbria is the only county with the unenviable record of having three ingredients on the catalogue.

For an area that has long shone out as a beacon of hope for those seeking both fine dining and quality, local produce and specialities, to have three such desirable foods deemed to be on the verge of fading from memory can be seen as nothing short of catastrophic.

Not so claims Suzanne Wynn, former chair of Slow Food's UK Ark of Taste Commission. Rather, being on the Ark list could be seen in a positive light; a sign that the local food market in Cumbria is thriving with producers and consumers working together for the common good.

"What it means is that the people of Cumbria are so much more aware of their food that they have taken the decision themselves to nominate those ingredients they think are in danger of dying out. The Ark is largely beholden on people nominating foods, so it is a sign of just how aware people are of what they have in their areas. I would say the fact Cumbria has three foods in the Ark is more of a negative reflection on other areas."

Inclusion in the Ark can have definite benefits. The international Slow Food movement has been

instrumental in helping ensure the survival of more than 200 threatened Italian products, as well as another 60 worldwide, including a yak's milk cheese from Tibet and guarana, an energy-giving root from Brazil.

And it's not just obviously endangered foods that make it in to the Ark. Jersey Royal potatoes and Somerset Cheddar are both currently residing there.

Jersey Royals, the waxy, kidney-shaped potatoes whose arrival in the shops is a sure sign that spring is on the way and which are grown exclusively on the largest of the Channel Islands, are one of the UK's most popular vegetables.

Somerset Cheddar, meanwhile, is one of the most popular and famous cheeses in the world.

But what marks both Jersey Royals and Somerset Cheddar out for special attention is that they are no longer produced in the age-old way. Somerset Cheddar is now one of the world's most industrially produced foods with only a handful of artisan producers making it as it ought to be. Likewise, Jersey Royals should only be grown on the south-facing coastal slopes of their Channel Island homeland, nourished with seaweed fertiliser.

But as demand for the potatoes has grown, production has switched to the rest of the island, and more often than not they are now raised under polythene so they crop earlier.

By the same token, Herdwick sheep are not in themselves on the verge of dying out. Indeed, the meat of this attractive breed that looks like a fleecy teddy bear, has of late come back into fashion thanks to the patronage of Prince Charles. The Herdwick doesn't even appear on the Rare Breeds Survival Trust's list of endangered native livestock, although the species suffered greatly during the food-and-mouth crisis.

What does mark the Herdwick out for special attention, however, is that it is unique to the Lakes and farmed in a way that can't be replicated elsewhere. The Herdwick has what is called a "hefting" instinct. The ewes become established on certain fells and after lambing in the valleys, take their young back to the same spot and instill this homing instinct in a new generation.

As a result these sheep believed to have been introduced to the area by the Vikings, are less likely to wander off their part of the fells. But their way of life – and that of the farmers who depend on the Herdwick – is in danger as a result of bureaucracy and changing tastes.

Suzanne says: "There is something very special and unique about the Herdwick that needs protecting. It is a degree of endangerment. But on the positive side, that danger has been recognised and by being in the Ark awareness will be raised and something can hopefully be done.

"One of the UK Ark's biggest successes has been perry pear juice made in the three counties of Worcester, Gloucester and Herefordshire. Nobody was drinking perry. Now, thanks to being in the Ark and the desire to save it, we have got to the stage where perry has become so well known that the big drink manufacturers are now making pear cider.

"However, they are having to make their drink from dessert [pears \(#\)](#) rather than perry pears as there aren't enough to go around. But because of the demand more people are now planting perry pear trees. It is one of the best examples of how the Ark has galvanised public opinion and been successful. We

are giving people a vehicle through which foods can be saved.

“How successful they are depends on how motivated people are to save something. In Cumbria the Slow Food convivium is largely made up of producers and that has had a big impact. Their view is we are producers, how can we use Slow Food to help us and ensure we have a future?”

Lyth Valley damsons were in danger of becoming another perry pear, out of fashion and forgotten. Believed to have originated in Syria and been introduced to England by the Romans, these fruit similar to [plums \(#\)](#) thrived on the well drained, limestone soils of the Lyth and Winster Valleys. Seventy years ago there were around 40,000 trees with the fruit grown both as a crop and for use as a dye in the wool trade.

Changing farming practices and the decline in home cooking and preserving saw a steady wane in the Lyth Valley damsons' popularity from the 1970s onwards. But local enthusiasts and the Countryside Commission have in recent years brought about a revival in the fruit's fortunes.

“There is a market for them now, and there is even a Lyth Valley blossom trail that tourists can follow,” Suzanne explains. “But the damsons can only be from the Lyth Valley so there is a limited area in which they can be grown.”

Windermere Char is even more of a rarity. Part of the trout family with delicate, pink flesh, it is related to the Arctic char and is one of the few fish that survives in deep, cold inland lakes. One theory says it was trapped in Windermere at the end of the ice age. Others speculate it was introduced by Roman legionnaires.

In medieval times the char was sent to the royal court in barrels, then later in the form of pies. From the 17th Century char was potted with spices and covered with clarified butter for transporting in pottery dishes.

Over-fishing led to a decline in the industry in the late 19th century, but wild stocks have now started to recover. About a dozen fishermen earn a living from the char during the season, which runs from March to September.

Suzanne describes char as a “wild food”, and says the focus has been on getting people to eat it “which may seem at odds with conceived opinion, but if there is no market then things will die out.

“There is an argument to say that with wild foods if they are valued then you will look after their environment. Grouse is a prime example that we put in the Ark last year. If people weren't shooting them, then grouse would die out as there would be no-one managing the environment in which they thrive.”

But should we care? “Of course we should,” Suzanne says emphatically.

“It is really important. It really upsets me to see producers doing something properly and nobody cares.”

WHAT MAKES CUMBRIAN FOOD UNIQUE?

SUZANNE Wynn believes it is Cumbria's isolation that has helped the area retain its unique food heritage.

“It is the county's splendid isolation and the transportation issue,” she says. “Historically Cumbrians

have had to use what was grown and produced locally.

“You tend to find that the more isolated a place is the more local specialities survive. You can see going back even as far as Roman times how food was moved along transport routes. Then the big change came with the birth of the railways and that opened a lot of the UK up, followed by the motorways. The eastern side of Cumbria is fed by the M6, but once you move further westwards towards the coastal side of the county the communications are not as good and it is very rural.

“This has helped Cumbria retain its uniqueness.”

SLOW FOOD

SLOW Food is an Italian-founded movement dedicated to resisting the global scourge of its polar opposite: fast food.

Members celebrate small-scale agriculture, artisan food production and a slower pace of life. Where foods are threatened, members will take up the cause which could involve everything from helping a product's manufacturers with marketing to actually taking over production.

The Ark of Taste is an international catalogue of food and drink products, including animal and fish breeds and fruit and vegetables, which are in danger of disappearing.

But the Ark doesn't exist to preserve every food in danger of dying out. Something has to be worth preserving. Suzanne Wynn said: “Sometimes modern techniques do need to be embraced, but you have to distinguish when it is benefiting and is helping and when it is being done to suit the supermarkets.”

Add a comment

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit