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# Endangered foods are worth saving

[May 16 2008](#) by Jane Hall, The Journal

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*It's not just our wildlife that is endangered, so are many artisan foods. Jane Hall reports on a unique 10 Things to Eat! Before They Die dinner which aims to show why traditional foods are worth saving.*

WHAT'S the nation's favourite new potato? The Jersey Royal. The first of the season grown under glass usually hit supermarket shelves in February with the outdoor crop following a few weeks later.

Like discarding your winter woollies, the Royals' arrival in shops is one of the first signs that spring is on the way. It means you can enjoy the softer, sweeter flavour of this fine textured and...

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is on the way; it means you can savour the nutty, earthy flavour of this firm textured and waxy potato grown exclusively on the largest of the Channel Islands.

So popular are these small kidney-shaped potatoes with their fragile, papery skins, that Jersey exports 45,000 tonnes of them every year to the British mainland. It will therefore come as a surprise to discover the Jersey Royal is an endangered species, alongside other edible UK stalwarts like Cheddar, Herdwick mutton and asparagus.

The four appear with a host of other foods on a special Ten Things to Eat! Before They Die gala dinner on May 22. The closing event of this month's Eat! NewcastleGateshead food festival, the menu actually features 17 artisan ingredients from across the globe that are now made by just a handful of producers.

Organised in association with Slow Food UK, the aim of the meal is to focus attention on bringing back from the edge of extinction foods like the Jersey Royal.

Which begs the question why a potato which is on everyone's shopping list is in danger of disappearing?

"Because they are no longer produced in the traditional way," explains Suzanne Wynn, chair of Slow Food's UK Ark of Taste convivium. "When they first became popular in the 19th Century it was because they were grown on south-facing coastal slopes in Jersey using seaweed for fertiliser. They were one of the first of the seasonal potatoes we could get in the UK.

"But when they became more popular, people started growing them all over the island, and the way to grow them considerably earlier now is to raise them under polythene. Jersey Royals are certainly not generically endangered, but traditionally-grown ones are, which is to everyone's loss, certainly when it comes to taste."

It's not just the traditional Jersey Royal that is in danger of disappearing from the British menu - so is Formby asparagus grown on the sand dunes of the Lancashire coastal town; Herdwick mutton from Cumbria, whose method of preparation has changed as the public's appetite for young lamb has outstripped the desire for longer-matured meat; perry pear juice made in the three counties of Worcester, Gloucester and Herefordshire; Somerset Cheddar, one of the most famous cheeses in the world but also the one most often produced industrially, of which there are now only a handful of artisan producers left, and Dorset Blue Vinny, once made from the milk left over from butter making but whose future now lies in the hands of a sole devotee.

All the foods will be featured at the Ten Things to Eat! Before They Die dinner, along with a host of other ingredients currently residing in the international Slow Food Foundation's Ark of Taste, into which all the Earth's gastronomic treasures under threat of disappearing are being put by members.

The Italian-founded movement dedicated to resisting the global scourge of its polar opposite, fast food, then tries to prevent this happening: this could involve anything from helping a product's manufacturers with marketing to actually taking over production. As a result, Slow Food has helped 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.

Suzanne, 47, who lives near Bristol, was herself introduced to Slow Food in Italy just over four years ago. Describing herself as a "product of the time of the Good Life self-sufficiency programme", she had for many years grown, made and reared her own food.

She is particularly passionate about saving UK artisan foods from extinction. But should we care that various ingredients could soon be consigned to the dustbin for ever?

"Of course we should care," Suzanne says emphatically. "It is really important. It really upsets me to see producers doing something properly and nobody cares.

"For me it is the taste. The Government relies on people not caring, in eating being the only thing they are interested in. That is when we start using lots of chemicals. But I don't think the model we have in this country can be sustained. Going back to buying locally is a much better model as it's better for the retailer, better for our health and better for the economy.

"I hope the Ten Things to Eat! dinner will make people see that what we have needs protecting. There are all sorts of varieties of fruit and vegetables, for example, that are dying out. Some of them don't matter in that they don't taste any different from other varieties. Something has to be worth preserving; that is the point of Ark.

"Certainly not everything that was produced traditionally was produced well. Some cider in the past would have been disgusting. 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."

Suzanne hopes Ten Things to Eat! will do more than satisfy diners' hunger pangs, but give them food for future thought. "I hope the meal will set people's minds going. And if they know of anything that should be in the Ark, then we want to know. That's the message we want to get out if

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Ten Things to Eat! Before They Die is on May 22 from 7pm at the Marriott Hotel, Gosforth Park, Newcastle. Tickets cost £85 fully inclusive of wine. To book call (0191) 230-5151.

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### Ten things to Eat! Before they die menu

:: **Canapes:** Potted Windermere smoked char with traditional Swiss rye bread, mini bakers with Gouda fondue, Herat raisins with seared monk fish, mini beef Wellingtons, cappacio of venison with Saxon Village cherry preserve



:: **Starter:** Formby asparagus, Jersey Royal warm salad and Lindisfarne oysters (not endangered) served with Champagne sauce

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:: **Main course:** Poached Herdwick mutton with Saint-Flour Planèze golden lentils and Ballobar capers

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:: **Dessert:** Mananara vanilla cream with pears poached in Three Counties perry

:: **Cheeses:** Artisan Somerset Cheddar, Dorset Blue Vinny, Irish Raw Milk Cow's Cheese, traditional Gouda

:: Huehuetenango coffee and chocolates from Alnmouth.

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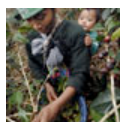
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