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## Festival banquet celebrates world's vanishing delicacies

**Martin Wainwright**  
Tuesday May 20, 2008  
[The Guardian](#)

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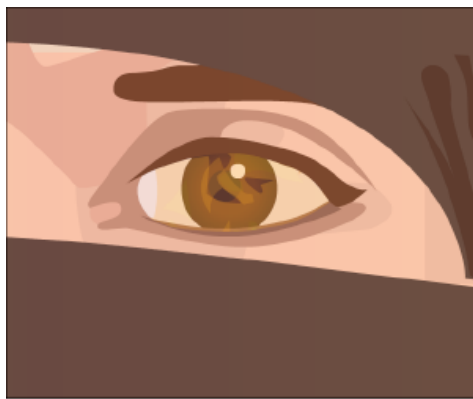
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When 250 diners sit down to an £85 feast called Ten Things to Eat Before They Die this week, they plan to send a message to the mass market.

The gala dinner will make a plea for speciality producers, from Africa to the Lancashire coast, who are struggling to stay in business.

A quarter of the entire annual crop of Ballobar capers a famous Spanish delicacy now reduced to local village consumption has been sent to Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead for the event, one of the highlights of the area's Eat! festival.

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Last-minute efforts are under way to add Mauretanian mullet caviar to the canapes, but the Imraguen people whose women keep the recipe going have yet to reply. "We're still hoping to hear from them," said Simon Preston, director of the food festival, who is working his way through Mauretanian phone books and trade directories.

"But at all events, it's going to be a thought-provoking occasion. We'll be well-fed but interested and challenged as well."

From a list of hundreds of candidates, the organisers chose 18 ingredients, with 10 as the must-eat star attractions. Each has the sort of colourful history which menu compilers love, starting with the unique asparagus grown just behind the sand dunes which line the coast at Formby, near Southport. Bunches were a prized galley item on Cunard and White Star passenger liners to New York, including the Titanic.

"It's the combination of sandy Lancashire soil and the cooler air near the coast which makes it so special," said David Brooks, stopping his asparagus crop-grader yesterday for a chat. "My grandad supplied the ships and I'm the fourth generation at least, but it's a struggle to survive."

Now down to four acres, his crop faces relentless competition from cheaper brands, and relies on the top end of the market to keep going. Preston said: "That's the point of our glittering gala. We need people who love food to eat these products out of the endangered zone."

The sold-out meal will also highlight subtle ways in which local producers have used their surroundings to produce distinctive food.

The Imraguen women salt, rinse and press mullet eggs between boards after the fish have been steered towards their nets, undamaged by trawling, by passing dolphin schools.

The Transylvanian berry jams, accompanying Northumberland venison, go back to Vlad Dracula's days. Handmade in seven villages founded by 13th-century Saxon immigrants, they are trying to break out of an unsustainable local market to survive.

"We face an increasingly homogenised, globalised world of food," said Preston. "This is a way to help these admirable producers and show that their food genuinely does taste different, and better."

The menu loyally embraces producers on Newcastle and Gateshead's doorstep too: sweets with the Guatemalan coffee have been ordered from a small chocolatier in Alnmouth, up the Northumberland coast; beer comes from a micro-brewery on the Tyne at Wylam and the wines from a Geordie exile, Arthur Cox, who runs a vineyard in south-west France.

The dinner follows a more conventional blowout last year when the festival ended with a black-tie finale called Ten Things to Eat Before You Die.

Preston said: "That was all the usual stuff Beluga caviar, truffles, wagyu beef and so on, and people loved it, but we wanted a bit more food for thought this year."

Chefs preparing the menu at the Marriott Hotel in Gosforth Park have teamed up with the Italian-based Slow Food organisation, which campaigns for traditional local producers.

#### **What's on the menu**

- **Lancashire asparagus** The Formby crop is down to a few farmers after the loss of the transatlantic liner market.
- **Herdwick mutton** Staunchly produced since Beatrix Potter's day but confined to the Lake District.
- **Balobar capers** Introduced to the Aragon region of Spain by the Moors but long since gone wild. Costly to harvest and outpriced by Andalusian and Moroccan

rivals.

- **Huehuetenango highland coffee** From Guatemala. Needs forest shade and laborious depulping and bean-raking for its famed flavour.
- **Raw milk cow's cheese** Traditional process reintroduced by Irish artisan producers in the 1970s to international acclaim, but a small market.
- **Herat raisins** Known since the fourth century AD but the 120 varieties are struggling against Afghanistan's disruption and more lucrative crops such as poppies.
- **Perry pear juice** Unsited to mass production and now limited to Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire.
- **Imraguen mullet botarga** Mauretanian caviar confined to the Banc d'Arguin national park, whose nomads with motorless boats are the only people permitted to fish there.
- **Saxon village preserves** Based on berries and other fruits from Transylvania, made by Romanian women to supplement low farming incomes.
- **Saint Flour golden lentils** Thin skins absorb sauces well but livestock has taken over much of the French land used in its early 20th century heyday.

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