

A TASTE OF WALES

by Angela Gray

When Hazel Thomas was growing up in the 1950s, her family in Drefach, West Wales, lived in an old farmhouse that was also the village pub. As a result, curing, preserving, baking, and cheese-making—as well as traditional ales—were all part of her family life. A classically trained chef, Hazel still enjoys cooking family favorites that define a cuisine born over the open fire, the cauldron, and the bakestone.

Anthony Evans is co-host of the popular Welsh television show *Stwffio*, which encourages children to learn more about what they are eating. He epitomizes the national love of eating locally; the wild game, fish, cockles, seaweed, and samphire (a coastal wild salad green) on his table are likely to have been gathered or caught by Anthony himself.

And Geraldine Trotman, whose father settled in Wales from St. Lucia, is passionate about putting soul back into the kitchen. She teaches families the nourishing value of healthy home-cooked meals through the “Home Start” charity with which she works in the Tiger Bay section of Cardiff.

These cooks blend the bounty of land and sea, with an inherited simple hospitality—a practice that binds together many Welsh cooks. On my own childhood farm, I learned from my family how to make the most out of what was available. Sausages, pickles, jams, fruit pies cooked on the bakestone, stuffed breast of lamb, and cured ham were all common in our kitchen.

Wales has always been blessed with a natural larder of seasonal ingredients. Over the centuries, this abundance has helped it develop a thriving modern food scene. Bustling farmers markets, festivals, specialty food shops, and award-winning producers inspire a food-loving citizenry as well as a pantheon of great chefs—including Hazel Thomas, Anthony Evans, and Geraldine Trotman. This national passion is honored each year at the True Taste Awards, the Oscars of the Welsh food world.

Among the most celebrated foods of Wales are sweet mountain lamb, salt marsh lamb, rich Welsh Black beef,

and succulent rare breed pork. Wild game and venison are seasonal favorites, and seafood throughout Wales is relished in local restaurants. Cockles (a little clam) are a delicacy in the South, served in paper cones with vinegar and white pepper. Laverbread, a delicious fresh seaweed puree, is a unique ingredient originally served as part of a hefty breakfast beloved by the miners of South Wales.

The traditions of preserving, curing, smoking, baking, and brewing are still cherished, and many smaller cottage industries have found success in producing foods with exceptional flavor and quality. For example, Wales is home to many dairy farms that produce lovingly made, award-winning artisanal cheeses. Mild, crumbly Caerphilly is probably the best known. However, a revival of farmhouse cheese production in the past twenty-five years has produced superior, much sought-after varieties, from Pant Ys Gawn (a mild creamy goat’s milk cheese) to Teifi (a hard-pressed Farmhouse) to Gorau Glas (a robust blue).

The straightforward lessons of Welsh cuisine have accompanied me throughout my career as a chef and food writer. I maintain great fondness for the national delicacies, as they all hold memories of times spent in the kitchen watching and learning with my grandmother, father, mother, and aunts. My family possessed deep culinary knowledge and mastered the art of seasonal cooking: everything they used was homegrown, locally produced, or sourced from the wilds nearby. To this day I look to the past for inspiration, often reminding myself that the simplicity of such dishes is what has endeared them to me.

Angela Gray is a food writer, television and radio presenter, and course director at Llanerch Vineyard Food School in the Vale of Glamorgan. She grew up in South Wales and has fond memories of early years in Porthcawl and Caerphilly where her family ran a dairy. Today, she spends her time writing, cooking on television, teaching, and working on food-related projects on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government.