

A TASTE OF
NORTH WALES

With a landscape defined by Snowdonia's peaks and the waters of the Menai Strait, North Wales is home to world-class produce — something a new crop of farmers, fishermen, chefs and entrepreneurs are keen to share with the world

WORDS: BEN OLSEN

The prodigal son

Following a busy lunch shift that's seen him plate up day-boat coley tempura, Welsh black beef pappardelle and Anglesey crab claw linguine in the open kitchen of Bryn Williams at Porth Eirias, chef Bryn Williams joins me at a table with sweeping views of Colwyn Bay. It's half term and, as holidaymakers take to the beach with buckets and spades, I finish up a fortifying lunch of catch-of-the-day coley, ably accompanied by crushed peas and a satisfyingly chunky tartare sauce.

Bryn, who also owns Odette's in London's Primrose Hill, is something of a celebrity here, a prodigal son born in the nearby valleys who returned to North Wales after clocking up culinary experience in the South East as well as the Cote D'Azur. "When I was young, if you were interested in food, you had to leave to gain experience, but now you don't have to — we've got a couple of Michelin stars and some fantastic restaurants," he says of the region's buoyant food scene, within which he plays a central part.

With its all-day menu and a modern, industrial aesthetic, this bright, waterside restaurant is modelled on European brasseries, yet the food is unapologetically Welsh. "Wales has one of the greatest larders on the planet. We're surrounded by the coast and some magnificent seafood," he says, pointing to the bobbing boats in the Menai Strait. "Then, if you go inland, there are some of the world's best farmers, meat producers and allotment gardeners."

The focus at Bryn Williams at Porth Eirias is very much on seafood, although Bryn says his soft spot for the "unbelievable" flavour of grass-fed, slow-maturing Welsh Black beef means it also makes cameo appearances. He buys fish, including slip sole, sea bass and coley from local fishermen, crab and lobster from Anglesey, and what he calls some of the world's best mussels from nearby Conwy, with menus changing to reflect availability.

"For me, restaurants should always have a sense of place," he says. "If you're on the coast, you should be having a plate of goodness from the sea. I'll always ask myself as a chef what I'd want to eat in a place like this and, to be honest, give me a glass of white wine and a bowl of mussels and I'm happy." *portheirias.com*

Salt of the sea

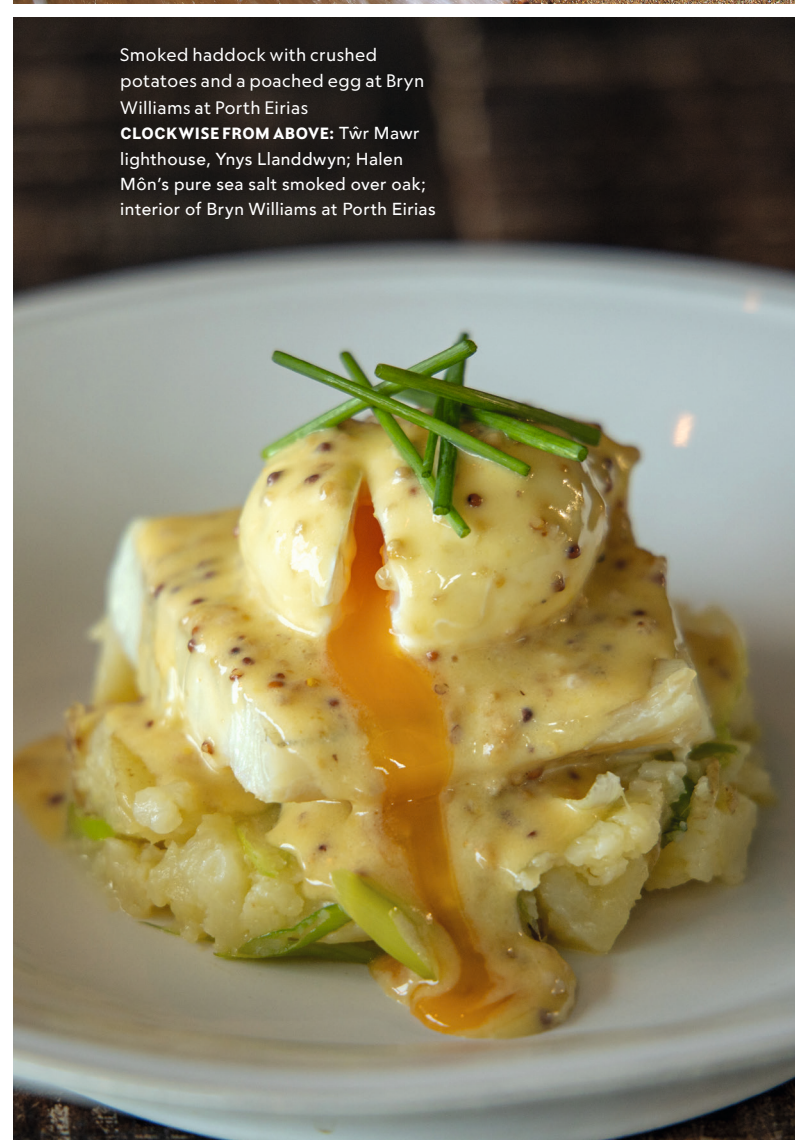
It seems somewhat surprising, driving down Anglesey's winding lanes, through red squirrel woodlands and sleepy villages, that around the next corner lies an innovative food producer beloved by American presidents and A-list chefs. Yet, in the village of Brynsiencyn you'll find just that.

Halen Môn has been producing high-quality sea salt since 1997. Its founders, David and Alison Lea-Wilson first met while studying at nearby Bangor University. Initially supplementing their student income by cultivating oysters, they launched an aquarium in the 1980s — a popular but highly seasonal attraction. While searching

for ways to make money over winter, they hit upon the idea of producing salt using the water already being pumped up from the Menai Strait for the aquarium. Since then, the duo have gone from strength to strength, with Halen Môn awarded protected designation of origin (PDO) status in 2014, making this salt to Anglesey what champagne is to northeastern France.

Central to this success is the quality of the sea water, as I discover on a tour of Halen Môn's HQ with Rob Jardine, who started working with the Lea-Wilsons as a teenager. Now visitor centre manager, he takes me behind the scenes, outlining the 14-day journey from sea to refined final product said to be favoured by Barack Obama. "The water is so clear here. On a high tide, clean sea water flushes through the Menai Strait from the Atlantic Gulf Stream, and oyster and mussel beds provide natural filters," he says, as staff tend to trays heaped high with brilliant white salt.

We enter the production hall, where 18 crystallising tables sit below gas heaters that warm the surface of the brine, which has been pumped in from the Menai Strait and boiled at 80C to increase salinity. As salt flakes form and grow, they sink to the bottom of the table and are shovelled into trays before being rinsed to remove the chalky residue. They're then dried and packed for destinations worldwide, with a lengthy client list that includes Green & Black's and scores of top-tier restaurants.



Smoked haddock with crushed potatoes and a poached egg at Bryn Williams at Porth Eirias
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Tŵr Mawr lighthouse, Ynys Llanddwyn; Halen Môn's pure sea salt smoked over oak; interior of Bryn Williams at Porth Eirias

IMAGES: JONATHAN CHEERY; ALAMY; BRYN WILLIAMS AT PORTH EIRIAS



NORTH WALES FAVOURITES



WILD HORSE BREWING
Launched in Llandudno in 2015, this brewery benefits from Snowdonia's soft water. Its range includes the crisp, pilsner-style Buckskin lager and the hoppy Nokota IPA, both perfectly pitched to slake the thirst after a day's hike. wildhorsebrewing.co.uk

CAWS RHYD Y DELYN CHEESE
Maldwyn and Menai Jones turned their hand to cheesemaking just over a decade ago. The resulting range, which includes the creamy Mon Las Anglesey blue and a camembert-style soft cheese, has more than justified that decision, picking up a host of awards since. Their cheeses can be found in restaurants and farm shops throughout the region. cawsrhydydelyn.co.uk

RED BOAT GELATO
Selling ice cream produced on Anglesey using largely local ingredients, Red Boat has five parlours across North Wales. Expect a local twist on traditional gelato, with flavours including salted caramel using Halen Môn sea salt and a particularly refreshing sea buckthorn that's both zesty and creamy. redboatgelato.co.uk

Next up, I'm taken on a salt-tasting flight designed to highlight Halen Môn's unique characteristics. I dab at the common table salt and rock salt, whose bitterness I'm informed is due to the presence of chalk, and the European sea salt, whose greyish hue comes from outdoor drying in clay baths.

Rob then introduces the PDO-approved Halen Môn salt, which, I note, is dazzlingly white, soft and flaky. "There's no bitter aftertaste because we remove the chalk," he says. "You get a salty flavour and then it vanishes — it's much cleaner on the finish. Whatever you season with it, it brings the food alive and makes it sing." halenmon.com

Mussel memory

It's a busy afternoon on Conwy quayside when I meet fisherman Tom Jones, from Conwy Mussels, who, wearing a dragon apron in the shadow of the town's medieval castle, would struggle to look more Welsh. "It's like stepping back 60 years when you arrive here," he says, gesturing at the crowds on Lower Gate Street. "You've got kids crabbing and parents eating local whelks and cockles — it doesn't get better than that."

Tom is the third generation of a family that's fished mussels here for more than 80 years. Rather than grown on ropes or dredged from beds started from seed, his mussels occur naturally within the estuary of the River Conwy. The nutrient-rich waters flushed with salt water from the Menai Strait and fresh water from the mountains result in larger, meatier molluscs with a distinct character. "Most shells have barnacles or signs of wear as they're naturally grown," he says. "People are used to seeing perfect black mussels in supermarkets, but they're all grown on ropes. Ours are more rustic, of course, but the meat inside always wins people over."

When we speak, the mussel season — any month with an R in its name — has just ended, giving Tom and his team a breather while the bivalves spawn and reproduce over summer. Come September, they'll be on the water using 20ft-long rakes to harvest mussels at low tide, with a mixture of experience and luck helping to identify areas where mussels are plentiful. "It's a centuries-old method," says Tom. "The rake's design allows smaller molluscs to fall back through the teeth, meaning stocks



Mussels attached to a rock on the shoreline
FROM LEFT: Conwy Quay with the castle in the background; seared Pen Llŷn scallops with an apple puree and crispy pork skin, Dylan's



don't get hammered as we remove them in sustainable quantities." Back on shore, the mussels are purified and sold to a handful of local restaurants and a growing number of acolytes. And Tom — who recommends steaming mussels with white wine, onion, garlic and leeks — has no plans to grow the business further. "We're a niche market. We've got a famous mussel that we're proud of and we plan to keep going like this forever." conwymussels.com

Local larder

The Anglesey town of Menai Bridge, just over a suspension bridge from the mainland, has an unmistakable appeal to it. A stroll down its charming high street takes you past Sosban & The Old Butcher (a pint-sized Michelin-starred restaurant worth booking well in advance) and an impressive roster of independent delicatessens, sandwich bars, butchers, artisanal ice cream parlours and pubs serving locally caught lobster, all suggesting the town is bucking the trend for high street decline.

Yet, according to David Evans, co-founder of waterside restaurant Dylan's, which makes a point of championing local produce, this wasn't always the case. He joins me for dinner and, over a plate of Menai Strait

oysters dashed with zingy mignonette, explains why — after holidaying on Anglesey for years — he left Manchester to set up the restaurant almost a decade ago with business partner Robin Hodgson. "There's an identity now to North Walian food that didn't exist 10 years ago," he says. "We see it as our strongest selling point. It feels like it's taken those from outside to a certain extent to show the full value of it."

With two other branches in Llandudno and Criccieth, Dylan's is now an established dining destination, yet David says it was a struggle to get local producers to sell to anyone other than wholesalers. "We had to persuade them we could pay them more and raise the profile of their product," he says, as my main course arrives: seared Anglesey lamb with charred Tenderstem broccoli, sweet pureed squash and a rich jus.

Setting up a seafood festival in 2014 to showcase local producers proved successful, helping bridge the gap between producer and consumer and, today, Dylan's menu reads like a who's who of the region's best producers. "I feel we've helped create a momentum that's allowed the town to blossom. If everyone else were to follow suit, we could support a lot more fishermen and farmers," says David. dylansrestaurant.co.uk

ESSENTIALS

Getting there and around

Regular trains hug the length of Wales's north coast from Manchester, Birmingham or Crewe, with major stops including Llandudno, Bangor and Holyhead. Frequent buses also serve the same stretch. However, exploring by car is easiest, allowing access to Snowdonia's peaks and Anglesey's farthest flung beaches. Or walk, using the spectacular 75-mile North Wales Way, which runs along the entire North coast of Wales, into Anglesey.

Where to stay

In the pretty seaside resort of Beaumaris, Anglesey, The Bull sits just minutes from the town's main attractions, including its Victorian pier and UNESCO World Heritage-listed castle. A characterful, 400-year-old coaching house, The Bull offers good-sized rooms and excellent food with a Welsh accent. Double rooms from £125. bullsheadinn.co.uk

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY; DYLAN'S RESTAURANT; WILD HORSE BREWING CO