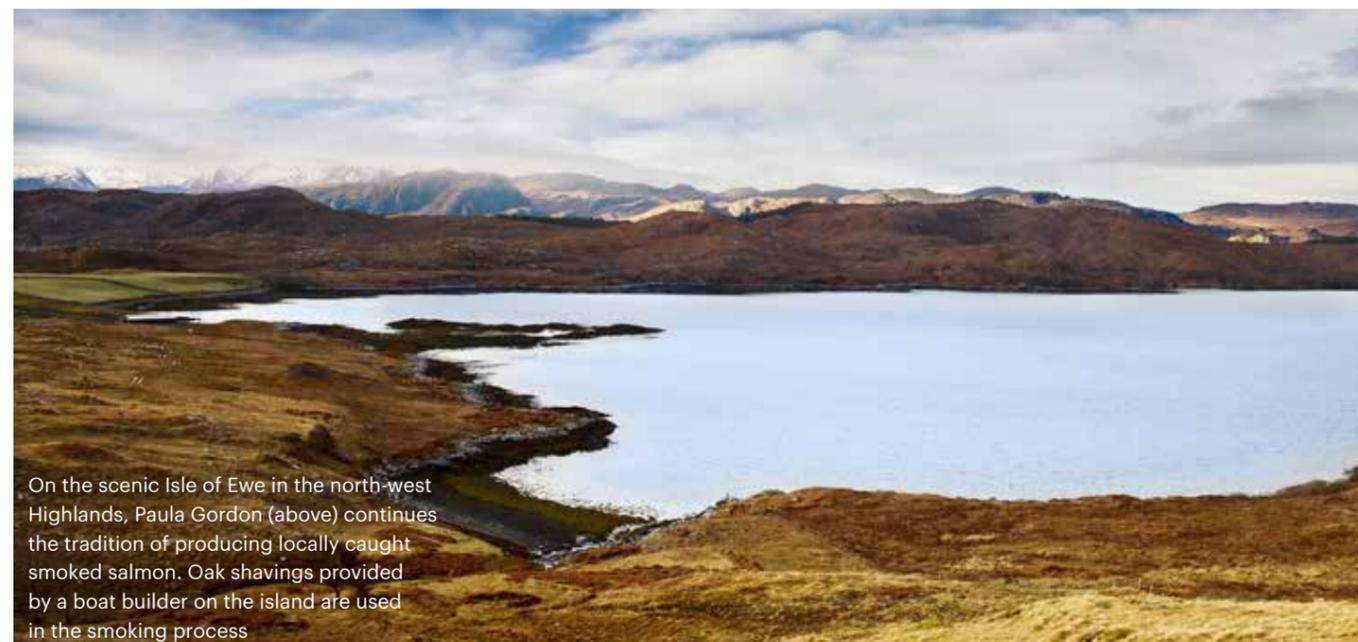


BRITISH IN PARTICULAR

To highlight the delicious, quintessential ingredients that are farmed, fished and grown up and down the country, we meet some of the remarkable producers who help bring them to our table

This month: smoked salmon

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On the scenic Isle of Ewe in the north-west Highlands, Paula Gordon (above) continues the tradition of producing locally caught smoked salmon. Oak shavings provided by a boat builder on the island are used in the smoking process





An aromatic fire of oak shavings, whisky barrel staves and larch; The Smokehouse Deli sells an array of products that complement their fish; Alistair hangs the salmon fillets to be dried and smoked. Alistair and Paula, with Crusoe (opposite), have always had a passion for food

January can be a little dreich on the shores of the Isle of Ewe in the north-west Highlands, but there's plenty to cheer Alistair Gordon – his job is a feast for the senses. He's busy hanging up jewel-bright orangey-pink fillets of salmon with large wooden pegs on what looks like a washing line in a kiln. They smell earthy and briny all at once. Cold smoke from a fire of three different aromatic woods helps impart a unique flavour to the fish, which will feature in New Year celebrations across the land.

Producing food in this part of Scotland during midwinter isn't for the faint-hearted. Too wet with little wind means that Alistair's fires won't draw; snow and ice on the A9 could prevent the company's deliveries being made on time; and if there's a gale on the Atlantic, the boats won't go out to sea and catch their vital haul. "There are all kinds of challenges," says Alistair's energetic wife Paula, as she cheerily packs up another order ready for dispatch, shifting boxes around to make room. "Working by Loch Ewe is like sailing, really," she says. "The elements define how well things go."

The nautical analogy is a clue to how the Isle of Ewe Smokehouse, as the business became known, came into being. This husband-and-wife team met in Greece, where Paula was working as a chef on a charter boat and Alistair ran a flotilla. They ended up living in his flat back in Edinburgh, but were constantly cooking up ideas about their future together in the countryside. "We knew we wanted a business that was out of the city, land-based, had a food element and was a bit of an adventure," Paula says. It was in October 2006 – when she took a freelance job at a traditional estate in Wester Ross preparing meals for guests, with Alistair tagging along – that she fell in love with the landscape and tried something that was going to change both their lives. "I'd never tasted smoked salmon like that before – just beautiful, with a firmer, drier texture than the mass-produced type, which can be greasy and slimy. It was more like prosciutto." The Highlands were already in Alistair's blood, as he has family in Inverness and Glen Affric. When the pair discovered that the smokehouse that had made this artisan food, based in the village of Aultbea, was for sale, they viewed it in

January 2007, sold the flat and pooled their savings to buy it. The keys were in their hands two months later. "It was meant to be – sometimes your path is there and that is that," Paula says, smiling as she recollects the serendipitous turn of events.

With experience working at Inverawe and Loch Fyne, Alistair had the knowledge required to run the smokehouse, following a handover with the previous owners. They inherited the machinery, the database of customers and the technique, which they wanted to emulate in order to produce the same high-quality food. Like the original owners, Alistair sources the salmon from Scottish Sea Farms, which raises the fish to RSPCA Freedom Food standards in a variety of locations, from the Oban area to the Shetland Isles. "Producing artisan smoked salmon using purely traditional methods is very satisfying," he says, as he mixes dark brown sugar, rum, salt and water together in a large drum, before he fills each of the four baby bath-like tubs with ten fillets. They cure for six hours before being dried and smoked for up to 48 hours to build layers of flavour, in contrast with the more usual 12 of commercially produced salmon. The fire of oak shavings (which come from a wooden-boat craftsman on the Isle of Ewe), whisky barrel staves (a special sought-after fragrant addition) and larch from Cromartie Timber (to lengthen the burn) is relit every four to five hours. "Our smoked salmon is real slow food. Anything that is given time tastes better," Paula says.

It's a continuous process in order to fulfil demand for the Great Taste Award-winning salmon, of which the team makes 10,000 tonnes per year. The workforce doubles during advent, with Jill Sutherland, Ferdi Balanquit and Angie Locke in the slicing room hand-cutting the salmon, while Paula, Sally Richards and Janette Latta check through the orders they receive by post, telephone and via their website, and pack them, each complete with the distinctive blue and orange logo. The fresh and contemporary branding is one of the most significant differences that the Gordons made to the business, replacing the traditional-sounding Sleepy Hollow name with the simple and effective Isle of Ewe Smokehouse. "We didn't want the company to be about

"Our smoked salmon is real slow food – anything that is given time tastes better"





tweed and legends, but to be young and vibrant, with an emphasis on plain and simple good food," Paula explains.

In January 2010, they also finished building a new smokehouse in the grounds of their home, as the original one was based in a croft house belonging to the previous owners. Next, they opened a shop on the site. "I love meeting the people who come and visit us," says Paula, as she restocks the fridge with cheese and charcuterie as well as salmon. During the summer holidays - Smoked by Ewe's second busiest time after December - tourists following the North Coast 500 road route stop off at this Scandinavian-style store to pick up ingredients for a picnic and glean information about the area, which Paula is only too happy to provide: "Hopefully they will remember those nice people at the smokehouse and their holiday in Scotland, and order from us later on." With few tourists in the area in winter, the shop turns into a packing space from November onwards. Paula describes it as an incredibly busy but jolly time: "You're sending lovely parcels to people for them to share with their family - what could be better than that?"

All the orders for New Year celebrations are dispatched weeks beforehand, so this hardworking couple will be able to savour the start to 2019 with a well-deserved holiday at home - and an unsliced side of smoked salmon to feast on, of course. Happy Hogmanay! *Read on for some delicious recipes using smoked salmon.*

1 *Isle of Ewe Smokehouse, Ormiskaig, Aultbea, Wester Ross (smokedbyewe.com). CL readers can receive a ten per cent discount on all first orders of smoked salmon until 31 December 2018 when quoting MerryFishmas.*



SMOKED SALMON GNOCCHI

Preparation 10 minutes Cooking about 10 minutes Serves 6
This tasty sauce can also be served with your favourite pasta if you prefer.

- 1kg ready-made gnocchi**
- ½ tbsp olive oil**
- 1 large courgette, diced**
- 300g full-fat cream cheese**
- 2 tbsp finely chopped dill or parsley**
- finely grated zest of 1 lemon**
- 125g smoked salmon, chopped**
- large handful of watercress, coarser stems discarded and roughly chopped**

- 1** Cook the gnocchi in a large pan of boiling water according to the packet instructions (or until they bob to the surface).
- 2** Meanwhile, heat the oil in a large pan and gently fry the courgette for a few minutes
- 3** until softened and lightly golden.
- 4** Stir in the smoked salmon, most of the watercress and plenty of freshly ground black pepper. Check the seasoning and serve immediately, garnished with a little more watercress.
- 5** Drain the gnocchi well, reserving a little of the cooking water. Stir the cream cheese, herbs and lemon zest into the courgette. Heat gently until piping hot, then tip the gnocchi into the pan and stir to coat (add a little of the reserved cooking water to loosen if necessary).



SMOKED SALMON AND LEEK TART

Preparation 30 minutes, plus chilling Cooking About 50 minutes Serves 4
Use up leftover smoked salmon trimmings for this simple quiche.

- flour, to dust**
- 250g ready-made shortcrust pastry**
- 25g butter**
- 1 small leek, finely sliced**
- 1 tsp wholegrain mustard**
- 100g smoked salmon, cut into bite-sized pieces**
- 150ml double cream**
- 1 medium egg**
- ½ tsp chopped chives**

- 1** On a lightly floured worksurface, roll out the pastry to the thickness of a £1 coin. Use it to line a 20cm 3cm-deep round flan tin and prick the base all over with a fork. Chill for 30 minutes or pop into the freezer for 10 minutes if you have room.

- 2** Melt the butter in a pan and gently fry the leek for 20 minutes. Set aside.
- 3** Heat the oven to 190°C (170°C fan) gas mark 5. Put in a baking sheet to heat up. Line the pastry with a large circle of baking parchment, fill with baking beans and bake blind for 10-12 minutes until the sides have set. Remove the baking beans and paper, then cook the pastry for another 5-8 minutes until

- 4** Turn the temperature down to 150°C (130°C fan) gas mark 2. Spread the mustard over the base of the pastry, followed by the cooled leek and salmon. Beat together the cream and egg; season well. Pour into the pastry case, sprinkle with chives and bake for 20-30 minutes until just set. Serve warm or at room temperature with seasonal vegetables.



SMOKED SALMON PARCELS WITH DILL AND BEETROOT DRESSING

Preparation 20 minutes, plus chilling Serves 8

The parcels can be made up to two days in advance and chilled until they are needed.

125g smoked trout
1 tbsp hot horseradish sauce
2-3 tbsp crème fraîche
zest and juice of ¼ lemon
1½ tbsp chopped fresh dill,
plus few sprigs to garnish
8 large pieces smoked salmon
4 balls ready-cooked baby
beetroot, diced

2 tsp cold-pressed
rapeseed oil
lemon wedges and
watercress, to garnish
slices of toasted sourdough,
to serve

① Break the smoked trout into pieces and put into a

food processor with the horseradish sauce, crème fraîche and lemon zest and juice. Blitz until blended. Transfer to a bowl, stir in 1 tbsp dill and season to taste.

② Place one piece of smoked salmon on a board. Put a spoonful of the trout mousse – the size of a golf ball – in the centre. Fold up the salmon to make a parcel, then turn over so the join

is at the bottom. Repeat with the remaining salmon and mousse. Put on a tray or plate, cover and chill for 30 minutes or until needed. Mix the remaining dill with the beetroot and oil. Season.

③ Plate each parcel with a spoonful of the beetroot dressing. Garnish with a lemon wedge, piece of watercress and a dill sprig. Serve with toasted sourdough. ➔

SMOKED SALMON MAC AND CHEESE

Preparation 15 minutes Cooking 30 minutes Serves 4

This humble dish becomes luxurious with the addition of rich smoked fish.

500g dried macaroni
 knob of butter, plus extra for greasing
 1 tbsp plain flour
 500ml whole milk
 2 tsp Dijon mustard
 125g Cheddar, grated
 1 small red onion, very finely chopped
 large handful of smoked salmon, cut into bite-sized pieces

- 1 Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan) gas mark 6. Bring a large pan of well-salted water to a rolling boil and cook the macaroni for about 12 minutes or until al dente.
- 2 Meanwhile, make the sauce. Heat the butter in a pan, then remove from the heat and stir in the flour. Pour in the milk,

a little at a time, stirring continuously - don't add it too quickly or the sauce will become lumpy. After half the milk has been blended, return the pan to the heat and gradually pour in the rest, stirring. Once the sauce has thickened, simmer gently for a couple of minutes to cook out any taste of flour. Stir in the mustard and cheese (don't allow the sauce to boil), then taste to check and adjust the seasoning, if necessary.

- 3 Drain the macaroni, retaining a cup of the cooking water. Return the pasta to the pan and stir in the sauce - if the mixture looks too thick, add a splash of the cooking water to loosen it a little. Stir in the red onion and smoked salmon. Spoon into a large greased ovenproof dish or four individual ones and cook in the oven for 15 minutes until golden. 



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL KINGSTON; GARETH MORGANS; WILLIAM SHAW; BRETT STEVENS