

Where the
WILD THINGS ARE

Hampshire's ancient New Forest was once a place of hunters, smugglers and poachers. These days, food lovers hunt down the boutique hotels, rustic pubs and fine local produce. Susan Low gets on her bicycle, meeting a few untamed beasts along the way



hungry traveller.

FOREST OF PLENTY, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Mike Smales shows off his Lyburn Farmhouse cheeses; Hotel TerraVina; a New Forest pony; a zingy salad at Lime Wood's Hartnett Holder & Co restaurant, and one of its Forest Hideaway suites; The Pig's kitchen garden and full English breakfast; The Oak Inn in Lyndhurst; Loosehanger Farmhouse cheese queen Ness Williams and son Rhob; The Royal Oak in Fritham



Cycling along a quiet forest track, we came face-to-face with a wild thing. Its eyes glowed with menace from

a craggy face and its dark chestnut coat bristled, from ridged back to dainty cloven hooves. The beast and its two snorting cohorts eyed us on our steel steeds (aka bicycles), sniffing the air with suspicion. They looked none too friendly, so my husband and I pedalled away fast, leaving the porcine creatures to their snuffling and rooting.

In the New Forest, you expect to meet beasts of various kinds. In these 220 square miles of ancient woodland, heaths and unenclosed pastures, the famed New Forest ponies abound, as do deer, donkeys, mules, cattle and pigs, grazing freely – but we were assured wouldn't ever meet a wild boar. So what were the wild creatures we encountered? That has remained a mystery – but there are whispers of wild boar moving into the forest, and I know what my money's on.

For centuries the New Forest had a rough reputation. Once the hunting ground of William the Conqueror, in the 18th century the area became prime territory for smugglers illegally importing untaxed luxury goods – largely wines and spirits – from France, and poaching was rife too. Things have calmed down over the centuries and the area

now attracts a very different sort of visitor – the hungry sort, like us.

CHEESE FEAST IN REAL-ALE HEAVEN

The train from London deposited us at Ashurst station, a gentle 3km cycle through countryside to **Hotel TerraVina** (see Where to Stay, right). Owned and run by Master of Wine Gerard Basset and his wife Nina, its wine list offers rare treats from near and far (no need for smuggling these days) and the kitchen turns out satisfying Anglo-French fare such as onion tart with local rosary goat's cheese, or Lymington skate with crevettes, mussels and saffron potatoes.

The next day we cycled off to meet two of the New Forest's star

cheesemakers (see box, below), breaking our journey at a pub beloved of real ale fanciers and chow-hounds, **The Royal Oak** in Fritham (023 8081 2606). Ask anyone in these parts and they'll tell you that this thatch-topped pub is *the* place for a low-key lunch (no food in the evening). It's a real local, where the talk is of ploughing, drilling and seeding, and muddy dogs (and cyclists) are welcomed.

The quiches are homemade and ploughman's lunches feature local Lyburn cheeses (see box, below). There are real ales served straight from the cask, as well as country wines, oak beams and a huge garden overlooking a field full of sheep. Before pedalling back, we

BLESSED ARE THE CHEESEMAKERS: TWO TOP LOCAL PRODUCERS

LYBURN FARMHOUSE CHEESEMAKERS (lyburncheese.co.uk) Mike and Judy Smale began making cheese from their dairy herd 15 years ago. Choosing not to make cheddar – “the whole world makes cheddar” – Mike hit upon the idea of Dutch-style hard cheeses. Now the dairy's cheesemaker, James Brown, makes four main types: lyburn gold, stoney cross, winchester and (my favourite) flavour-packed, 20-month-aged old winchester.

LOOSEHANGER FARMHOUSE CHEESES (loosehangercheeses.com) Ness and Gwyn Williams have been making cheese here since 2002. They started out with a single cow's milk variety, loosehanger original, based on French-style mountain tomme, and now make a range of goat and cow's milk cheeses in their bijou dairy. Their cheeses have won tons of awards. My favourite is old sarum, a creamy textured, full flavoured blue.

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indulged in a couple of halves of ale, which disappeared faster than we did when fleeing the mystery beasts.

AROUND LYNDHURST: PUB GRUB AND BOUTIQUE COMFORTS

Next day we headed deeper into the forest, along quiet trails. We met few other people, but lots of ponies and a trio of mules who (true to type) stubbornly insisted we cycle round them. The trees were full of birdsong and somewhere a woodpecker beat a staccato rhythm.

To give our legs a rest, we stopped for lunch at **The Oak Inn** (oakinnlyndhurst.co.uk) with its milk-churn stools and hop-festooned rafters. Honest grub, such as chicken, ham and leek pie or dressed local crab, is served alongside Fuller's ales.

The village of Lyndhurst is pretty enough, but in summer the narrow high street is a snarling traffic jam. We breathed a sigh of relief to be heading out of town towards the newest foodie mecca in these parts. **Lime Wood** (and its sister **The Pig** in Brockenhurst – see Where to Stay), have majorly raised the area's foodie stakes. To call Lime Wood a hotel and restaurant is like calling Sir Bradley Wiggins a cyclist: true enough but omitting the brilliance. This is a country house hotel with

funk factor, home to restaurant **Hartnett Holder & Co**, where Gordon Ramsay protégée Angela Hartnett and co-chef Luke Holder work Italian-inspired genius on high-quality local fodder.

As we huffed our way sweatily up the gravel path, past the helipad and car park full of top-of-the-range SUVs, we were daunted by the grandeur. We needn't have fretted – staff welcomed us as though we were just back from a country hack.

That evening, the dining room buzzed as carefully coiffed couples enjoyed posh nosh. An overly refreshed man at the next table was laughing at the fact that the most expensive dish on the menu is... goat. “It's local,” assured the waiter. “New Forest goat? I've never seen

a goat in the New Forest – have you?” he turned to ask us. Of course we had (see box, p122). We loved our vitello tonnato – veal in a tuna, caper and lemon sauce – and wild bass with octopus and olives.

BROCKENHURST: WOOD-FIRED PIZZAS, FARM-SHOP HEAVEN AND BEER

If Lime Wood is top of the tree in Lyndhurst, its sibling **The Pig** hogs the limelight in Brockenhurst. We wound our way through more forest to be greeted by woodsmoke emanating from the outdoor pizza

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL TERRAVINA (hotelterravina.co.uk) Friendly service, comfy rooms and an outdoor pool in summer. Doubles from £160 B&B.
THE PIG (thepighotel.com) The 26 bedrooms are country-chic and there are blissful spa treatments. Doubles from £139 room only.
LIME WOOD (limewoodhotel.co.uk) As well as the restaurant, there are gorgeous gardens, a fitness studio and spa with heated outdoor pool. Doubles from £255 room only.

oven. The Pig is the embodiment of all that's trendiest in food right now: it has a smokehouse, kitchen garden, pigs, chickens and quail – and guests can hunt for wild food with forager Garry Eveleigh.

About 80 per cent of the menu items come from within a 25-mile radius. Thinking it rude not to partake of some namesake protein, we feasted on the Bath chap, a huge piece of pork jowl served on the jawbone, teeth and all, with salad leaves fresh from the walled garden.

Next day, we cycled to **Setley Ridge Vineyard & Farm Shop** (setleyridge.co.uk), an emporium of local jam, chocolates, honey, cheese and condiments. We tasted four of the five wines made at the vineyard, including a zippy white bacchus and a rosé pinot noir. Book ahead for tours of the vineyard and winery.

Our final destination, just outside Lymington, was the shiny new »

hungry traveller.

microbrewery **Vibrant Forest** (vibrantforest.co.uk). IT-man turned brewer Kevin Robinson is big on experimentation; we tried his hoppy pale ales, German-style wheat beer and Russian stout at stools in front of a plywood bar (pictured below) for which the word makeshift was surely invented. Self-taught, he's been brewing since 2011, and makes Lime Wood's own-label Pale Ale.

Leaving the forest and its wild beasts behind, we pedalled to the train station to travel home. Hunger pangs urged us to open our panniers, which still held cheese remnants from our tastings. And so the New Forest feeling was eked out a little bit more – but not for long enough... Thanks to *Hampshire Fare*, supporters of local producers, for arranging our visit (hampshirefare.co.uk).



Try this recipe from The Pig

Pork chop with nettle salsa verde, tomato salad and goat's cheese

SERVES 4. HANDS-ON TIME 30 MIN

- 4 large British free-range pork chops (ideally from a rare breed such as Gloucestershire Old Spot)
- 500g zebra or tiger tomatoes (from the Isle of Wight – they have a beautiful, stripy pattern. If you can't find them, use a mix of green and red heritage tomatoes)
- 250g green beans
- 50g rosary goat's cheese (or soft, unrinded goat's cheese)

FOR THE DRESSING

- 2 tbsp Wild Island Bay & Juniper Balsamic Dressing (buy online at wildislandstore.co.uk), or balsamic vinegar
- Good squeeze lemon juice
- 4 tbsp olive oil

FOR THE SALSA VERDE

- 10 nettle tips, blanched, or handful fresh parsley leaves
- 1 tbsp small capers
- Zest 1 lemon
- 100ml rapeseed oil
- Good pinch smoked salt
- ½ bunch fresh marjoram
- ½ bunch fresh basil
- 50g old winchester cheese (or aged gouda or Irish coolea), grated

1. Heat the oven to 180°C/fan160°C/gas 4. Season the chops. Set a griddle pan or frying pan over a high heat and fry the meat until golden brown all over (with good char lines if using a griddle). Put in a roasting tin and cook in the oven for 4 minutes, then remove and leave to rest in a warm place, loosely covered in foil.
 2. Meanwhile, chop the tomatoes, trim the beans and put in a large bowl. In a smaller bowl, whisk the dressing ingredients together, drizzle over the tomatoes and beans, toss, then set aside.
 3. For the salsa verde, pulse the nettles or parsley and capers to a purée in a food processor, then put in a bowl and stir through the lemon zest, rapeseed oil, smoked salt, marjoram and most of the basil. Stir in the cheese, then season to taste.
 4. Divide the salad among 4 plates, then crumble over the goat's cheese. Put a pork chop on each plate, spoon over the salsa verde and sprinkle over the remaining basil. Serve immediately.
- PER SERVING** 587kcal, 43.3g fat (9.9g saturated), 41.3g protein, 7.8g carbs (5.4g sugars), 1.3g salt, 3.5g fibre
- WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE** The ripe, juicy apple and lime flavours of South African chenin blanc are spot on with these zingy flavours. **d**



NEXT MONTH

A food lover's tour of the USA's trend-setting city, Chicago



MEET THE PRODUCER: COBLEY WOOD FARM

This 42-acre farm, with its tiny log cabin-like house, is not the most likely place for a couple of semi-retired school inspectors to end up. But it's where Mike

and Anne Roberts rear their Suffolk and Polled Dorset sheep, Saddleback pigs, countless chickens, ducks and 50 South African Boer goats (pictured) – all free-range. They sell most of their meat through farmers' markets and farm shops, and their goat burger is the bestseller. "People like the taste, and they buy it because it's healthy and lean," says Mike. Any future projects planned? "We want to have a go at making our own bacon next," says Anne.

To visit, book at coblewoodfarm.co.uk