

A former royal hunting ground where ancient lores still rule, Michael Raffael discovers this leafy part of Hampshire and its burgeoning community of passionate food producers, hoteliers and chefs

New Forest

New Forest? Close-cropped pastures, blasted heaths, winding broad-leaf woods, forestry plantations and quaint boroughs. New Foresters? Commoners, incomers dwelling in clustered bungalows – ‘God’s waiting rooms’, rock stars and petro-billionaires, the Baron Montagu of Beaulieu. An echo of Old England or a national (theme) park dusted with the glamour of wild ponies?

Whichever way you look at it – romantically or pragmatically – there’s no doubt that the New Forest is worth preserving. It’s a place of privilege – even for pigs: in autumn, the pannage season, they roam wild for 60 days, gorging on acorns and beechnuts.

About 500 farmers and smallholders – commoners – pay a fee for each animal they graze within the national park. Many laws establishing their rights originated in Norman times, when William the Conqueror created the New Forest. Some arcane entitlements still survive: to gather firewood (estovers), to cut peat (turbarry) and to collect marl (lime-rich clay). A court of verderers sets the by-laws that Agisters – rangers – gleefully enforce.

The New Forest can be dangerous, though, for four-legged creatures. Each week, the *Lymington Times* publishes the Verderers’ Court list of road traffic accidents involving livestock. Its most recent annual figures recorded that two pigs, 12 cattle and eight donkeys died. So did 51 ponies. The statistics pinpoint the tension between horse and horsepower, but smallholders have to risk their animals’ lives.

Farmer Sarah Richards has 23 Gloucester Old Spot-Tamworth pig crosses at large: ‘I’ve lost them and have been out looking for them for the last six days.’ They’ll show up, she knows, when they’re ready to be found. Their eventual fate? Hog roasts that her husband, Roy, takes care of.

‘The Forest,’ Sarah says, ‘is one of those places where everyone knows everyone’s business.’ Smallholders and farmers send their stock to Jody



Scheckter’s Laverstoke Park abattoir. (According to Sarah, ‘They play music to the pigs there and it settles them.’) They give the carcasses to butcher Chris Oakes, of Oakwood Butchers, himself the proud owner of two British Lop sows on the Rare Breed Survival Trust’s endangered-species list. They ride together during the ‘drifts’, the cattle and pony round-ups that echo the Wild West. These allow owners to worm and brand their stock and tails are trimmed to show from which forest area they came. In the evening, these locals meet for a pint at the Royal Oak, Fritham, a converted cob cottage that only serves food at midday and for cash only, in contrast to the many food pubs in the area. Its house beer, from the Hampshire microbrewery Bowman Ales, is mid-amber, smooth and hoppy.

Many artisan food producers inside the national park like to imagine it as the new Ludlow. They argue their case with a catalogue of beekeepers, cheesemakers, jam boilers, juice squeezers, game cullers, chocolate temperers, bakers, fudgers and picklers. A badge, the New Forest Marque, identifies them. It reflects intent rather than a past, regional culinary identity.

Oakwood Butchers, selling beef hung for seven weeks, is a three-year-old business. Winemaker Paul Girling at Setley Ridge Vineyard on the Brockenhurst Road was (and some of the time, still is) a builder. Trevor Smith, a chocolatier in Beaulieu High Street, learned his craft in Paris and was once the owner of a boulangerie-pâtisserie in the Loire Valley.

At their best, these ambitious food pioneers offer scrumptious goodies. Trevor’s tequila slammer truffles are a ‘wow’. Setley Ridge’s rosé – dark rose-petal pink, smelling of strawberries with a redcurrant taste – is an ideal picnic tippie. One-time marine engineer, Jason Holmes and wife Clare of New Forest Goat Dairy, have come from nowhere to create a Gold Medal mould-ripened —>>



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goat's cheese in a reclaimed quarry near Sway. Almost on their doorstep, Gordleton Mill, an elegant restaurant with rooms, bakes the cheese in an organic tomato with a wild mushroom and polenta chip accompaniment.

Chef Luke Matthews at Chewton Glen, New Milton, the Relais & Châteaux hotel that has played a pivotal role in setting restaurant standards, serves it as a salad with roasted beetroot, watercress and walnuts. Champion sommelier Gerard Basset, owner of TerraVina, a boutique inn with a unique focus on wine, worked there before setting up the Hotel du Vin chain. Opened in September 2009, Lime Wood near Lyndhurst used an ex-Chewton general manager as its consultant. Its chef, Alex Aitken, was the first in the region to tap into the rich resources of woodland fungi when he was cooking at Le Poussin in Brockenhurst.

The forest has a long history of providing wild food. On 2 August 1100, Sir Walter Tyrrell, the king's archer, shot and killed William II. The Rufus Stone at Canterton marks this spot. Was it an accident or murder? Historians can't decide, but all agree that he was pursuing a stag. Native red deer are quite rare today, but fallow deer and the smaller roes still abound in the forest. What the monarch wouldn't have seen then were the sika and diminutive muntjac that have since escaped captivity and become naturalised.

Hunting today is a necessary part of conservation in the New Forest and it feeds a regular supply of venison to farm shops, pubs and restaurants. The White Buck, a Fullers-owned pub in Burley, dishes up a simple chargrilled haunch, while Chewton Glen is more ambitious, with the likes of spice-rubbed loin of venison, red wine poached quince, Jerusalem artichoke, pork belly and liquorice jus.

Poor soil explains why arable farming has never flourished here. The two surviving mills provide sufficient flour to supply a few local craft bakers and the tourists who stop by. Owners Sandra and Richard Harte converted workers' cottages at Alderholt Mill into a bed and breakfast; the old grain store is self-catering. They stone-grind enough grain for the bread they serve their house

guests and cream tea customers. Eling Tide Mill, near Totton, which draws its energy from the tidal Southampton water, grinds sufficient flour from Cadland Manor Estate to supply a handful of craft bakers in Southampton. The mill-pond fills on the flood and gradually empties as the tide goes out, turning the blades of the waterwheel that power the ancient mill.

Sarah would like to see another piece of New Forest heritage revived. 'The old way of curing hams,' she says, 'was to prepare a bed of bracken, put the meat on top and then bury it in salt.' Having a go is at the top of her to-do list. If it works, she knows that chefs would be queuing to buy it. A smallholding friend cured two legs of pannage pork and air-dried it for six months. She gave some to Michelin-starred Matthew Tompkinson at the Montagu Arms in Beaulieu and he offered to take as much as she could supply.

He's still waiting. Her friend's second attempt failed. Flies laid eggs on an exposed bone-end and the meat spoiled. It takes courage, skill and persistence to succeed as an artisan. Any half-dextrous cook can stuff a trotter.

The New Forest is more than a playground. Yes, it delivers some of the most cosseted luxury anywhere – its TerraVina wine list and Lime Wood plush – and has its fair share of caravan sites. But there's space too even for creative fudge boilers. Smallholders thrive and it's a haven for rare-breed cattle and pigs, while farmers' markets at Lymington, Beaulieu, Lyndhurst and Sandy Balls attract faithful crowds.

My most memorable moment? Sampling a slice of a soft, as yet un-named Loosehanger cheese. Made from Ayrshire milk, it was a pale butter colour, silky smooth and almost sweet. Gwyn Williams, the cheesemaker – creator of the champion blue Old Sarum – was having trouble with the recipe. Mould called cats' whiskers was growing on the rind but it didn't affect the taste. A work-in-progress, yes, but already very, very good. The same could be said for the rest of the New Forest's food. □

Michael Raffael travelled with The New Forest Tourism Association (01590 689000; thenewforest.co.uk)

Gourmet stops

Alderholt Mill

01425 653130
alderholtmill.co.uk

Beaulieu Chocolate Studio

01590 612279

Chewton Glen Hotel

01425 275341
chewtonglen.com

Lime Wood Hotel

023 8028 7171
limewoodhotel.co.uk

Loosehanger Cheese

01725 514791
cheeseproducer.com

Montagu Arms Hotel

01590 612324
montaguarmshotel.co.uk

The Mill at Gordleton

01590 682219
themillatgordleton.co.uk

New Forest Goat Dairy

01590 670477

Oakwood Butchery

01590 622467

Setley Ridge Vineyard

01590 622246
setleyridgevineyard.co.uk

TerraVina Hotel

023 8029 3784
hotelterravina.co.uk