

MAGICAL SKYE
The spectacular
Cuillin Hills that
soar above
the island



The Isle of Skye has star quality and it has it by the bucketful. On a clear day, the soaring mountains and distant islands dissolving into the glittering, ever-changing sea are magical – you almost can't believe it exists.

Skye's Old Norse name means cloud island, so a clear view isn't guaranteed – the first time I visited was on a day trip as a child. We stepped off the ferry into low cloud and dense drizzle and never even saw the slopes. But the west coast of Scotland is worth the weather. It's much easier to get to since my childhood days – the Skye Crossing, a road bridge joining the island to the mainland, opened in 1995 and the scenery now attracts everyone from filmmakers and helicopter-borne millionaires to backpackers. Some come specifically for the food – and I wanted to find out why.

THE NORTHERN WILDS

Skye is, appropriately, shaped like a 50-mile-long lobster. The right and left 'claws' – Trotternish to the east, and Waternish and Duirinish to the north and west – feel like the fringes of the world, with their crofting (small-scale farming) townships and expansive views. Just south of the centre are the Cuillin Hills and some of the most breathtaking scenery, while the lush, forested south is known as the garden of Skye.

I began my journey in the pretty main town, Portree, on the island's east coast, and spent the first day looping anti-clockwise around Trotternish. It was like driving through the set of an epic film, with waterfalls and skylines at every turn. The feeling continued as I walked among the rocky pinnacles and cliffs of Quiraing and watched dark ravens soar and tumble in the sky, in a daredevil display of courtship aerobatics.

After so much outdoor drama, it was time to go inside the quirky and fascinating Skye Museum of Island Life in Kilmuir (skymuseum.co.uk), set up 50 years ago by a local who >>

THE ISLAND WITH A LOVER'S ALLURE

The Hebridean island of Skye has always had natural beauty in abundance. But now, as food writer Hattie Ellis discovers, its stellar restaurants, cafés and food producers are attracting attention from far and wide. If you've never been, there's never been a better time to make plans



LOCHSIDE SPLENDOUR
Stately Kintloch
Lodge; juicy west
coast scallops with
squash risotto; the
grand dining room



Meet the producers



• Isle of Skye Baking Co

A converted woollen mill on the outskirts of Portree is home to this exceptional bakery and café run by a South African couple, Barry and Liza Hawthorne. Filled rolls, sumptuous shortbreads, oatcakes and homemade cakes, plus a crafts shop and gallery upstairs make this a great place to eat and buy presents.

Open 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, isleofskymbakingco.co.uk



• Sconser Scallops

Father and son David and Ben Oakes sell the best king scallops I've ever eaten. The secret is that the shellfish are twice-dived: collected from the wild, relocated to the best place to fatten up, then dived to order (about £20 for 12 scallops in the shell, ordered in advance, available all year round). sconser-scallops.co.uk

wanted to record the life of his childhood, forebears and not least the island food: the pot dangling over a peat fire on a chain called a 'swee', the fish drying for the winter and fields 'laughing' with corn, as one 18th century visitor wrote.

Before heading back to Portree, I ventured deeper into this glorious landscape on a Wild Walk along the shores of Loch Snizort with expert fisherman Mitchell Partridge, who runs **The Skye Ghillie** (skyeghillie.co.uk), as my guide. There is a right to roam in Scotland, but it helps to be guided and told how the bumps and ditches are part of a landscape that was once full of families before the Highland Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries. As we walked, Mitchell interwove nature with tales of Scotland's fierce, romantic and melancholy history.

Sea eagles, dolphins, seals, basking sharks and otters abound here. We gathered mussels on the shore, the silvery blue of the water reflecting

the ochres of the seaweed on the shore and the bracken on the hills. "People are tired of the tatty consumer society we're in," said Mitchell. "To just step out of it for a day into all this refreshes them and helps them to take less for granted."

STAR CHEFS AND SUPPLIERS

And it's not just Skye's looks that have star quality. The next day I headed to **The Three Chimneys** (threechimneys.co.uk; three-course lunch £37), in Colbost on the shores of Loch Dunvegan. The whitewashed crofter's cottage serves dinner on bare tables, yet people come from all over the world – and last year it won its first Michelin star. Part of the restaurant's charm is the simple but sophisticated cooking, totally in harmony with its surroundings. The produce speaks for itself in dishes such as Scottish seafood platter, or a simple Skye shellfish bree (soup).

The island's best chefs have exceptional local suppliers. I visited one of the most established just a few miles from the Three Chimneys, Bridget Hagmann of **Glendale Salads**. Her land was designated rough grazing when she came here from Germany. Three decades on, it produces around 150 kinds of organic herb and leaf.

Bridget believes in letting plants mature. "Young leaves are nice, but they're a bit boring," she says. "I'm interested in older leaves. They're stronger in flavour and have a better shelf life. They start to flower and get these amazing colours. In old age, the plants get all their beauty out."

The vitality of Glendale's produce sings out from plates around the island, including those at **The Edinbane Inn** (edinbaneinn.co.uk) a great pub in the northwest near Loch Greshornish, with excellent food and traditional music sessions on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Glendale also supplies the renowned Michelin-starred **Kinloch Lodge** in the south of the island (kinloch-lodge.co.uk; see Where to Stay). Kinloch put Skye on the food map when it became

a destination hotel thanks to its owners, food writer Lady Claire Macdonald, a great advocate of Scottish food, and her husband Godfrey, High Chief of Clan Donald. Long-standing chef Marcello Tully is Brazil-born and French-trained. Add to the mix exceptional Scottish produce and you get a beguiling combination in dishes such as Mallaig sea bass with lime and coconut. While he respects Scottish produce, he's not afraid to tweak tradition. Whisper it: he puts coconut in the breakfast porridge – and it's fantastic.

ISLAND HOSPITALITY

Some of Skye's most appealing restaurants are run by couples. On my third day I drove 13 miles down a spectacular single-track road to **Coruisk House** (coruiskhouse.com), near the little port of Elgol, where you can take a boat ride into the remote Loch Coruisk.

Clare Winskill and Iain Roden were both London lawyers led here by a love of food and the west coast of Scotland to set up a restaurant

with three bedrooms. The menu is short but this was the best food I had on Skye, from Clare's bread onwards, through scallops (see Meet the Producers, opposite), venison and seasonal fruit ice creams and desserts, all superbly elegant, with clean and balanced flavours. The couple close for some of the winter and spend their time visiting vineyards. They're building a small but interesting wine list.

Another hospitable and talented couple, Simon Wallwork and Kirsty Faulds, run **Glenview** (glenviewskye.co.uk), a great B&B in Culnacnoc on Trotternish. The place is decorated in a delightful mismatched style and is home to **The Skye Pie Café** (see recipe, p118). They also run regular pop-up restaurant evenings, and on days off, Australian-born Simon forages for dulse (seaweed), elderberries, nettles and more, and skilfully incorporates their wild flavours into his excellent cooking.

THE NATURAL LARDER

I discovered that Skye is full of exceptional people who've come to



live in this beautiful place and make a living through food. Everywhere I went I found great producers who work close to nature. One such couple now make wonderful **salt** (isleofskysesalt.co.uk) using just polytunnels, sunlight and the pure waters of Loch Snizort. At **Orbost Farm** (facebook.com/OrbostFarm), in the northwest, Keith and Rachael Jackson produce excellent beef, pork and lamb from native breeds, as well as venison. They're trying to establish an abattoir on Skye, a vital missing link in the local food chain.

David Urquhart of **Skye Game** (skye-game.co.uk) has been involved in deer management for 25 years and sells his prime venison, taken from the forests and hills of North Skye, to restaurants and consumers.

I fell for Skye, but nowhere this beautiful can be perfect. You may have to contend with midges, busy single-track roads and the weather. I was nearly trapped on the island when the road bridge was closed by high winds. But it would have been a welcome delay. Like any lover, I could hardly bear to leave without knowing when I'd be back; it will never be soon enough.

Hattie Ellie travelled to Skye as a guest of Visit Scotland. To find out more about holidaying in Scotland and about Scotland's Year of Food and Drink 2015, see visitscotland.com/tasteourbest >>

Where to stay

• **Peinmore House** is a handsome manse near Portree, run by Don and Margaret Greer. Doubles from £140 peinmorehouse.co.uk

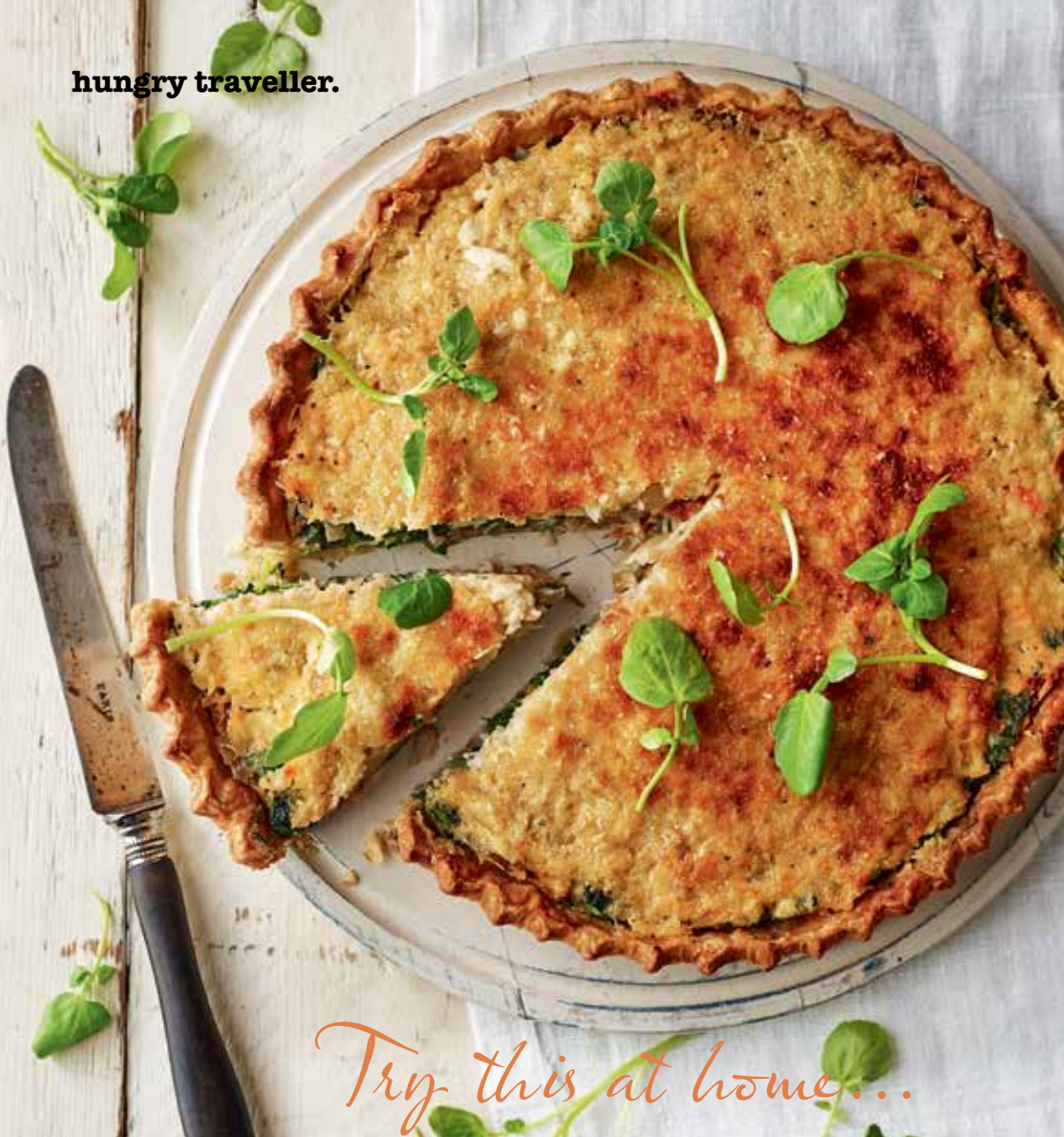
• **Canowindra B&B** Near Peinmore House, smiley couple Georgie and Rick have built a comfortable new B&B.

Doubles from £150 canowindra-skye.co.uk

• **Kinloch Lodge** is a posh pile with smart food and a warm welcome. From £170pp, including five-course dinner. Chef Marcello Tully runs cookery workshops kinloch-lodge.co.uk



SKYE'S STAR QUALITY, FROM TOP LEFT Langoustines and the dining room at The Three Chimneys; red deer at Orbost Farm



Try this at home...

Simon Wallwork's crab, watercress and horseradish tarts

SERVES 8. HANDS-ON TIME 1 HOUR, OVEN TIME 30 MIN, PLUS CHILLING



Wrap the pastry in cling film and keep in the fridge for up to 4 days, or freeze for up to 1 month. Make the tart up to 48 hours in advance. Keep wrapped in the fridge and bring up to room temperature to serve.

SIMON'S TIP This makes quite a lot of pastry but the larger volume makes it easier not to overwork. Freeze leftover pastry or use to top the tart and make a more filling pie.

NEXT MONTH

Iceland and its ultra-cool capital, Reykjavik, is on the menu

- 20g unsalted butter
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2cm horseradish root, finely grated (or 2 tsp grated hot horseradish from a jar)

- 10g plain flour
- 150ml fish stock
- 50ml crème fraîche
- Finely grated zest ½ lemon
- Small pinch cayenne pepper
- 300g watercress
- 150g brown crabmeat
- 300g white crabmeat
- 3 tbsp grated strong cheddar

FOR THE SHORTCRUST PASTRY

- 125g cold unsalted butter, cubed
- 250g plain flour, plus extra to dust
- 10ml white wine vinegar
- 1 free-range egg yolk

1. For the pastry, put the butter and flour in a bowl and rub with your fingers until sandy textured. Gently mix in 75ml cold water, the vinegar, a good pinch of sea salt and the egg yolk using a blunt-edged knife. Don't overwork the pastry; it should be smooth with a slight marbling of

butter. Roll into a disc, wrap in cling film, then chill until needed.

2. Melt the butter in a frying pan and gently fry the onion for 5 minutes, without colouring. Set aside half the onion. Add the grated horseradish to the pan, cook for a minute, then add the flour and cook for 2 minutes or until it turns a pale golden colour.

3. Slowly add the fish stock to the pan, stirring continuously, then boil for about 5 minutes until thickened. Take off the heat and stir in the crème fraîche, lemon zest and cayenne. Taste, season and allow to cool.

4. Heat the oven to 190°C/170°C fan/gas 5. Roll out the pastry on a floured surface to about 3mm thick. Drape the pastry over the rolling pin, then unroll over a 23cm loose-bottomed fluted tart tin. Carefully line the tin with the pastry, making sure it goes into the flutes and edges. Run the rolling pin over the top of the tin to trim off excess pastry (see tip), then prick the base a few times with a fork. Line with baking paper, fill with baking beans, then chill for ½ hour.

5. Put most of the watercress in a colander (reserve a few sprigs to decorate) and pour over a kettle of boiling water to wilt. When cool enough to handle, squeeze to drain, roughly chop, then spread on a board to cool. Sprinkle the onion over.

6. Bake the rested pastry case for 15 minutes, then remove the paper/foil and beans and cook for 5 minutes more until it feels dry and sandy. Let the pastry cool for 5 minutes.

7. Fill the tart in layers: brown meat, watercress/onion (pressed down with the back of a spoon), white crab meat, then the horseradish sauce and finally the cheddar. Bake for 30 minutes or until the pastry is cooked and the top is golden. Add the reserved watercress sprigs and serve with a salad of ripe tomatoes, capers and dill.

PER SERVING 386kcal, 24.1g fat (13.5g saturated), 17.4g protein, 25.4g carbs (1.5g sugars), 0.9g salt, 2.4g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE An Alsace white wine – best is a balanced, slightly appley pinot blanc.