

Crab fish

Guernsey's new food festival offers a tasty escape within easy reach of home, writes **Maria Mellor**

I've got a new passport. It's big, burgundy and full of stamps. But instead of showing how far I've travelled – in fact, I'm still in the British Isles – I get a new stamp with each helping of cheese and wine. And instead of surly immigration officers, I hand my little book over to smiling waiters as I make my way along Guernsey's Grande Fromage Tour.

This is one of many special events at the inaugural edition of The Big Eat Guernsey food festival, which launched in April and is set to take place again in October, offering a twice-annual celebration of Guernsey's cuisine. With its southerly sunshine, the shoulder seasons are already a great time to visit, and the festival enhances that with tours and experiences to help clients eat their way around the island.

SAY CHEESE

An hour-long flight from Gatwick has me landing on the Channel Island before lunch, ready to tuck

in. Guernsey is coming up in the world as a foodie destination, with Chouet Bay restaurant Vraic earning the island's first Michelin star for a decade earlier this year, and four other restaurants listed in the prestigious foodie guide.

Jo Dyer, marketing officer at Visit Guernsey, says the tourist board planned the new festival to "celebrate local produce and the innovation of chefs", as well as a flurry of young locals entering the culinary scene. They range from producers such as Jock and Sasha at the Soil Farm to brewer Dan Bates at Little Big Brew Co.

As someone whose itinerary is dictated by the restaurants I want to visit – with a spot of sightseeing to while away the time between meals – I'm excited for the Grande Fromage Tour through island capital St Peter Port, where 15 restaurants have curated their own cheese and wine pairings, costing £12 per stop. Some places stick to the classics, such as elegant ➤

PICTURE: Rod Edwards/Visit Guernsey/Brian On View 2010

COMING SOON
SEAFOOD
TAKE-AWAY
Feel free to try a
free sample of what's
to come
Compliments of
Bernie & Peter



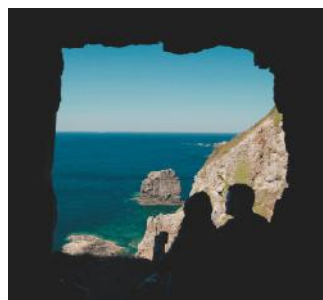
DESTINATIONS

BRITISH ISLES | GUERNSEY



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hook restaurant in St Peter Port; the 'window in the rock' cliff hole; dining experience at The Big Eat Guernsey; Vraic restaurant

PICTURES: Islands of Guernsey Tourism



Rouge, which lets you select one of four wines, each paired with a cheese that brings out the wine's flavour notes. Others combine their signature cuisine with the task at hand, such as Asian-fusion restaurant Fukku, where 'kimcheese' kimchi croquettes are on the menu.

My favourite stop on the self-guided tour is the one where I don't even need to leave my base, The Old Government House Hotel & Spa. Its Brasserie restaurant offers a savoury butternut squash cheesecake that uses the same spices as those in its cleverly chosen drinks pairing: a boulevardier cocktail heady with sweet vermouth.

NEED FOR SEAWEED

One of Guernsey's best-known products is seaweed foraged from its shorelines and made into everything from chilli crisp to hand cream. We head to the waters of Chouet Bay with Tara Brimson, owner of the Wild Guernsey glamping site and a keen forager with in-depth knowledge of the tendrils that turn up on the beach.

She shows us bladderwrack, encouraging a taste of the bulbous, tender tips; and pepper dulse, also known as the 'truffle of the sea'. Our tour is combined with lunch at Vraic, where the sea purslane leaves we'd just seen growing sit on top of a seaweed, crab and hazelnut tart.

Executive chef Nathan Davies says Guernsey seaweed is used in nearly every course, whether obvious, as in the seaweed broth, or in subtle ways, such as for extra seasoning.

"I've always used seaweed but never used it as much as here," says Davies, who has also worked at Michelin-starred restaurants in Wales. "This restaurant only works here in Guernsey."

SAIL TO SARK

There comes a point when I'm so thoroughly stuffed that I need to walk it off, while making the most of the sunshine. Less than an hour by ferry from St Peter Port is an island with no cars so, aside from a tractor that can carry visitors up the first big hill, the only real option for getting

around is by bike or on foot. This is Sark, a designated 'dark sky island' where light is kept to a minimum so you can see the stars.

It's just as enchanting by day, as we discover while trying to find La Seigneurie Gardens – though getting a little lost doesn't matter when it takes only 40 minutes to traverse the island from end to end. Once inside the gardens, we wander through serene scenes: ducklings quacking as they swim in secret ponds, walled gardens filled with fragrant flowers of every colour, plus a quirky 17th-century house where the hereditary Seigneur (lord) of Sark resides. We then take a short hike through the woodlands to the 'window in the rock' – a hole in the cliff that suddenly drops into the sea.

As we amble back to the ferry that will return us to Guernsey, I'm surprised to have found such a wild yet peaceful space within the waters of the British Isles. I came for the food festival but fell in love with the real flavour of the Channel Islands – and leave feeling as if I've travelled a lot farther than I actually have. **TW**

TRIED
&
TESTED

THE OLD GOVERNMENT HOUSE HOTEL



Previously the residence of the governor of Guernsey, the 18th-century Old Government House Hotel & Spa in the heart of St Peter Port is a landmark in itself. The 63-room hotel offers old-world charm and a museum-worthy collection of artefacts detailing the history of the building and the island. As Guernsey's only five-star property, it has a heated outdoor pool along with a spa and gym. It also regularly hosts events, such as murder mystery dinners that see both guests and locals dressing up in period costume. A night's bed and breakfast starts at £270 in a Classic Double Room. redcarnationhotels.com

BOOK IT

Kirker Holidays offers a three-night stay at The Old Government House from £719 per person in October, including breakfast, transfers and flights. kirkerholidays.com

Visit Guernsey has travel trade resources at trade.visitguernsey.com and more information about the food festival in October at thebigatguernsey.com