



tourism
northernireland



Northern
Ireland Year of Food
& Drink 2016

Year of Food & Drink Starter Course

January – April 2016



We
Catch

We
Cook

We
Breed

We
Grow

We
Craft

We
Enjoy

#EnjoyNI16

The logo for Northern Ireland Year of Food & Drink 2016, featuring a stylized map of Northern Ireland and the text 'Northern Ireland Year of Food & Drink 2016'.

Starter course of Year of Food and Drink

The hugely successful starter course of Northern Ireland's Year of Food and Drink has given us just a taste of its possibilities with industry eagerly embracing the initiative designed to place food and drink at the heart of our tourism offering.

From January's Breakfast Month and February's Love Local, to Heritage and Traditions in March and Brewing and Distilling in April, the food and drink industry has risen to the challenge with a host of innovative themes and events designed to place food and drink at the heart of the visitor experience.

With the aim of boosting Northern Ireland's destination reputation, inspire trade and generate spend through increasing visitor satisfaction, Tourism NI has also stepped up to the plate through sponsorship, workshops, training programmes and media visits. We've supported 48 food and drink events with funding of over £300,000 whilst five larger events received support through the International Tourism Events Fund 2016/17.

A series of food revolution workshops in January engaged over 450 businesses and generated more than 100 ideas around new products and experiences and increasing sales. We also delivered a World Host pilot programme 'Sales Powered by Service', and recently awarded certificates to 80 successful participants.

Over 60 international media professionals from GB, France, Germany and the US have been hosted while our Year of Food and Drink Spring Campaign ran in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) on TV, in the press, on radio and digital. The key ROI market has also been targeted with a series of familiarisation trips, consumer events and trade shows all incorporating our Year of Food and Drink messages as well as a nationwide feature on RTÉ's The Late, Late Show.

Local authorities too have shown their support by organising industry events such as the Taste our Best summit in The Guildhall in Derry~Londonderry and the Focus on Food conference in St George's Market in February.

But of course it's the actions and abilities of those on the ground, both this year and in the future, that will really lift – and maintain – our reputation as a food destination. Collaboration and partnership, authenticity and genuine passion, have driven Year of Food and Drink activity and forged the shape of things to come.

From a walled garden in Co Down to an orchard in Co Armagh, the devotion of our local producers has become a common theme. And with one chef climbing mountains to visit goat farms whilst another revives millennia-old food traditions the heart of the Year of Food and Drink is beating in our people.

The coming months will provide more opportunities, to Love Dairy and NI Meat, to Harvest and to Learn. In the meantime we hope you relish these stories of our industry champs.

All the articles included in this brochure can be accessed on the News&Media section of the Tourism NI industry website.

Visit www.tourismni.com

Ingredients

Year of Food and Drink sizzled into action with industry launches and Breakfast Month activity	2
Small is beautiful at city café	4
Local tourism providers join the food revolution	6
Fed and Watered by the food of 'Love Local'	8
Deseine's designs on B&Bs	10
Tour de force in Co Down	12
'Taste and See' training for YoFaD	14
Henderson's returns to market to celebrate Heritage month	15
Blessed are the cheese makers at pre-Christian Iron Age site	16
Ain't nothin' like the eel thing	18
Gardener brings us back to our roots in Heritage and Traditions month	20
Whiskey inspired dish toasted by Tourism NI	22
'My NI' publication targets global media and industry	23
Molly's the yardstick for craft brewing and fine food matching	24
Mac Ivor's Cider family trees	26
Special brew at the Walled City Brewery	28
Whiskey rebirth on the Ards Peninsula at Echlinville Distillery	30
Brewing and distilling crafts demand for new festivals	32

Industry Development publication
PDF version available online at tourismni.com

Disclaimer: Northern Ireland Tourist Board does not endorse the companies referred to in this publication and takes no responsibility for their business operations and services provided.

Published: May 2016

Tourism NI,
Floors 10 -12, Linum Chambers,
Bedford Square, Bedford Street,
Belfast BT2 7ES



Year of Food and Drink sizzled into action with industry launches and Breakfast Month activity



The First and deputy First Ministers voiced their support for the Northern Ireland Year of Food and Drink 2016 at a gala banquet to kick off the year at the Ulster Hall in January.



Arlene Foster MLA and Martin McGuinness MLA spoke of the value of food tourism to the economy and stressed their commitment to supporting the food and drink industry by placing it at the heart of the tourism proposition.

Detailing how food tourism generates over £350million per year to the local economy, First Minister Arlene Foster said she believed there was significant room for further growth.

“As the next 12 months of food and drink experiences unfold, there will be no better time for locals, visitors and global markets alike to enjoy a true taste of Northern Ireland,” she said.

“As we showcase, advertise and enjoy our finest and tastiest produce all through the year, I believe Northern Ireland will perform very well as the destination of choice for food and drink.”

The deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness said the £2.75million initiative would assist everyone involved in the food and drink industry to take our influence to another level.

“It is an important element of our ambition to build and develop a £1billion tourism industry by the end of the decade,” he said.

“We must drive quality, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship which will increase employment capacity in the food and hospitality sectors. I urge everyone with a role to play to do everything they possibly can to support this initiative to develop, enhance and promote the food and drink product at home and abroad.”

The Year of Food and Drink got off to a flying start with Tesco Northern Ireland’s announcement of a £500,000 programme to provide a platform for the local food and drink industry to engage with the initiative.



A launch event on January 7 brought together the great and good of local food and drink at Tesco Northern Ireland’s flagship Extra store at Knocknagoney, and was officiated by Department of Agriculture and Rural Development’s Permanent Secretary, Noel Lavery on behalf of Minister Jonathon Bell.

The event, which saw Tesco customers able to sample an array of products from local iconic brands such as Punjana and Irwins, provided networking opportunities and facilitated discussions between producers and industry bodies.

We mopped up Breakfast Month with Ulster Fry Day which encouraged everyone to pay homage to our iconic breakfast dish.



After Tourism NI asked for posts of Ulster Frys, social media was set alight by entries. Passengers at Dublin’s Connolly Station also shared the passion, enjoying breakfast courtesy of TNI and Co Down’s

Krazi Baker Mark Douglas. As part of the celebration of the signature NI breakfast dish commuters were treated to local potato bread with Kennedy bacon from Co Tyrone.

In the same week Derry City and Strabane District Council’s Year of Food 2016 celebrations ‘took off’ as passengers arriving at City of Derry Airport were served an Ulster Fry full of local produce.



Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council, Cllr Elisha McCallion was at the airport on Monday, 25 January to greet passengers from Ryanair flights from London and Liverpool as they

disembarked from the aircraft, to tell them about the city and district’s participation in Tourism NI’s Year of Food 2016.

The Mayor said she was delighted at Derry City and Strabane District Council’s involvement in the Year of Food and Drink and its commitment to hosting a year of fantastic events such as the LegenDerry Food festival in March, Taste our Best in February, Flavours of the Foyle, Clipper Kitchens, Slow Food Showcase and other planned events for the year.

Jan

Small is beautiful

As the NI Year of Food and Drink 2016 was being launched at a high profile gala banquet on Wednesday, January 13 one small gourmet sandwich shop was proving you don't have to be big to be beautiful to take part in the 12-month long initiative.

On the same day that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister joined leading figures across the food and drink and tourism industries to launch the Year of Food and Drink (YoFaD) programme, Yahi in Great Northern Mall in Belfast was launching its Breakfast Month menu, kick starting a whole year of great food ideas.

Literally going by the book – the Tourism NI Year of Food and Drink toolkit, that is – the gateway-placed premium goods café is a fine example of “the quality, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship in our food and drink industry”, and enthusiastically embraced the programme aimed at putting food and drink at the heart of the tourism experience. In the early days of January the team of just seven had already drawn up a plan for the year ahead aligned with YoFaD's monthly themes which directed not only their regularly updated menus but also their window displays, special offers and social media activity.

“The Year of Food and Drink fits in to what Yahi is all about,” explained marketing coordinator Lesley Crozier. “We have an ever changing and exciting food offering tied in to the YoFaD themes which showcases the best, natural local ingredients and products that we use every day.”



Yahi's product development manager Amanda Stewart and supervisor Andrea Forrester

Yahi's new product development manager Amanda Stewart said that the initiative had also allowed the business to put themselves on a stage with leading names from the industry.

“Northern Ireland has so much to offer in terms of chefs and food. Getting involved is a way of placing ourselves as part of the wider tourism offering but is also a great way to get our brand out there, to be associated not only with good, quality, local produce but also be up there with chefs and producers of the highest calibre.”

Situated as it is in front of both Europa Bus Centre and Great Victoria Street train station, Yahi caters not only for local office workers and shoppers, but also the day trippers and overnighters coming into the city through those main transit points. Tourism NI's latest Visitor Attitude survey highlighted how Belfast, understandably, attracts one of the largest number of domestic day trippers but also how the biggest proportion of their spend, by far, goes on eating and drinking. Furthermore, cafes stand out as the most popular place for visitors to eat, and even more so with day trippers.



“We don't expect people to decide to come to Belfast just to eat at Yahi's,” continued Lesley, “what we do see ourselves as though, is an important bolt on. We saw a lot of extra business when the Christmas market was on at City Hall last year. Customers may be coming for a particular tourist attraction but they still want somewhere nice to eat. It's part of the experience.”

Despite working on a very limited budget for promotions, the team adapted the brand guidelines available on tourismni.com with Lesley herself designing their promotional posters which incorporate the YoFaD logo (see photo). Free social media channels also play a big part in their promotions with menus, sample days and special events all promoted heavily on Twitter and Facebook.

And again they echo core advice from the Tourism NI Year of Food and Drink toolkit which urges businesses to ‘Be bespoke’ and create a unique Year of Food and Drink 2016 menu. Having worked together in adopting the monthly themes Amanda, Lesley and store manager Brian Martin came up with an inventive year-long menu which, for example, offered Irish stout hot pot, corned beef gubbeen and Guinness beef brisket during March's heritage month and a picnic box lunch for customers to get out and explore Landscape and Places during May. The innovative crew even created a theme for April's Brewing and Distilling theme despite not serving alcohol.

“In April we concentrated on coffee, along with a tapas menu, and asked our suppliers to come to an event where we could show them how to make the perfect cup,” said Amanda.

Here again Yahi are in line with the Toolkit advice in using their ideas to showcase local producers.

“As the window displays change every month in line with the themes we approached suppliers and asked them to dress the windows,” explained Amanda who is an avid proponent of the fresh, local produce which adds such value and authenticity to the visitor experience.

“Our ‘Hunter’ Breakfast Month special, for instance, contained Sloan's Dry Cured Bacon from County Antrim, Ballygarvey free range eggs and Dromona mature cheddar cheese on bread provided fresh by local artisan bakers every day,” she said. “We live by our ethos of ‘we hunt and gather’, hunting and gathering the best natural ingredients around us for our premium sandwiches and foods. That of course boosts the local economy but we just love good food and educating people about that too.”

Catch up with Yahi's continuing Year of Food and Drink activity on Twitter @yahicafe #sayyahi #enjoyni16 or their Facebook page.



Local tourism providers join the food revolution



The Northern Ireland Year of Food and Drink 2016 went out on the road in January with a series of regional roadshows aimed at helping local businesses join the food revolution.



The Tourism NI events took place in Enniskillen, Armagh, Belfast and Derry and were attended by a wide range of tourism and hospitality providers, retailers, food service and agri-food specialists as well as stakeholders including local councils.



Attendees at the roadshows shared and discussed the themes of the Year of Food and Drink calendar and examined what visitors to Northern Ireland were currently saying about our food offering.

The events also offered practical guidance on how to use the Year of Food and Drink branding and marketing collateral to promote local produce and provided advice on positioning businesses to maximise the opportunities of collaborative working.

Carolyn Boyd, Tourism NI Industry Development Manager, said: "Food and drink have become increasingly important to tourism as they offer visitors the opportunity to learn about our heritage, landscape and culture and meet our people. It also accounts for a significant proportion of the annual visitor spend."

"Food and drink experiences also give destinations an opportunity to differentiate and celebrate indigenous foods, and certainly in recent times our regions have played a strong part in the food revolution that has been gripping Northern Ireland.

"I was therefore delighted with the turn-out, interest and enthusiasm shown for our roadshows across Northern Ireland, and I believe as a result local providers were well equipped to get their food and drink stories heard and to maximise the opportunities of this major initiative."

TourismNI.com spoke to some of the hundreds of people who attended the series of roadshows aimed at officially introducing Year of Food and Drink 2016 in January.

We joined the conversation at the Stormont Hotel on Friday, 22 January asking some attendees for their thoughts on the day.

Liz Ashton, Peppup Ltd, Newtownards

Liz is the founder/owner of Peppup Ltd which produces roasted red pepper table sauce. She attended the roadshow in Belfast, "to get a flavour of what's going to happen for the next year" and to see how she could be a part of it.

"The USBs (of YOFAD brand guidelines and toolkits) are very handy," said Liz. "I'm sure I will use that to put the logos and that on Facebook and Twitter. Like a lot of people I'm just getting the hang of social media."

As to the overall benefits of the Year of Food and Drink to the tourism industry Liz believed the initiative would help with tourism overall.

"I have friends in the UK, they've never visited and they're all quite 'foodie' so I'm hoping it will create that 'destination' appeal for them," she said.

Pauline McGurk, Dot's Kart, Magherafelt

Pauline is the owner of Dot's Kart mobile BBQ which amongst its many dishes serves eel and as she points out "not many people do street eel". Pauline described the Stormont Hotel roadshow as "a very good informative day" but believed "the focus on the whole food in NI thing needs to move out of Belfast more".

She was in attendance "just to see what everybody was doing and what opportunities were out there." "Everybody's kind of thinking along the same lines," she said, "and with St Patrick's Day and Easter and Mother's Day all happening on top of each other, a lot will be happening."

In terms of the tourism offering and its link with local food and drink, Pauline said, "My thought was of maybe doing something with Lough Neagh with the eels, a Lough Neagh trail perhaps to get people up to that area" but in an apt analogy said at the minute she was 'paddling her own canoe' with the idea.

Elizabeth McBride, Bay Cottage, Antrim

Elizabeth McBride of Bay Cottage B & B on the shores of Lough Neagh spoke of the restrictions on smaller businesses' promotional activities and the difficulties in being events focused.

"The problem with smaller places is that we don't have the volume of people to generate events or have events put on for our guests," she said, however her enthusiasm for food tourism was apparent.

"I believe passionately that local produce is one of the selling points for people visiting Northern Ireland. I try to serve as much local produce as is feasible for breakfast and I also offer the option for evening meals. I think we have wonderful food and we should share it with others."



Fed and Watered by the food of 'Love Local'



General manager of Fed & Watered Christopher Telford with head chef Richard Martin

Food producers and hospitality providers used the month of February to declare their Love for Local, placing local produce and artisan excellence at the heart of the visitor experience.

And what more traditional way could there be of proving your devotion than taking the name of the one you love – or at least incorporating its colloquialisms – into your own title? Such is the loyalty to 'local' of the Fed and Watered restaurant, based in the departure lounge at Belfast International Airport.

The well-known local saying being used as the outlet's name underlines its 'Love Local' ethos explained General Manager, Christopher Telford.

"We are all about fresh, local ingredients and even the name Fed & Watered is a well know Northern Irish saying," he said. "The Love Local month of the Year of Food and Drink is allowing us to showcase that ethos as well as our products and suppliers. All the ingredients in our sandwiches come from local suppliers: our tray bakes from Just Good Food in Portadown; our Mac and cheese is made with Dromona from Dale Farm; our burgers and sausages are all made from Northern Irish meat and we use Ewing's as our fish supplier, sourcing our fish from Irish waters where possible."

As part of the Mount Charles owned restaurant's activity for Breakfast Month, Love Local was also to the fore with their chefs adapting the soda and potato breads with which they make 'Irish pizza'.

"For our Breakfast Month event we came up with an Ulster Fry pizza, an eight-inch soda bread with sausage, bacon and the pizza's tomato sauce serving as the tomato in the fry," said Christopher.

And with local produce well and truly covered in the 'Fed' part of the restaurant's name, the 'Watered' part of the title also gets the sweetheart treatment.

"As well as Johnston's coffee from Lisburn and teas by the Thompson family we are very big into our local drinks suppliers," continued Christopher. "We use Hilden Brewery beers such as Headless Dog and Cathedral Quarter and we've also recently taken on Yardsman lager from East Belfast which has proven very popular. We stock Mac Ivor's cider and use Armagh Cider Company for our fresh apple juice in the morning. We also use Shortcross Gin and Ruby Blue vodka."

But it's not just the ingredients that get the Love Local treatment at Fed & Watered, their cocktail combinations also receiving a NI twist, echoing advice from the Tourism NI Year of Food and Drink toolkit to 'be bespoke' in your offerings.

"We have launched Fed & Watered cocktails such as the Belfast Martini, a play on the French Martini, but one which uses Ruby Blue vodka and blackcurrant liqueur," explained Christopher. "We've played about with local drinks and we've another couple of things planned for Brewery Month in April with airport themed drinks, such as the Aviator cocktail."

But how exactly does this innovation and dedication to 'local' improve the tourist offering, especially from a restaurant at the very end of the tourist line? Fed & Watered is the last

Follow on Facebook at Fed & Watered at Belfast International Airport or on Twitter @FedWateredBIA



eating place before the departure gates and faces a host of challenges due to its location. However, its manager sees that as an opportunity as well as a challenge to be faced.



"As we're beyond the security gates we do have a 'catchment' market," explains Christopher, "but as the last restaurant we have to fight for our custom.

What we aim to be is a restaurant that can cater for the unique demands of an airport but where you can also forget that you are in an airport – the food and drink should be as good as if you were going out to a restaurant in Belfast city centre.

"What we are also committed to is giving the traveller – both international and local – the very best experience right to the last minute. The way I see it is that one or two good restaurants with a Michelin star isn't going to sustain our reputation as a foodie destination, we need all those other levels that go along with it. We all play a part in it. Here at Fed & Watered we aim to keep that high value, high standard right to the last minute, we want you to leave here thinking 'that was a great meal, we've enjoyed our whole time here'."

Christopher and his team also managed to bundle three months of Year of Food and Drink themes up in one neat package in their efforts to cater for travellers' needs, with February's 'Love Local' merging with the 'Heritage and Traditions' of March and April's 'Brewing and Distilling' theme.

"We produced drinks cards detailing the background to our drinks, for example Yardsman beer and the history of the shipping industry here, or the cider tradition in Armagh. Hopefully it's a kind of summary of what the tourist has already experienced in their time here and can also inform the 'tourists' that live here. It's very important to us that the local person travelling from here leaves better informed about our local food and drink so we do our utmost to showcase when, where and how it's made."

Fed & Watered based much of February's 'Love Local' activity around specific events during half term when the airport naturally has more footfall and 'Got Creative' in showcasing local suppliers. Advice to 'Get Social' from the Tourism NI Year of Food and Drink toolkit is followed as a matter of course, said Christopher.

"We use the airport's Twitter and Facebook accounts but we mostly push out our messages through our own social media, including Twitter (@FedwateredBIA), Instagram (fed_watered_international) and Facebook. With Twitter we try and make sure our handles are relevant or that we have something a bit quirky to put out. We also work with suppliers and use their base for social media."

As to the range of support available for Year of Food and Drink activity, Christopher said, "The brand guidelines online have been very useful, we printed off a lot of the hexagons for Ulster Fry Day and made bunting. It is good that these resource are there. Also being kept informed through the e-zine and being able to showcase what we are doing on the Tourism NI website in this article is important, we're always on the lookout for other contacts and leads."

As to the initiative overall Christopher believes that the Year of Food and Drink is enhancing Fed & Watered's existing ethos as well as helping in their aim of "holding the traveller right to the last minute".

"Being able to tie into a bigger initiative is important, you can only do so much yourself but doing something like this enhances what we are already doing for tourists and locals alike. For many tourists this is their 'last taste' of Northern Ireland, at least on this trip, and we want to make sure it's been as good – if not better – than the rest."

Deseine's designs on B&Bs

Around 20 B&B and guesthouse owners from graded accommodation across Northern Ireland joined leading cookbook author and TV presenter Trish Deseine at a Tourism NI lunch on Thursday, 18 February. The event, held at Chris and Davina McGowan's Wine and Brine in Moira, gave a 'European perspective' on local breakfast offerings as part of the overall visitor experience. Trish brought her 25 years of culinary experience in France to bear in her presentation which was then opened to questions from the floor. Ahead of the event TourismNI.com caught up with the Co Antrim woman who 'taught the French to cook' to discuss how B&Bs and guesthouses can use local produce to enhance the visitor experience.

After 25 years living and working in France where she was accredited with bringing French cuisine into the 21st century it's fair enough to say that Trish Deseine knows her onions.

The Northern Irish food writer, who is now based in West Cork, wrote many of her 18 cookbooks whilst living in and around Paris. Such was her impact in what many perceive to be the epicentre of culinary excellence, she was named in French Vogue's list of Top 40 Women of the noughties. The County Antrim native brought that savoir faire to Moira in February when she addressed a selected audience of B&B and guesthouse owners. The 'Lunch with Trish Deseine'



Trish Deseine with Davina and Chris McGowan of Wine and Brine

was part of 2016's Year of Food and Drink and organised by Tourism NI. Having written her award winning books in both French and English Trish is perfectly positioned to apply a European perspective to local food.

"The genuinely 'local' food experience is the next big thing and certainly something visitors from Europe expect, especially when in someone's house," the author, chef and TV presenter told TourismNI.com. "It's a direct way to link in to the local community, it's the perfect storm really. It's easy for B&B owners to flag up where the produce is coming from, presuming of course that they are buying locally which many places will do naturally."

As the food experience in itself becomes ever more important for visitors, the compact geography of the north lends itself to 'loving local', she believes.

"Because Northern Ireland is so small the natural thing is to buy what's around you, especially when you're looking at what is on the breakfast plate. Ireland is one of the forerunners in really good B&Bs, the very concept of which is part of the local offering so it's important to go that little bit further and be more careful about what's on the plate."

In France, Italy and Spain where it's long been fashionable to label products' origins, the ethical value of using local is not only understood, said Trish, but is expected as part of the B&B and guesthouse experience.

"It's where 'pure food' comes to the fore, where we're looking at what's on the plate and how it connects into the local community and how important that experience is to the way they're going to feel for the rest of the day. Our breakfasts generally are excellent but a lot can be done to make them even better really easily."

One of those simple factors is the timing of people's breakfasts, when the coffee arrives for example and whether the coffee is quality. Limiting the options on offer, choosing carefully which items B&B and guesthouse owners make themselves and quantity and portion size are also crucial, she adds.

"Making bread for example is very time intensive so unless you're very good at it make use of your local baker, that ignites relationships with your local producers. And although quantity and portion size is important in Ireland visitors from Europe don't want a huge plate. With food waste such a thorny issue it really breaks people's hearts. Getting it right also helps the economics of the business. If you have a chance the night before, have a chat with your visitor, see exactly what they want. People can be really specific when you give them the chance."



Trish also discussed some simple social media promotional techniques such as Instagram and Twitter before getting into the "nitty gritty of the real art of making great breakfasts".

As to the growing importance of good, local food to the tourism offering the woman who 'taught the French to cook' is unequivocal.

"It's massive, huge, one of our biggest assets. Specifically, it's about how we set people up for the day, in B&Bs it's about the home environment and in other accommodations it's about a friendly and welcoming manner. The breakfast experience can be perfunctory in Europe, we make it into a bit of an occasion and that can allow accommodation owners to tap in to what good food means all round."

And she was no less enthusiastic about the Year of Food and Drink initiative in general.

"It's a fantastic idea, a brilliant idea, to have the brand, the slogan and the energy. It's giving us the tools needed to federate people. Given how easy it is now to communicate ideas, to give impressions of events, food is a wonderful image that can be shared all over the country and the industry. It's allowing us to catch people's imaginations, to get people together to share stuff and really that's what food is all about."

Feb

Tour de force

A new tour of County Down is capturing the very essence of the Year of Food and Drink by placing local produce and producers at the heart of the visitor experience.

NI Food Tours, which was in its final test stages during Love Local month of February, is the brainchild of Tracey Jeffery, a qualified teacher, trainer and patissier. Passionate about local produce and the landscapes of County Down, Tracey previously studied for a French degree in France and went on to work in a patisserie. After bringing that expertise back home she became a producer of macarons and fine patisserie and whilst building that business around her home in Killinchy unearthed her latest idea.

“When I took my produce to market I was visiting local farmers’ markets and events and came to realise very quickly that we have amazing producers,” she said. “In this part of north County Down we also have the highest concentration of award-winning restaurants and I just thought ‘wouldn’t it be amazing for people to be taken on a journey around all of these fantastic things? To be able to hear their story and connect with them on that level, to eat in our fabulous restaurants and sample our local produce? It’s about trying to offer people a very different but authentic experience.”

Crucial to her idea is the beauty of the surrounding landscape, through the famous drumlins of the county to the nearby sea and lough shores.



Tracey Jeffery of NI Food Tours

“I am combining the stunning scenery of the 115 miles of coastline of Strangford Lough and I’m covering some of St Patrick’s Trail in what will be comfortable coach tours. We won’t be out walking but will be driven from place to place in among the drumlins which provide some of the most beautiful scenery in the country.”

Tracey initially plans to offer three tours, one down either side of the lough and a Chocolate Ecstasy tour, the first of which took place in March. That ‘light-hearted’ tour of Down’s ‘amazing chocolatiers’, is layered with visits to restaurants with signature chocolate dishes as well as sessions in chocolate workshops.

The fishing tradition of the area provides a natural focus for Tracey’s other tours with visits to Kilkeel and Annalong part of the ‘lough’ itineraries.

“We’ll look at the smoking and curing traditions which will be explained by fisherman and local experts down around the harbours in our local fishing villages. They’ll not only be showing us skills such as shucking oysters but will be giving us their stories and letting us really connect with the communities of that area.”

A higher end offering is also in the offing with a lunch with landed gentry on the menu.

See website at nifoodtours.com Facebook NI Food Tours and Twitter @FabFoodieTours



“Yes, I’m looking at an Edwardian dining experience, a lunch with Lord and Lady Dunleath and a tour of Ballywalter House in what will be a slightly more expensive tour. I’m trying to focus on the best of County Down, whatever that may be as I’m very passionate about it and all we have to offer.”

What the seasons have to offer will also be an influencing factor with the cyclical nature of local produce blended into the tours.

“We will be visiting an award winning cider maker who, during the colder months for example, will be giving us mulled cider but during the summer we’ll go into his orchard and have our chilled cider there. At other times of the year that visit won’t be included at all because as a producer he won’t have enough happening so the itineraries will adapt to the seasons.”

As to her target audiences Tracey is looking at a mix of clients: home and overseas tourists as well as corporate and conference visitors. The new Waterfront Hall will, she hopes, provide an opportunity to spread the word about County Down and widen the overall tourism perspective.

“A lot is heard about Causeway Coast and Glens, a lot is heard about Titanic and I just think there is lots more to shout about and which can be fully enjoyed through our food and drink. I am shouting about the local here and want local people to come and see too, what this part of County Down has to offer, maybe as part of their weekend. During the week it would be more conference visitors and corporates who are already here, for team building days and corporate days out and I’m busy researching those markets.”

Many of the market segments as outlined in the Northern Ireland Tourism toolkit would seem to fit the range of Tracey’s potential clients, from the ‘Time Together’ visitors to the ‘Mature Cosmopolitans’, the ‘Culturally Curious’ and ‘Great Escapers’. For Tracey however it’s more straightforward: “It’s not specifically for people ‘with an interest’ in food,” she explains, “just people who like food and, of course, drink which is just as important here.”

As to capturing the essence of the Year of Food and Drink, she says, “It just so happens that I’m launching this in the Year of Food and Drink and I’m hoping that helps but overall it is fantastic that our local produce is being properly recognised as an ever important part of the tourism experience.”



Feb

Mar

Taste and See

TNI puts its money where its mouth is with 'taste and see' training programmes.

Tourism NI literally put its money where its mouth is by hosting 'taste and see' training programmes for the hospitality industry back in February and March.

The WorldHost 'Sales Powered by Service' programme was tailored specifically for the Year of Food and Drink and aimed to boost customer service and sales by enhancing knowledge of our local produce.

Offered free for hospitality providers as well as producers, the half day training sessions took place in Derry, Armagh, Belfast and Strangford. The sessions took the form of presentations on YoFaD activity and opportunities and also included 'Taste Experiences' to bring the learning to life. Coupled with amazing menus drawn up by the hosting venues, the 'Taste Experience' was a central element of the specifically targeted training.

"The menus and food and drink samples were prepared from entirely locally sourced produce," explained Tourism NI project manager and industry development officer Louise McKinstry.

"This experiential training allows our hospitality providers to talk about local produce confidently because they have experienced it themselves and can talk about where it came from. With Tourism NI focussing on the importance of good local food as part of the visitor experience, it's a case of 'don't do as we say, do as we do' and that's why we provided such a premium programme."



The sessions were delivered by WorldHost master trainer Anna McColgan having been drawn up in partnership with Tourism NI and People 1st, the sector skills council responsible for tourism, hospitality and leisure as well as passenger transport and retail. The new addition to WorldHost's suite of training programmes took its tried and tested customer skills programme and shaped it to YoFaD needs, that is the needs of the hospitality and tourism industry.

"We want to ensure that we are addressing the skills and knowledge gaps within the industry," explained Louise. "Customer service has been identified as one of the key skills gaps within the industry and this was designed to address that. However, we're very aware that addressing that skills gap needs to be reflected in the bottom line. That is why we are delivering 'customer service that sells', training that will impact revenue and see tangible results for business."

"We are building in the knowledge of our local products because we want people to be passionate about it," continued Louise. "We also want to create a legacy with this programme which we have developed in partnership with Food NI and People 1st and promoted in conjunction with local authorities. The longer term aim would be to build on its success and to continue our partnership with local authorities to roll it out on a continuing basis."

Also in February, Tourism NI launched a larder full of ambient dressings and branded items to complement the downloadable Year of Food and Drink brand guidelines and assets which had already been made available on our site (tourismni.com). From bunting to banners, sail flags to wooden spoons, the branded items were made available to buy for those who wished to incorporate the brand into their events and activity.

Henderson's returns to market to celebrate Heritage month

A leading wholesaler whose business grew from his grandfather's stall over a century ago went back to market to celebrate his roots as part of March's Heritage and Traditions month.

Chairman of the Henderson Group John Agnew is the grandson of John Henderson, the founder of Henderson Wholesale, a company owned by the Group. John Henderson started selling butter, cheese and eggs from his market stall on Royal Avenue in 1897 before moving to the traditional covered markets of St George's a few years later. It was to the iconic market that his grandson returned on Friday, 25 March to honour his grandfather's legacy and where chef Paula McIntyre helped him cook up some nostalgia. John Agnew recreated his grandfather's stall, from which he sold the products he had sourced from local dairy farmers. Almost 120 years later, Henderson Wholesale still prides itself on sourcing fresh, local produce from farmers, growers and suppliers on the island of Ireland, primarily in Northern Ireland.

Returning to the spot where his grandfather had early success with the business was reflective for Mr Agnew, as he looked back at the heritage of the company as a whole.

"John Henderson was my mother's father, I am named after him and am proud to continue to be involved in the business through my role as Group Chairman.

"Henderson's heritage is never forgotten, nor taken for granted. We are a local company that will always support local workers, farmers, suppliers and producers, and that will continue into our future legacy. Heritage is an important part of Northern Ireland, and I'm delighted to be able to share ours during Northern Ireland's dedicated Year of Food & Drink."

To celebrate Henderson's return to St George's Market, local chef and SPAR brand ambassador Paula McIntyre cooked up samples with Mr Agnew for market goers to enjoy. As part of the culinary trip down memory lane Paula used the same produce John Henderson sold during his market days; butter, cheese and eggs, amongst the many other products the company offers its retailers and customers today.

James St South Cookery School

Some of NI's finest chefs and food producers who use methods and recipes passed down through generations were invited to talk about their history and culinary success at a Tourism NI event as part of Heritage and Traditions month.

The special event at James Street South Cookery School featured some of the country's finest brands whilst head chef of James Street South David Gillmore gave a cookery demonstration on how to make Belfast Black Wheaten and Seafood Fricassee.

Also celebrating March's theme was Jason Hamilton from Carnbrooke Meats, Bernard Sloan from Whitewater Brewery, Tourism NI Board Member Michele Shirlow, Will Abernethy from Abernethy Butter and Lindsay Skinner from Punjana.



Blessed are the cheese makers at pre-Christian Iron Age site

Follow @NavanCentreFort on Twitter or on Facebook at Navan Centre & Fort or see website at www.armagh.co.uk/navan-centre-fort



March's theme of Heritage and Traditions could not have been marked anywhere more appropriate than Armagh's Navan Fort, a pre-Christian site with almost a millennia of history.

The Fort is a monument to Iron Age man and one of the most significant of ancient Ireland. Its associated Visitors Centre – which operates under the auspices of Armagh Banbridge Craigavon Council - places innovative and imaginative events at the heart of its activities. And, as it geared up for the start of its main tourist season at Easter, the centre had placed the Year of Food and Drink at the heart of its planning.

Marketing officer Ghilian Campbell told TourismNI.com how the centre 'likes to keep things fresh all the time' and how the Year of Food and Drink was helping them to do that.

"We're been very mindful when we've been planning this year's events of the Year of Food and Drink and how our planning fits in to the council's wider strategy. It is something that we will also be looking to grow, for food and drink to be a stronger element in the future, that we don't just do it for this year and then forget about its importance. As a centre overall we buy local as much as we can, particularly in sourcing our food to support our local businesses."

One small example of the centre's innovation in incorporating food and drink into an authentic Navan experience was on show at a recent celebration event for the borough's new 'cultural cheerleaders', as Ghilian explained.

"We hosted the Armagh Ambassadors, who have been recruited to promote the city, and thought 'what can we do different to make the venue stand out'. So as part of our welcome breakfast we provided nettle scones, the nettle having been foraged from around the local area – just as it would have been in the original site."

Of course keeping true to the food traditions of the time is much easier when you have the expertise of your very own Living History Department providing guidance, not only on relevant dishes but on the cooking methods used. These include outdoor ovens for baking and fulacht fia - ancient field kitchens – for meat.

"Obviously there's a point where you have to draw the line," laughs Ghilian, "outdoor ovens for example aren't going to cut it with hygiene and safety, but our Living History experts are excellent in terms of the skills we should be showcasing at events in our Iron Age dwelling and the food that would have been eaten."



The centre's Iron Age dwelling is populated by period characters who recreate Celtic life in dramatized demonstrations but who also allow visitors to get involved. This commitment to experiential tourism encourages visitors, for example, to weave their own willow for building fences and is a concept being extended throughout the Year of Food and Drink.

"Our characters show how cheese would have been made, how the bread was baked and they talk about their hunting and gathering and how they lived off the land," explains Ghilian. "As part of the Year of Food and Drink we have widened that element so in May and June for example our tour groups will be shown, and then invited, to make a honey bread that would have been made in Celtic times. We will also be getting them involved with the construction of a traditional cobb oven, mixing the muck and straw needed to build the oven which will actually be used by our characters."



The growing movement towards 'wellness tourism' has also been adopted by the Centre with a Celtic Mindfulness weekend held in February. Here too, the Year of Food and Drink exerted its influence.

"With an event such as this where attendees are cleansing their inner being through ancient meditation and healing techniques we can't then serve up processed foods full of preservatives," says Ghilian. "So we used salads, organic meat, seeds and wheat. Natural foods from the time and the area."

This alignment of body and soul extends to alignment of the calendar with events at the Centre timed with the Celtic calendar, from the Spring celebrations of Bealtaine to August's harvest festival, Lughnasa.

"The Lughnasa festival celebrated a plentiful harvest with the burning of a sacrifice inside a massive Wicker Man and we do that – minus the sacrifice of course – here at the Centre," said Ghilian. "Before that in June we will host a Celtic Midsummer Murder where King Conor invites you to a summer solstice dinner at which there has been a murder. The food will be of the time and of the summer season."

A variety of visitor markets are of course targeted by the Centre with their Easter celebrations on Old McDonald's Farm aimed at young families and a series of educational 'Ology' events including Ecology and Archaeology Days. These are carried out in collaboration with other bodies, such as the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre who recently provided expertise on the fauna and flora around the site.



"Kids can come in and see a fox, or stroke a ferret while walking around an area in which these animals live," added Ghilian. "A visit to Navan is an experience in itself but we strive to build in as many other experiences as we can while our visitors are here."

Mar

Ain't nothin' like the eel thing

Lough Neagh food heritage supporting commerce and tourism.

While the notions of heritage and tradition evoke a sense of belonging, value and pride they also bring a heavy responsibility for those entrusted with their rich legacies. Such a responsibility is being borne along the shores of Lough Neagh in Toome where the area's millennia old tradition of eel fishing now centres around the largest eelery in Europe. Sited a stone's throw away is the White River House Hotel where head chef and director Michael Lennon is in no doubt of the obligation.



"You can't be in Toome and not serve eel and there's only one way to do it and that's the right way."

The Bellaghy native put eels on the menu on taking over the lease of the hotel two years ago. With the graphic design talents of his partner Henry Doherty the pair have literally put local food on the map (see image on opposite page). Making use of Tourism NI's Year of Food and Drink online branding and logos, Henry creates innovative and eye-catching materials to complement Michael's Lough Neagh creations. They believe that respect for their food heritage is a must for future progression.

"All around this lough there's a tradition of cooking eels that's been handed down the generations," explains Michael, "from the fishermen to their sons and daughters to the lough shore people who now don't fish but still cook them at home. It can be nerve wracking because there's a



Fishermen on Lough Neagh

technique and because if you were to serve an eel round here that wasn't cooked right you'd definitely be chased out of the town."

Michael has so far escaped that ignominy since he and fellow director Henry took over in April 2014. But theirs hasn't been a move to 'reintroduce' eels to the White River House restaurant menu, more an extension of the eel tradition.

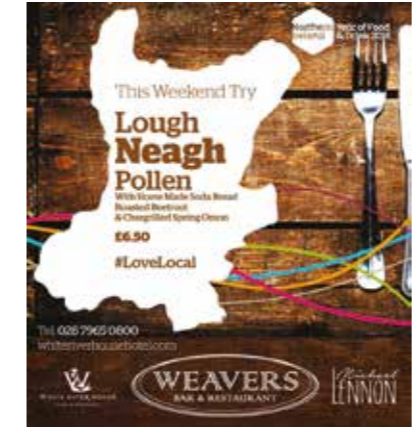
"You wouldn't have seen it at all on menus as it would have been cooked more in homes around the lough because that's what people would have lived on," he says. "There'd have been eel suppers around the place where people would have gathered to eat them so that's something we're also doing."

One of those eel suppers took place at the hotel on Saturday, 19 March as part of the Year of Food and Drink's Heritage & Traditions month. Combining the eels with another iconic dish, the 'Irish Stew and Eel Supper Night' included traditionally fried Lough Neagh eels served with homemade breads and preserves. The re-emergence of the eel supper, however, has not been a random occurrence, with torchbearers such as Michael working collaboratively to revive the tradition. Opening up the actual fishing practice has also proved hugely successful, raising awareness of the eel heritage and creating events around its industry.

"We have built up a very good relationship with the fishery who opened their doors to the public for the first time ever the year that we took over here. The open day was a huge success which was repeated again last year as part of the River to Lough Festival. Over 5000 people took part and I

cooked the eels for a supper. We got through ten stone of eels – which is a lot of eels – and were serving a good percentage of people who had never tasted it before."

The opening up of the fishery and the subsequent growth of the River to Lough Festival could only come about through successful partnerships, a crucial message of the Year of Food and Drink. The collaborative approach of the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative, Lough Neagh Partnership, Mid Ulster District Council and DARD's NI Regional Food Programme, as well as Tourism NI, has not only allowed local business and community to reengage with their food heritage but has introduced it to a new generation. It has also helped to open up the lough's wider food provenance. Whilst eel may be the best known of Lough Neagh's fish to the extent that it became the north's first ever protected geographical foodstuff, pollen, dollaghan, trout and perch are also amongst its bounties.



"Pollen is a lovely fish but wouldn't be seen at all on menus," says Michael. "We put it on here as part of Love Local month, which gave us a chance to make it a talking point. The reaction has been excellent. People know it's coming out of the lough right at our doorstep and it's been a chance to raise awareness of this fish which, for me, is far better than seabass."

A lack of awareness of the lough's foodstuffs has historically been a problem but one that can be addressed through continuing partnerships, he believes.

"The Year of Food won't do it itself, it's people like us, the community and the fishery, all working together which will bring that about. There's been a re-emergence of local food without a doubt and people are beginning to realise what we have here. Why would you import from Thailand and the like, when you've this lovely fish right here?"

A concentrated focus on the lough's food heritage has also opened up opportunities. The idea of food trails and tying in with other attractions are currently being developed by community associations, businesses and local authorities.

"Say there's a half day looking at the very rich food heritage and traditions of this area, such as the eels, the fishery and the fishermen," said Michael, **"but across the road is the Toome canal where the Game of Thrones was recently filmed and Moneyglass castle out the road has also been in it. We're five miles from the new Seamus Heaney centre and just five minutes from The Forge at Hillhead, made famous by Heaney who, of course wrote often about the eels."**

"We'll be using the Year of Food and Drink to talk about all these things and to look at the opportunities. Funding is an issue, as it always is, but the conversations are starting. For me at the minute though it's great to be able to use ingredients on our doorstep, from around Lough Neagh and its surrounding lands. The year of Food & Drink is giving us a great platform to showcase our produce and to be proud of it."

Find the White River House Hotel on Facebook at [facebook.com/whiteriverhousehotel](https://www.facebook.com/whiteriverhousehotel), on Twitter @WhiteRiverHotel or view their website at www.whiteriverhousehotel.com

Gardener brings us back to our roots in Heritage and Traditions month

With the Year of Food and Drink concentrating attentions on Northern Ireland's future as a food tourism destination, one man has literally gone back to its roots to recapture the culinary past in support of that progression.

David Love Cameron is a gardener and former postman from Whiteabbey whose late blooming love for horticulture has seen him revive an almost lost heritage pea and a Victorian walled garden.



His is a story that grew from a passion for gardening after he dug up his front lawn to "give it a try" and is now intertwined with the food heritage of the land he cultivates. The journey, which seen him spend a year helping to develop a new heritage garden at Raymond Blanc's two Michelin starred restaurant in England, has led to his produce now being served – and sometimes tended - by the city's top chefs.

Acting on his firm belief that fresh, seasonal produce would be in demand amongst Belfast's top end restaurants David set to work last year transforming The Walled Garden at Helen's Bay into a productive market garden. Bolstered by his experience in Blanc's prestigious Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons

and his passion for organic growing and community gardening, he conducted some market research and the results, he says, were "amazing".

"All of the restaurants I contacted agreed there was a dire need for fresh, seasonal vegetables in the Belfast area. Incredible as it may seem but some were ordering from companies who were sourcing ingredients from France and they just weren't getting the freshness and flavour they were craving. When you harvest something like a carrot the sugars immediately start to break down into starch so vegetables that have been out for up to a week are not going to taste anything like those I can dig up and deliver to a restaurant in the space of an afternoon."

Unsurprisingly it was high quality venues such as James Street South and The Merchant who immediately bought in to David's project, sharing as they do, his dedication to organic, local and seasonal food. That shared vision now sees chefs from The Merchant working in the garden every week, a cross-training exercise in which David himself previously participated.

"It was absolutely invaluable for me to spend time with the chefs in the kitchens at Le Manoir and they were encouraged to come down into the garden as well. It increases all staff's awareness of how the produce comes about and a wider appreciation for freshness, seasonality and a link to local. It also helps us build on the two-way relationship between us the producer and chefs and proprietors who are passionate about local, seasonal food. It is great for us to be able to say we are working with the best restaurants and great for them to be able to say they are using the freshest, organic produce grown just ten minutes out of Belfast."

Visit facebook.com/thewalledgardenathelensbay or follow on Twitter @WalledGardenHB or David on @gardeneraceae



With one of the purposes of the Year of Food and Drink to develop this 'link to local' in order to tell the stories of the north's unique heritage and culture, David agrees that the narrative is crucial and, with most small scale producers, is also unique and original. His own story is a case in point going, as he did, from a tentative gardener to a local, organic and heritage seed champion whose work as part of his scholarship with Raymond Blanc, has brought him full circle back to the land he now sows.

"When I entered the [Le Manoir] competition I was asked to identify six or seven seeds that would have been grown in the local area around the start of World War 1 which is a significant time as it marks the decline of the kitchen garden in the old country house," says David. "It was then I came across the Carruther's Purple Potted, a shelling pea that would have been grown in some of these old gardens in County Down so probably in the one that I am working in now."

Tracking down the seed itself proved more problematic. Heritage or heirloom seeds are, by their very definition hard to come by, having been lost or overlooked through the generations. However, after an appeal on Radio Ulster's Gardeners Corner one octogenarian gardener who had just hung up his secateurs, came forward with a packet, kept in a shoebox on top of a wardrobe. The Carruther's Purple Potted went on to pass Blanc's blind taste test for inclusion in his menus and, after being sent home with Prince Charles after a Royal visit to Le Manoir are also being grown at Highgrove.

The re-emergence of traditional produce is, says David, largely down to the work of the charity, Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library which aims to conserve vegetable varieties. As to the continuing onus on food provenance, a key theme of Year of Food and Drink, David is in no doubt as to its origins.

"I can say with a fair degree of certainty that it comes from Raymond Blanc himself who, when he came to the UK in the '80s, found a dire food culture where people weren't using seasonal produce or locally grown and he set about changing that completely. He bought Le Manoir and started to develop the garden there and now has this iconic kitchen garden and there's hardly a chef worth his salt who wouldn't want the same."

And while David acknowledges that terms such as 'localism' and 'seasonality' are the buzz words du jour, he can't see a return to those more unenlightened days.

"Like the importance of our food heritage I really think they are here to stay as principles. Once you've got that freshness you're never going to want to go back. Small scale suppliers like myself, have proven more than able at plugging the gap in the market, not everyone can have their own market garden no matter how much they'd like to. And there is a growing network of artisan and small scale producers who are supporting each other, building a momentum and starting to create a local food web."

Within that growing momentum is opportunity and potential, he adds, not only for suppliers but for his Walled Garden as well.

"There's a long way to go and there's room for other producers and growers but collaboration is essential as is supporting each other financially by buying each other's products."

"Also for ourselves diversification will be important and we'll be looking at opening up the garden for visitors so we can tell our story there too. The garden was once owned by shipbuilders which we could develop thematically but we also want to be able to sell our knowledge, develop experiential learning and tie in with the area's heritage. We want to develop not only the narrative but also the project and I'm chomping at the bit to get people down here."



Whiskey inspired dish toasted by Tourism NI

A culinary creation inspired by the aromas of a ten-year-old malt whiskey was toasted by Tourism NI in March as it scooped the organisation's Year of Food Award at the IFEX hospitality conference.

The special award to mark Tourism NI's Year of Food and Drink 2016 was won by Darran Benham of Sodexo Ireland and the Executive Head Chef at Bushmills Distillery.

Inspired by the world famous distillery's ten-year-old single malt whiskey, Darren's menu consisted of honey and whiskey glazed Antrim venison loin served on a pearl barley and mixed herb risotto with vanilla pickled beetroot, baby veg and a milk chocolate jus. The two-dish competition also included Darran's black pudding quails egg Scotch egg, his menu incorporating a varied range of local produce.



The 41-year-old chef, who has previously won the RAF Chef of the Year accolade and has recently been a finalist in the National Chef of the Year competition, said he was delighted

to win the award which was sponsored by Tourism NI as part of the Salon Culinaire event. Salon Culinaire at IFEX is Ireland's largest and most prestigious chef competition and has previously been won by local luminaries such as Michael Deane, Chris Bell and Roisin Gavin.

As Executive Head Chef at Bushmills Darran said the Tourism NI sponsored award had seemed the perfect fit for him in the Chef Skills strand of the competition as well as an opportunity to complement the craft behind Bushmills' food and drink offering.

"Bushmills Distillery is such a big tourism attraction and is embracing the Year of Food and Drink and its monthly themes with a menu of whiskey inspired dishes," he said. "One of Bushmills strengths is handcrafted, small quality batches and it's the same with the food we have been preparing at the distillery."



'My NI' publication targets global media and industry

A 150-page publication highlighting unique stories around Northern Ireland's food and drink was produced by Tourism NI and launched to industry in April.

The 'My NI Year of Food & Drink 2016' publication is targeted at a global media and industry audience and features a host of stand-out stories on a range of produce and producers.

Compiled by the Tourism NI Campaigns Team the publication also features examples of accommodation which uses the finest locally sourced food and drink. Highlighting examples of food related stories that inspire and entertain, the 6000 publications are being distributed primarily to international and domestic media as well as to industry members, Tourism Ireland's 26 market offices worldwide and Invest NI.



Joanne Taylor, who was part of the team who produced the publication, said the overseas market was the primary target for the book and explained how content was chosen. From potato bread to artisan cheese, craft beers to sweet Fifteens, the book delves in to food and drink culture and heritage, its associated landscapes and people.



"The overseas market is one we're primarily trying to get to so the idea was 'wouldn't it be a fantastic thing to give to international food journalists; quirky stories which highlight the breadth of our food offering and the contact details of the person or producers showcased'.

"We spoke to a range of stakeholders, such as Food NI, the Ulster Artisan Producers Group and those who organise our media visits, to gauge what type of things should be included in the publication. Collaborations, especially of artisan producers and indigenous foods, have created some unique stories as well as award winning products which we have also highlighted. In 2015 Northern Ireland won 70 Great Taste Awards, the largest number for any single region and we have highlighted those award winning entries with Great Taste logos."

Following on from a generic 'My NI' series the booklet hones in on five sectors pertinent to the Year of Food and Drink and provides contact details for each of those featured to facilitate follow-up features by international and domestic media. The sections cover Indigenous Food, Local Artisan Producers, Delectable Drink, Sweets and Snacks and Accommodation.



Molly's the yardstick for craft brewing and fine food matching

Toasting Hilden Brewery as a pioneer of the north's resurgent brewing and distilling sector is a much deserved salute given the Lisburn-based company's status as the oldest independent brewery in Ireland.

Founded by Ann and Seamus Scullion back in 1981 the brewery is committed to traditional processes in hand crafting its range of beers. Where it has also led the way however is with its associated restaurants, which marry the best of local brewing with the best of local cuisine. The Tap Room based at the brewery and the Botanic-based Molly's Yard offer 'superior but unpretentious, modern Irish cuisine' which complement Hilden's full flavoured brews.

That description could also be said to sum up the vision of Molly's head chef Ciaran Steele whose philosophy, although straightforward, is built on exceptional quality. Having been in the kitchen at Molly's Yard since a month after it opened a decade ago, the Belfast man and the Hilden team share a core belief.

"Like our own craft beers from Hilden and the cider, gin and whiskey we stock, we have always been committed to the small batch, high quality stuff," says Ciaran.

"I try to keep our food as Irish as possible, we've such great produce, why wouldn't you. We've the greatest lamb in the world, the best meat and the best chicken, and on top of all that we're surrounded by water.



Head chef at Molly's Yard Ciaran Steele

"In terms of using local produce James (Skeffington) our general manager is always researching and networking and if he comes across something of interest he'll come back and say to me. I'll go out and meet the farmers, the cheesemakers and the vegetable growers, we'll get them in with the samples and if it's good we'll take it on."

These relationships with local producers who share their passion and commitment has proven extremely fruitful, and not surprisingly says Ciaran.

"Nine times out of ten when you go to somebody who believes that much in what they're doing the produce is unbelievable. We use Young Buck cheese which is brilliant and it's the same thing with the fish man. Keenan's are at the harbour in Killeel waiting for the boats in the middle of the night, it's that fresh when it gets to me the stuff is still breathing."

And Ciaran is no less enthusiastic about another recent discovery which he believes will become a staple on menus everywhere within a short period of time.

"Goat. Raised in the hills above Belfast. It should be promoted by Muhammad Ali, G.O.A.T, Greatest Of All Time. It's the most sustainable meat in the world and the most eaten. This is kid goat that is slaughtered at eight months so it's not a strong flavour, it's lean, it's good for you and it's phenomenal. I have goat herders pie on the menu, goat loin, roasted shoulder of goat and goat carpaccio and it's phenomenal."

The move towards more sustainable meats is part of a wider ethical food debate and is supported by the move back to local produce and towards more adventurous tastes. The transformation in recent years is "like night and day" says Ciaran who attributes the food 'revolution' to a combination of factors.

"Ten years ago when I first started all you could sell was chicken, salmon and well done steaks. Big name chefs have helped to change that, like Raymond Blanc and others from Europe, and there's a generational difference that we would see in the restaurant every day.

"But as well as that people have realised what we have here and I can't see why that wouldn't continue. We can be a foodie destination, we have all the produce on our doorsteps and once a movement starts it encourages people to see what can be done. You can see that with the brewers and distillers, craft beers and distilleries are everywhere now, ten years ago Hilden was the only one."

The Hilden Brewery and Molly's Yard have also blazed a trail in food and drink matched events and have embraced the Year of Food and Drink as an initiative that supports their ideas. Their regular Magnificent Gin Tasting event sells out immediately after being announced and has a waiting list. With dishes such as Seared Belfast Hills Kid Goat loin, wild garlic fadge, morel mushroom foam accompanied by Thin



Gin it's not difficult to see why. Previous events which have tied in with the Year of Food and Drink themes included a St Patrick's Day menu as part of Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Language Week) in Heritage and Traditions month.

"For Seachtain na Gaeilge we had our menu in Irish as well as English and served dishes such as rillettes of cured sea-trout with Molly's Chocolate Stout, wheaten bread dill and buttermilk dressing or Slow roast flank of beef with Young Buck blue cheese boxty and Hilden sticky stout jus. The Hilden drink not only accompanies the drink -matched menus of great local foods but are also incorporated into them."

Also on Molly's Yard calendar as part of the Year of Food and Drink was a five course tasting menu paired with craft beers from the Brewery.

"As a chef I try to make things that I would eat, keep it simple and let the food do the talking," states Ciaran. "That's it really."

To keep up to date with Molly's Yard and Hilden Brewery's Year of Food and Drink activity go to www.mollysyard.co.uk and www.hildenbrewery.com. On Facebook see www.facebook.com/MollysYard and www.facebook.com/Hilden-Brewery and on Twitter @MollysYard and @hildenbrewery.

Apr

Core business

On a 160-year-old family farm in Ardress in County Armagh, a fifth generation grower is proving 'the apple never falls far from the tree' with a cider making business hewn from the family's fruit growing heritage.

Greg MacNeice of Mac Ivor's Cider launched his craft cider company five years ago after a decade with the family business, MacNeice Fruit cannery and processing. Influenced also by his mother's French heritage, Greg launched with two core products, a medium and traditional dry made mainly from the company's own orchards. Now with a fruit cider ready for launch as well as plans for the US and European markets, the company has firmly established itself in the Irish craft cider market. However, the seed of the idea remains firmly rooted in family legacies, not just paternal and maternal but down the generations.

"My dad Sam and his brother Joe established a cannery for Armagh Bramley apples in 1969 and we've been growing on an acreage of over 100 and processing Bramleys ever since," explained Greg.

"Because my mum is French we'd be used to drinking this gorgeous cidre and I couldn't understand, what with all the gorgeous apples here in Armagh, why we didn't have an equivalent. So I broke out some old demijohns, which belonged to my uncle Peadar and experimented with a number of recipes, mainly using heritage varieties. With positive feedback from family and friends I thought I'd try a bit more volume and we had our first commercial batch back in 2011."

That paternal uncle shared Greg's commitment to heritage varieties as well as his passion for brewing, albeit on a smaller scale. Making his own home brewed cider from



Co-founder of MacNeice Fruit, Sam MacNeice with his son Greg MacNeice of Mac Ivor's Cider

the heritage apples he catalogued and pressed, Peadar is considered a forefather of Armagh's blossoming craft cider sector. In addition, his personal characteristics have been added to the brand, incorporated as they are into the logo for Mac Ivor's. The name of the company itself also resonates with family tradition as homage to another branch of the MacNeice family tree.

"Peadar was a bit of a character and I wanted to get his story in there, so he is the fox in the branding and our 'follow the fox' tagline. Mac Ivor was my granny's maiden name and as it was her who started growing the heritage varieties it was important for me to bring her name back as an acknowledgment of what she started. My grandfather died quite young which left her with nine children and a farm to run so primarily it was an emotional decision to have her name there. It also gave us the opportunity for the brand to have a real personality and an authentic sense of place and of our apple growing heritage."



'Follow the fox' on Twitter @MacIvorsCider and on Facebook at Mac Ivors Cider Co or see the website at www.macivors.com



That heritage also helped when Greg brought the first of his batches to market, selling into local outlets where business relationships were already established. After engaging distributors, north and south, to improve market penetration, the first official launch took place in August 2012.

"The first year was tough," he acknowledges, "our volumes were very small and the big brands at that time were extremely dominant. Cider was a little bit behind the curve in terms of craft brewing and distilling and it took a lot of hard work and selling, particularly with the bars."

"What really sold it however was the taste of the product, people understood the difference from the big brand producers. With both the dry, which was the traditional cider that I'd always wanted to make, and the easy drinking medium cider which 'big brand' drinkers happily shifted across to, the product spoke for itself once we got it out there. The demand for provenance and craft was also growing at that stage and was met by our fresh pressed apples and purely artisan processes."

The shift towards food matching is also an area the company has embraced, highlighting the versatility of cider as well as an innovative use of Bramley by products. A current collaboration with renowned local restaurant, Uluru has Lough Neagh eels smoked with Armagh apple wood and served with Mac Ivor's Cider.

"If Lough Neagh eels are to be smoked with anything, it should be with Armagh apple wood, what with the PGI status of both the eels and the Bramley," Greg insists. "We also have 40 hives of local honey bees that will be producing lovely apple blossom honey for the beekeepers that we work with in order to pollinate the Bramley."



A new plum and ginger flavour has also been added to the Mac Ivor's mix, the company having identified a gap in the market for a quality fruit drink. The move wasn't without its considerations however with Greg holding out for the perfect combination before expanding the core range on which they are building their success.

"I was wary of moving away from our craft roots and ethos so held off until I was certain of a well-balanced flavour that works really well," he explains. "The plum and ginger are an excellent pairing with our existing medium cider base and we've taste tested at a couple of festivals, where people have gone mad for it."

European and US drinkers are to get the same opportunity as Mac Ivor's looks to extend its presence in overseas markets. Already exporting to northern Europe, namely Denmark, Finland and Germany, the first shipment of Mac Ivor's Cider arrived in Rome last week. The next big target is the US market, which although not renowned here for its cider heritage, has a fascinating past as well as a future filled with opportunity.

"Thomas Jefferson was an amazing cider maker at a stage when cider was bigger than beer but with the onset of Prohibition, cider apples were widely grubbed. However, 'hard cider' as they call it is one of the fastest growing market sectors, a growth that's also fuelled by its gluten free status."

"The business in Italy is another encouraging development in the international marketplace and is a market in which premium Irish ciders are becoming increasingly popular. Our busy social media presence is hugely beneficial in staying in touch globally and provides us with a direct link between us as producers and our buyers."



Special brew at the Walled City Brewery

Late hops, dry hops, amarillo hops, water: it's all about the ingredients at the Walled City Brewery where founders James and Louise Huey are concocting a special mix.

However, the premium craft beers perfected by master brewer James are just part of the winning formula at their fledgling brew house in Derry~Londonderry. The first craft brewery in the city centre for more than a century, the facility opened last May with its own fully integrated restaurant. Born out of the Hueys' passion for all things local, provenance, partnership and collaboration have also been added to the melting pot in their recipe for success.

Having served his time with industry giants, Diageo, James found himself with a choice in 2013 after a consolidation of operations by the global corporation. The subsequent closure of the Dundalk plant where he'd previously been working saw the pair turn to their personal passions "to work out what to do next". Thus the idea for the business took shape and the ethos that would underpin it.

"We thought 'what do we love?', said James, "and it came down to three things, we love the city, we love craft beer and we love local food so the restaurant and brewery idea came together from the start. The Walled City Brewery – although not explicitly 'Derry' – draws heavily on the city's heritage in the same way as our beer. Some people thought that I'd limited myself there but I believed in that 'sense of place' and a truly authentic 'taste of the North West' that would extend across the business."



James Huey of Walled City Brewery

The names of James' small batch beers resonate with that connection including The Undertones' inspired 'Kicks', 'Wit' for the Derry craic and 'Stitch' which pays homage to the city's shirt factory history. Sensing the step change in consumer demands for 'local and authentic' James placed those elements at the heart of his business plan.

"It applies across the board, from the tourist to the local who wants to keep their money in the city following the downturn. Tourists want to know where the food and drink comes from and when you start telling them why 'Kicks' or 'Stitch' they just light up. Our dedication to provenance in our food and drink also helps the whole story that we're telling. We get our meat from Tony the butcher down the road, we use Sperrin water in our pilsner, the authentic, local experience is a general trend not just here but across the globe."

The trend for craft beer is also a growing global phenomenon with venues such as the Walled City Brewery already well established in England and Europe, and more particularly in the US where craft beers make up around 12 per cent of the market. Despite the recent growth in craft brewing in the local market that figure currently sits at 0.5 per cent, still a "tiny drop in the ocean".

"America is 40 years ahead of us with craft beers but everyone, including the big guns, can see what way it's going. With my previous employers I was involved in some of those 'crafty' beers designed to address the continuing growth in small batch producers, however we're still at such an embryonic stage."

See www.walledcitybrewery.com or follow on Twitter @walledcitybrewery or Facebook, Walled City Brewery.



The fledgling sector has also encouraged a radically different approach to business where producers, who may previously have been viewed as competitors, are stocking and promoting each other's products. This partnership and collaboration is essential, says James to creating a sustainable foothold.

"There is a good wee community up here, we need to be working together to claim even a tiny market share. We have worked, for example, with Northbound Brewery who are also based here in the city and we've one of their beers on tap. We also work with Kinnegar from across the border and we are now exclusively local craft beer. We stock a guy who does 50 litre batches a day which is tiny and who the big outlets wouldn't look at so he has a way of getting his beer to market too."

That market includes of course the 'classic' craft beer demographic, the 25 to 35-year-old male, well-travelled and with disposable income. However, the tourist market has also been an important target for the Walled City Brewery from the start.

"It had to be," said James, "we're not your usual Derry fare but we've found it's really taken off across all demographics. We have made a point of the fact that we're progressive and different and if you're on holiday and want a real ale or craft beer then this is where you come. For the locals, they have loved the fact that they can come in here and watch us brewing and two weeks later taste the batch that they've seen being made. It adds a lot to their experience."



This experience will be extended with Walled City Brewery taste experience tours which are being launched this year after already having been trialled with a number of groups. Again the collaborative approach to working has been to the forefront in this trailblazing family business.

"Our bar manager has done a huge wall mural on the history of brewing which gives me a visual to talk through with visitors as the brewery itself is too small for tours. That's another indicator of the way we work together. We are a unique family business where, as well as my wife and myself, there's my two sisters, one the interior designer and the other, the executive chef so it's the complete package, local produce, local heritage and local faces."



Whiskey rebirth on the Ards Peninsula at Echlinville Distillery

Whiskey or 'uisce beatha', literally 'the water of life', is being held true to its original name with a rebirth on the Ards Peninsula.

There the Echlinville Distillery has resurrected old brands and traditions and is giving birth to new opportunities in tourism and employment. Using barley grown in surrounding fields through partnerships with local farmers, Echlinville promises "authenticity and provenance" in the creation of its products. The distillery near Kircubbin pledges to produce the finest whiskey conceivable whilst "telling the story of the land from which it originates, and of those who brought it to life".

The brainchild of local man Shane Braniff, Echlinville Distillery was opened three years ago when it became Northern Ireland's first licensed distillery in over 125 years. Having resurrected the legendary Dunville's Irish Whiskey brand, with its Dunville's PX10-year-old Single Malt, Echlinville's impressive portfolio also includes Jawbox gin and the award winning Bán Poitín.



Echlinville founder Shane Braniff with First Minister Arlene Foster at the opening of the new stillhouse in April

The Year of Food and Drink's Brewing and Distilling month of April saw the unveiling of its new state-of-the-art still house and the launch of visitor tours of the multi-million pound facility. Attended by First Minister Arlene Foster and a host of local dignitaries, the still house is the jewel in the crown of Echlinville's innovative project. Fronting an extensive maturation hall, bottling and storage facilities the site also hosts an impressive function room, all within the grounds of the estate. According to founder Shane, a well-known local businessman, the opening "marks the beginning of a new era for Echlinville Distillery and for tourism and employment in the Ards Peninsula."

"Our impressive new building houses some of the finest distilling technology on the island of Ireland," he said. "The still house has been designed to showcase the beauty of the purpose-built copper pot stills and the craftsmanship of the equipment, whilst maximising the view of the surrounding countryside and the land on which we grow the grain barley used to make our whiskeys.

"Traceability and provenance is at the heart of our production process, with every drop of spirit produced here originating from crops grown and floor-malted on our own estate.



"We are also proud to be able to offer visitors a unique insight into our 'field to glass' approach during our newly launched distillery tours."

The still house also boasts an impressive function room, providing a unique entertainment venue at the heart of the working distillery. And with plans to develop a Visitors' Centre, whiskey museum and restaurant on the site, Shane and his team are determined to further enhance the Echlinville visitor experience.

At the official opening on April 7, First Minister Arlene Foster spoke of the benefits to the local economy - and in particular to the Ards Peninsula - created by the distillery and its expansion. But with plans to bring its products to the US and European markets, the company also has its sights set on wider goals. Ms Foster acknowledged those ambitions on targeting the export market and the funding provided to the development by Invest NI and the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development.



"This expansion reflects the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to support entrepreneurial, innovative and export-focused businesses and puts another successful Northern Ireland company on the international stage," she said. "I commend Echlinville for its vision and ambition."

The new facility has secured Echlinville's place as Northern Ireland's second biggest spirits producer, with the capacity to produce around 15,000 bottles of the highest quality whiskey, gin, vodka and poitín every week. Alongside its own Echlinville single pot still and single malt whiskeys, the team also plan to launch a super-premium Irish potato vodka and a single estate gin. They have been carefully crafting new single malt and Irish pot still whiskeys, which will come of age this year even offering a bespoke product to mark their latest milestone.

"Echlinville's 'Patron's Promise' private reserve gives enthusiasts the unique opportunity to be among the first to own a cask of our finest whiskey - with the promise that each customer's whiskey will be matured and finished exactly to their own specific taste," explained Shane who also spoke of his family's - and his team's - deep roots in the area and the importance of provenance in their products.

"We appreciate the importance of terroir. We have worked this land through generations of our families. The Ards peninsula is our home. We know its unique topography, its rich soil, its saline air and its temperate climate.

"This inherent understanding, the sensitivity to place, empowers us to produce spirit unique in character and true of place. Our barley is grown in the fields surrounding the distillery and we have revived the age old tradition of distillery floor malting. We truly are producing spirit from field to glass."

For more information on Echlinville Distillery and the Patron's Promise, or to find out more about distillery tours visit www.echlinville.com, follow on Twitter @Echlinville or The Echlinville Distillery on Facebook.

Apr

Brewing and distilling crafts demand for new festivals

The continuing growth of the craft brewing and distilling sector has created a demand for a new kind of festival where premium local drinks are served with quality local food against a backdrop of great music and a host of entertainment.

Two such events made their debut in April as both the North West Brew Fest in Omagh and the Belfast Craft Beer Festival took place for the first time.



The North West Brew Fest was the brainchild of a County Tyrone hotel that has set its sights on new markets with the brand new event taking place under the Year of Food and Drink umbrella. The Silverbirch Hotel in Omagh hosted the inaugural North West Brew Fest at the end of the month with organisers hoping it will become an annual fixture.

Allan Duncan is the owner of the Silverbirch, which has recently embarked on a series of redevelopments to enhance its existing facilities and develop new services. The event was part of a wider strategy by the family owned business to target the leisure markets whilst adding value to its existing corporate trade.

Allan spoke of how the business development team at the forward-looking hotel got together at the end of last year to plan its activity for the Year of Food and Drink and examine any opportunities the initiative could deliver. With a new

marquee-type Pavilion lending itself to a beer garden theme and having already stocked Pokertree craft beers and ales in their Baretta Bar and Grill, they approached the Carrickmore-based brewery with the idea for the event.

“Our initial thinking was ‘how could we build an event around what we already had’, he explained, “so we met with Pokertree, who then suggested the other breweries that could take part. That collaboration and partnership saw us bring in six breweries in total for the unique event which was a complete first for us. We are not afraid to try new things and the Year of Food and Drink has given us the stage to do that. We are aware that food and drink experiences have become increasingly important to guests so we were excited to host the North West Brew Fest as part of meeting that need.”

As well as the Pokertree Brewery the April 30 event also hosted Red Hand Brewing from Donaghmore, Long Meadow Cider from Armagh, Hillstown Brewery from Randalstown, Farmageddon from Comber and NorthBound Brewery from Derry. The drinks offering was complemented by a food menu inspired by the drinks on hand such as beer battered fish and light bites.

Meanwhile the three-day Belfast Craft Beer festival took place at Custom Square from April 21 to 24 and played host to a myriad of craft brewers, cider makers and distilleries as well as some of the city’s favourite artisan food producers.

With over 25 producers and over 150 different craft beverages on offer - from brand new craft brewers to the godfathers of the industry - the festival showcased the best of local produce and gave attendees the opportunity to meet the masters of their crafts.

