

Holy Smoke

SEEKING A FOOD EPIPHANY, ANNA BLEWETT VISITS ORFORD IN SUFFOLK AND FINDS IT A NEAR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Like many people, my love of food is tied up in memories of tastings past. The sweet tang of my first ever dessert gooseberry, eaten surreptitiously in the rows of a pick-your-own farm or deliciously salty chips enjoyed on every seaside

holiday. Experience is everything in this game, and there's no better place to sample the food you love than at its source, where the people and landscapes tell you everything that a menu card can't.

There are few foodie destinations as peaceful and pretty as Orford; a small, sleepy town buried deep in the heart of coastal Suffolk. Once a busy seaport, the red-brick town became landlocked as its shores silted up over hundreds of years and today it sits on a muddy river a couple of miles from the sea. It's this mineral-rich channel, however, that has proved the making of this gastronomic gem. The pure and

unpolluted waters that surround and breach a maze of grassy seawalls, also support a diverse range of seafood including oysters, crabs and lobsters, while the waters beyond attract sole, bass, ray and more. Even the mudflats and soggy banks yield delicious fare in summer, when plump samphire and tasty sea purslane grow like weeds.

The waters are worked by a multitude of local characters including Peter Weir, an enthusiastic fisherman who runs trips on his boat, *The Regardless*, to lift the lobster pots resting in the River Ore. Myself and my fellow passengers get a privileged peek into an age old tradition as, full of Cockney bluster uncommon in these parts, Peter boldly grapples with the crabs, eels and – hurrah! – lobsters that come up in his pots. Muddy and full of fight, the precious haul is far more thrilling as it emerges from the swirling waters than when viewed out of context on the ice of a swanky deli. More valuable too, as it clearly takes much baiting, waiting and manoeuvring to entice the Ore's prized inhabitants into our boat.

UP IN SMOKE

Whereas once this fine fare fed the inhabitants of the town's 12th-century castle, today it is enjoyed by the mix of folk drawn to the town. Each summer the picture-perfect lanes resound with the chatter of day trippers on their way to or from the smoked food emporiums that have become synonymous with the town. Back on dry land intermittent puffs of wood smoke drift from the tar-dripping sheds of

Richardson's, a smokery which does a brisk trade in blackened, sugar-glazed ham hocks and deliciously moist smoked chicken. Next door is *The Butley Oysterage*, a family business with a prior claim to the title of Orford's best smoke house. This bustling restaurant, which bangs out platter after platter of the most delicious oysters, smoked seafood and simply-cooked local fish dishes is just part of a family business that is as inspiring to the imagination as the appetite.

Pinneys, the parent company, which today operates its own fishing boat, oyster beds and smokehouse to supply the restaurant and shop, as well as other local businesses, was established in the 1950s by an ad executive keen to escape the rat race of wartime London. Richard Pinney was an entrepreneurial type who, after several false starts, found success with the oysters he introduced to the fertile mudflats of Orford's *Butley Creek*. Today the same banks are worked by Richard's son Bill, a canny fisherman with an encyclopaedic knowledge of oysters, lobsters and any other species landed in the Pinney nets. The results of the family's trials and errors are a series of gently smoking chambers hung with salmon, mackerel and cod's roe. All equally delicious.

JOURNEY'S END

Back in the town and, more importantly, on dry land, there's a chance to reflect on a day trip through the food chain over a pint at *The Crown and Castle*, an exemplary pub run by Ruth Watson, presenter of TV's *Country House Rescue* and, formerly, *The Hotel Inspector*. Always one to spot and back the right horse, Ruth's investment in this quiet and unassuming settlement is testimony to Orford's enduring credentials as one of Suffolk's most precious foodie havens. While its visitors return to the hectic bustle of the real world, Orford remains a peaceful idyll quietly growing some of the best food in the country.

And the legacy it leaves you? A stomach full of the most divine seafood available and a head swimming with impossible dreams to build your own smokehouse. What more could you possibly ask for?



Getting There

My trip around Orford was guided by Suffolk Safaris, a new enterprise developed by food enthusiast, Polly Robinson, to put fellow foodies in contact with the people and places that produce the goods. Fired by her own discoveries since living in East Anglia, Polly has made it quite literally her business to find the most knowledgeable, interesting and enthusiastic farmers, foragers and fisherman and share them with her guests. "Right from the outset the idea was to take people one step beyond a traditional cookery school so before you cook and eat you go back to see where the food was made or grown and meet the people behind it. In our experience, people who've dedicated their lives to producing food have a great story to tell."

From the Orford-based 'Seafood in a Day', to guided mushroom and hedgerow foraging trips, Suffolk Safaris presents food lovers with a host of opportunities to discover the culinary secrets of one of the UK's most bountiful regions. To learn more visit www.foodsafarisuffolk.co.uk, or read up on the latest events at www.foodsafarisuffolk.blogspot.com.



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