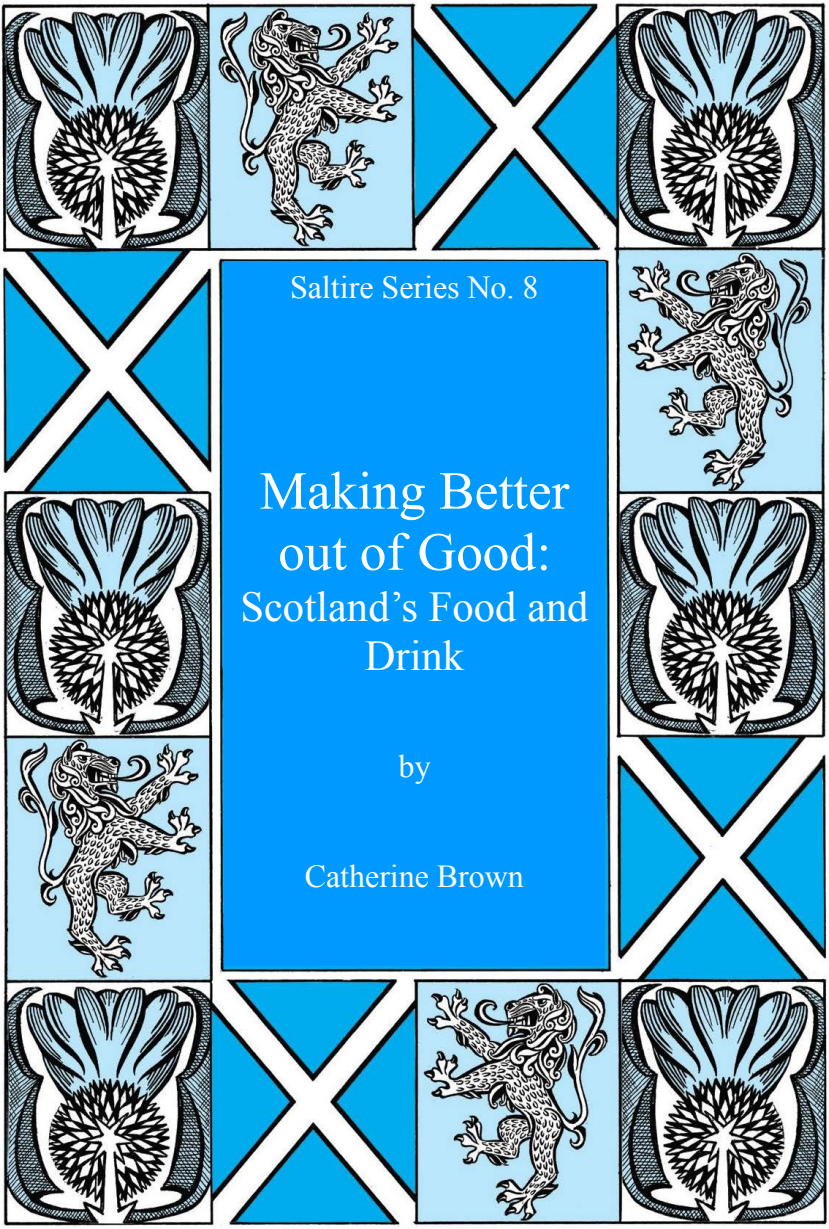
Saltire Series No. 8
Making Better out of Good:
Scotland's Food and Drink
by
Catherine Brown

SALTIRE SOCIETY SCOTLAND

COMANN CRANN NA H-ALBA

About the Saltire Society

We are;

- An apolitical membership organisation open to all
- An international supporter and patron of the arts and cultural heritage of Scotland
- A champion of free speech on the issues that matter to the cultural life of every Scot
- A promoter of the best of what we are culturally, now and in the future
- A catalyst to ensure new ideas are considered and the best of them are made real

We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last 75 years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

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No. 8

Making Better out of Good: Scotland's Food and Drink

Catherine Brown

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About Catherine Brown

Catherine Brown grew up in a Glasgow tenement and began her catering career in a Clydeside dockers' canteen. A professional chef, food writer, author, teacher and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (Scot.) she became well known during the 1980s and 90s for her investigative food writing in *The Herald* (Glasgow) and as a presenter, with Derek Cooper, of STV and Grampian's *Scotland's Larder*. She has three Glenfiddich Food Writing Awards and in 2001 was the Guild of Food Writers' Food Journalist of the Year.

Her first book, *Scottish Regional Recipes* in 1981, was followed by *Scottish Cookery* in 1985 (fourth updated edition 2013). Other books include: *Broths to Bannocks* 1990 (updated edition 2010); *A Year in a Scots Kitchen* 1996; *A Scottish Feast: an anthology of food and eating* 1996 with Hamish Whyte; *The Baker's Tale* 2002; *Classic Scots Cooking* 2004; *Maw Broon's Cooking with Bairns* 2010, and *Seafood Cookery* 2012. She was co-author with Laura Mason of *The Taste of Britain* 2005, republished in five volumes in 2007: Scotland's volume of traditional foods – *From Petticoat Tails to Arbroath Smokies*. She has a home in rural Perthshire and shares a family home in a small village on the shores of Loch Torridon.

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Editorial note

In the Saltire Series we have invited individuals to spark fresh thinking, ignite debate and challenge our orthodoxies, through the publication of short commissioned essays. The Editorial note from a pamphlet produced in 1942 is still a strong expression of the proposition.

‘They will express the considered judgements of their own authors, to whom complete freedom has been given; and are not to be taken as representing the policy of the Saltire Society, whose objective is to promote that free and informed discussion without which no sound policy for Scotland’s future can be shaped.’

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EATING WELL

It was her duty to cook. To make the best she could out of limited ingredients, prepared in her cramped tenement kitchen, cooked in her big black pot over an open fire in a cast-iron cooking range. Today's broth for her family, waiting for their dinner, was planned to last two days. A piece of beef rib which she calls 'nineholes' is the meat flavouring. Whole barley and dried peas are the thickening: onions, carrots, neeps, leeks and parsley the variety of vegetables. Other days it might be lentils with a ham hough; or rice and a boiling chicken with leeks; or maybe mince-and-tatties; tripe-and-onions; or an oxtail stew, tender meat sliding of its own accord from sculptured bones left on the plate.

Today's chefs have their own version of this nose-to-tail eating. But in the 1950s these enjoyable meals – in a deep Scots soup plate – were what we ate at Flora Tonner's kitchen table in Glasgow's East End. She was my maternal 'tenement gran', born in 1889. Though she left school aged 12 to work in a mill picking up bobbins from under the looms, she was exceptionally talented at slowly extracting the deepest flavour from the cheapest cuts of an animal's carcass: blending this with fresh flavours from vegetables and the mellow textures of grains and pulses. She had lived through two world wars, the hunger marches following the General Strike of 1926, and the 1930s Depression. And here she was in the 50s and 60s, still scrimping and saving. Never wasting a scrap of food. Providing the next

generation with meals which remain an unforgettable taste-memory. She was never going to change a lifetime's habits with her cooking pot. And why should she?

Her broths contained all the nutritional essentials to provide a healthy diet and enough energy to do hard physical work. The British wartime government had taken advice from physiologists on the best balance of foods for their rationing scheme. They needed to drastically reduce the animal
protein intake (the scarce wartime foodstuff) but could increase carbohydrate intake (the more plentiful). This was the basis of 13 years of wartime food rationing (1941-1954), when everyone ate the same balanced ration of basic foods.[1] Now that food was being dished out equally, those at the bottom of the heap were eating better than they'd eaten for decades.

Their eating problems dated back to the mass exodus from rural to urban in the 1800s, continuing into the next century. Working in industrial cities, living in slum housing, earning pittance wages, unable to afford medical help: women had no option but to scrimp and save on their weekly budgets. In their worst case scenario, if men were unemployed, a 'poor relief' handout might be two loaves of white bread and a pot of jam. So a piece 'n' jam (jeelie piece), washed down with hot sweet tea, replaced pots of broth or porridge. Comfort was often sought from alcohol and tobacco.

For many suffering this deprivation, their lives began to improve after the war when a new Westminster government

was elected in 1945.[2] It had an agenda, among other things, to ensure full employment and build better houses. Also, to set up a national health service and support the wartime act which had provided children with a school meal and daily bottle of free school milk. There was hope that eating well would become part of a healthier and happier nation.

But it was not to be.

According to the health statistics, more problems developed when major de-industrialisation in Scotland began in the 1980s, creating more unemployment and poor health in the most vulnerable areas. Once again, hopelessness and grief created the old health-destroying life-style: poverty equals poor diet; equals poor mental and physical health; equals self-harming on damaging addictions.[3]

In areas where this happened, life expectancy was so low that the nation's overall health rating was pulled down to the point where Scotland had the poorest health in Europe. But not the poorest food. That's the irony.

A LONG COASTLINE: A BOUNTIFUL SEA: A PISCIVOROUS NATION

On the east coast, just north of Dundee, Tina Braithwaite kept hens in the back yard of her house, a villa with a front garden of fruit trees overlooking a long strip of sandy beach on the Firth of Tay. Born in 1879, my paternal 'seaside gran' had been a nurse before her marriage. Her house had a large dining room, a kitchen with a double-oven Triplex range, a gas cooker, an adjoining scullery as well as a well-stocked larder. It was here that she raised seven children, and where I discovered that there was more to food from the sea than a battered fillet of deep-fried haddock from a Glasgow chippie.

Crabs and whelks from the beach were favourites. The hunt was fun. Poking under rocks with a stick to entice out the crabs, learning how to catch them from behind to avoid getting our fingers nipped. The reward was a lazy afternoon under the shade of apple trees in the garden. Meticulously picking at shells until the most elusive morsels had been prised-out. They had been simply boiled. Nothing added. The natural taste was the great treat.

Also with the flukies (flounders) caught with lines off the sandbanks – or with our feet if we were fast enough. Salted overnight, and for breakfast the next day tossed in flour and fried in butter, on the bone for the best flavour. Fish bones were a new experience, involving some expertise with a knife separating flesh from bones. But we were well instructed in this too.

When Nell, the fishwife, arrived with her creel of jumpingly fresh fish from the fishing boats at Broughty Ferry harbour, there was more new seafood to sample: including my gran's favourite smokies. Nell wore an ankle-length, navy blue skirt thickly gathered at the waist with a pad at the back to support her creel. She was always invited to stay for a cup of tea and chat at the kitchen table. From the early 1950s, I spent most of my summers here learning to cook and eating well.

A favourite picnic venue was Auchmithie. A small east-coast fishing village, perched on the edge of a cliff, with a winding track down to a sheltered bay surrounded by caves and rocks for us children to adventure. It was the original home of the fishwife's smokie: the hot-smoked haddock cured over a fire in the base of a half-whisky barrel. By the 1950s, the fishing community had mostly moved south to Arbroath and the Auchmithie cure had become an Arbroath smokie.

Since the early beginnings of Scotland's fishing industry, this east coast – from Wick to Eyemouth – had sustained more fishing villages than any other region. Their prosperity grew during the 1800s, largely due to prolific shoals of herring and plentiful white fish, especially the highly-rated North Sea haddock. What made the names of the fishing ports live on, however, long after the herring had gone, were the fishwives' smoked haddock fish cures. Cold-smoked Finnan haddies became the most common cure, eventually copied throughout Scotland and in England too. But Arbroath remained home to the smokie, probably brought

here by Viking settlers in the 900s since Norse surnames (Spink, Cargill and Swankie) remain common in the area.

By the early 1900s the native Arbroath curers had begun to replace the old whisky barrel with rustic, brick-built kilns which they continued to call their 'barrel': smoking the fish over a fire of hardwood logs and covering the pit with layers of hessian sacking (cloots) to control the heat. It was during the late 1900s, however, that a new version of the smokie was being produced elsewhere in large–scale, computer-controlled kilns. Rated a poor-quality 'smokie' by Bob Spink, a major Arbroath smokie-curer, he successfully protected the original smokie's reputation by registering it as a European Union protected cure: only made in Arbroath by the original method.[4]

Since then, his son Iain has created his own Arbroath Smokie roadshow at farmers' markets and other events, using his Norse ancestors' half barrel. You can watch him as he hangs the fish over the fire, and creates the intoxicating fish-smoking aroma which attracts long queues of folk waiting for a hot-off-the-barrel, ready-to-eat smokie. Magic![5]

My early introduction to the sea's fabulous food resources on the east coast made me curious about what was available elsewhere around Scotland's long coastline. On my first visit to Orkney in 1988, I discovered their crabs and lobsters. Wandering to the end of The Street in Stromness, I came across a large tank full of brown crabs. I poked my head into an adjoining shed and found busy workers picking

meat from crab shells. Stewart Crichton was in charge, and explained their enterprise, also showing me the nearby 'holding' tanks for lobsters. The foresightful Orkney Fishermen's Association began a programme of monitoring and restocking their lobster grounds with juvenile lobsters. The lobsters and crabs were their most valuable seafood asset then, and remain so today.[6]

Raymie Manson's fish shop on The Street, where whole salt ling were hung out to dry in the cold blast blowing in from the sea, was another attraction. Always ready to give instructions to curious visitors on how to cook and eat this salt fish (with mealy Orkney tatties and home-made Orkney butter) his fish shop is no more. But Jolly's Fish Shop in Kirkwall remains. Now owned by George Stout, it's a rich source of the sea's bounty from around these islands.[7]

Nearest to the richest fishing grounds for white fish, at the edge of the continental shelf, Shetland has an ancient seafood history and remains an important asset. Scalloway and Lerwick are at the hub of the fishing industry with a fisheries college, high-tech market, fish-processing enterprises and salmon and mussel farming all around the coast.

Nowhere else, possibly in the world, has a community shown such ingenuity using up the odds and ends of the large white fish industry. It's here that its unique nose-to-tail fish cooking lives on. A tradition which began in the gruelling days of the haaf (deep-sea) fishing for large white

fish, far out to sea, in small six-oared boats.

In its heyday, during the 1800s, it supplied world markets with filleted, dry–salted, large, white fish mostly ling and cod, known as *stockfish*. On islands of poor arable land, it was a rich capital resource for landowners. The tenured fishermen-crofters who risked – and lost – their lives, took home a pittance of a wage and the fish 'waste' (heads, roes, livers, stomachs and swimming bladders) to feed their families. The irony is that though the stockfish was high-value currency for the landowners, it was the odds and ends which were high-value food for the people.

Omega-3-rich fish livers are the flavouring ingredient in krappin, a Shetland mix of fish livers and oatmeal which is either stuffed into the cleaned head of large white fish, or wrapped in greaseproof paper parcels (secured with rubber bands) and poached. Stap is a meal of poached white fish and fish livers. Unique, and richly satisfying tastes which Marian Armitage, Shetland cook and food writer, describes as – '…a truly delicious feast of plain, wholesome, traditional Shetland food'.[8]

It was the expansionist Vikings who established the dry-salted stockfish cure for large white fish, when they settled in Scotland around the 900s, also introducing nose-to-tail cooking techniques for large white fish. More aware than the local inhabitants, of the economic importance of the northern seas, they created new ways of harvesting the seas more productively. With more advanced boat-building skills, and more successful fishing

techniques, these innovators laid the foundations for the subsequent success of Scotland's fishing industry many centuries later.

Though the Vikings also settled on Scotland's west coast, it was the hunter-gatherers who first populated this area around 7000BC, settling in seaside caves and living off the sea's resources. The evidence remains in their rubbish dumps, known as shell-middens. Oyster, mussel, cockle, whelk, limpet, spoot (razor clam), and cowrie shells are just a few of the 40-odd types, found in the shell debris of this period. Seafood was a rich source of nutrients, including the fatty acid (omega-3) essential for brain development in children.[9]

Not all those harvesting shellfish around the Scottish coastline, however, have had the restocking foresight of the Orkney crab and lobster fishermen. Until the late 1800s, native Scottish oysters had been a staple food eaten by all classes: served by the hundred to those on a city tavern 'oyster-ploy' and exported to England by the shipload. But by the early 1900s they had been plundered to death.

It was a chance meeting on a west coast sea loch in 1975, between a marine biologist and an impecunious laird, which restored oysters to the Scottish coast. The biologist Andy Lane was working on a salmon farm, where one of his ambitions was to hatch eggs from native Atlantic salmon and use them to restock the west coast rivers, where fish numbers were falling. He didn't want to upset the ecological balance with pollution from salmon farms. But he

was working for a commercial business, with a distant corporate structure controlling the operation. One day a man in a faded fisherman's smock, and a black Balmoral bonnet with a red toorie, turned up at the hatchery. It was the laird, Johnny Noble.

After a few nights over glasses of whisky in the ancestral home they went into partnership. The business would be built on respect for sealife and its habitat. None of their activities would harm the environment. They would encourage others, to enhance the biodiversity of the seas, by insisting that all their suppliers fished with nature-friendly methods. They would improve the economy of the local community by providing skilled work. Local businesses would be supported, rather than multinational global brands.

The biologist successfully grew oysters by the thousand. The laird turned out to be a brilliant salesman winning a Queen's Award for Export. An old cowshed was converted into a restaurant and fish shop, selling sustainably caught fish and only salmon from farms which were environmentally aware. Oyster farming on Loch Fyne became one of the area's success stories.[10] And when Johnny Noble died, much lamented in 2002, the estate was passed on to the next generation in good financial and biological health. Still innovating, Loch Fyne's latest project is pioneering an integrated aquaculture scheme for the loch which involves farming mussels, scallops, sea urchins and edible seaweed alongside a salmon farm which is not hell bent on trashing the planet.[11]

With many islands, and an indented mainland with fiord-like lochs dominated by high mountains, the west coast has always been less accessible by land than the east coast. For the Gaelic-speaking Celts, who came from Ireland, and the Norse-speaking Vikings, who invaded and ruled briefly, the seas were their open road. Those who could build seaworthy boats, and navigate successfully, were always at an advantage.

In the early 1800s, intrepid seafarers from an Isle of Barra crofter-fisher community set off every year from Castlebay to row in small boats to the Glasgow fish market. On board was their annual catch of stockfish as well as croft butter and eggs.[12] By the end of the century the skills of these seafarers, handed on from one generation to the next, would be employed navigating steam trawlers to distant fishing grounds, and making use of railway transportation to get their fresh fish to the market in a matter of hours. This was the heyday of Scotland's fishing industry. It changed the nation's fish-eating habits, from stockfish to fresh fish and from heavy-smoked to lighter cures, but it didn't change the fact that Scots continued to eat more fish per head of population than the rest of the UK.

A LIMITED FERTILE LAND: A DISTINCT FARMING TRADITION: A LARDER OF UNIQUE FOOD AND DRINK

Though Scotland has a coastline three times longer than France, just 15% of its land is rated 'favourable arable'. Most of the remaining land is rough, hilly and mountainous, described as 'less favourable arable', yet still offers useful grazing for sheep, cattle and wild game. In the nine crofting counties, the farming system is dependent on small arable units and common grazing on hills and mountains. Add to these differences: Scotland's colder climate; longer hours of summer daylight; plus 93 inhabited islands where farming is the way of life; and it's no surprise that its larder is unlike the rest of the UK.

As well as seaside summers foraging for seafood on the shores of the Tay, I also visited relatives near Forfar in the Vale of Strathmore: the heart of berry country. If I wanted some pocket money I went to 'ra berries' (Parliamo Glasgow for 'smashing fun'.)

The fun, of course, was not picking the berries, but eating them. They were addictive when picked at their peak of sweet, soft, luscious perfection. For other Glasgow tenement weans who came every year with their parents, for their annual 'holiday', the smashing fun was not only eating the berries, but also the freedom to roam the countryside and to enjoy the social life round the camp fire at night. I had other relatives who had a farm in the Carse of Gowrie in Perthshire and spent holiday time with them too,

gathering eggs from their free–range hens, being shown how to wring their necks when one was needed for the pot, and playing in fields of apple, pear and plum trees laden with fruit.

These areas are among the country's richest farmlands which have been exploited since earliest times. Monks set up the Catholic Church here and farmed the land in the 11th and 12th centuries. They also settled in the Laich of Moray and in the Borders, other areas of rich farmlands.

With a drier climate and cooler summers, plus long hours of daylight, the conditions are perfect for slow-ripening soft fruits which include, besides raspberries and strawberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, gooseberries, tayberries and blueberries. Berry-growing also extends to other areas where the climate and soil are favourable. The industry has flourished, with much innovative help from the Scottish Crop Research Institute since it was founded in 1957, based at Invergowrie. It's now known as the James Hutton Institute.

Once hailed by Edinburgh street market sellers in the 1800s, as 'Carse o' Gowrie's – tap o' the tree', by the mid-1900s this area no longer supplied apples and pears to the marketplace. Between 2009 and 2012, however, an Angus Apples Orchards project in local schools planted new trees (357) in new orchards (28). Also, not all the old orchards were dug up. And some of the old varieties have recently been revived. The National Orchard Inventory for Scotland has been established to nurture this orchard revival.[13]

Though this area is also renowned for potato-growing, it's on the warmer, wetter west coast on a fertile strip of the Ayrshire coast that the 'first earlies' are harvested. News of the first lifting is followed by a celebratory meatless dinner of new tatties and butter and possibly a wedge of Ayrshire Dunlop[14] cheese, one of Scotland's oldest indigenous cheeses dating back to the 1700s. Across the Firth of Clyde on the Isle of Arran, Donald McKelvie, a Lamlash shopkeeper began breeding potatoes in a few plots in 1901, and is credited with developing some of Scotland's best potato varieties whose genes live on in many of today's potatoes. Maris Piper was bred from his Arran Cairn.

Unlike Ireland in the 1800s, when the Irish peasantry became almost totally dependent on the potato and suffered dreadful famine when the crop failed in the 1840s, the Scottish peasantry continued to grow their traditional oats and barley.

Oat kernels grow slower in the cool, moist Scottish climate and therefore fill out better than in hotter conditions where growth is faster. While oats were introduced in the Roman period, previously barley had been the chief grain crop in Scotland for all purposes since Neolithic times. The original variety, *hordeum vulgare, k*nown as 'bere' (pronounced 'bare') continues to be grown in Orkney. Orkney Beremeal is currently seeking EU protected status.[15]

Oats did not become the main cereal crop until the 1700s. At this time kale, a variety of cabbage, and nettles were the most commonly cultivated greens. Kale was so common

that the word became generic for ‘dinner’ at midday. In rural areas, and especially among the travelling people, wild greens such as sorrel, nettles and wild garlic were widely used, as well as a large variety of seaweeds. Another cultivated vegetable was the Musselburgh leek, prized for its long green ‘flag’ (stalk). It was regarded as ‘king’ of the onion family, essential for cock-a-leekie.

The meat choice for the national Scotch Broth was originally flavourful mutton from a sheep at least a couple of years old. Beef cattle were capital assets and rarely eaten. Pigs were less common than cattle, sheep and goats. The Ayrshire cure is Scotland’s only bacon cure: its tradition preserved by the Ramsay family of Carluke (est. 1897) who also salt and smoke hams, providing the essential ham hough to flavour a pot of lentil broth.[16] The essential flavour for Shetland mutton broth, however, is the rarer ‘reestit’ mutton. When Jim Grunberg was the butcher at Smith’s in Lerwick, he posted this notice in the window beneath his reestit mutton hanging on hooks:

> Reestit Mutton: Traditionally it was salted, then dried above a peat fire. It will keep for years if you keep it dry. Reestit mutton broth is an acquired taste that you acquire at the first taste. A small piece is enough to flavour a pot of broth which should include cabbage, carrots, neeps and tatties.

I had my first taste of salt-mutton broth not in Shetland, but on the Applecross peninsula in Wester Ross. A road was being built round the coastline, connecting the crofting

townships which had used the sea as their open road, until the land road was completed in 1972.

The memory remains vivid: the warm welcome from Alastair and Maggie now into their 70s; the cosy croft kitchen; the pungent aroma of burning peats mingling with cooking smells coming from a large black pot on the fire. Alastair, going over to the pot and taking out a largish piece of meat, bringing it over to the table and cutting it up. 'It's been in the salt,' he said. It had come from the barrel of brine in the barn where he preserved his Blackies (Blackface sheep) which had roamed the heather hillsides for five, or more, years. Along with drams, we get a piece of the richly-flavoured mutton and an oatcake. It's our first course. Later, he chops up some kale and adds it to the pot and we get a plateful of broth. Slow extraction of flavour from the salt mutton, plus thickening and sweetening from the barley and vegetables create the unique flavour of this simple but memorable broth.

At this time, I was teaching a London City and Guilds course to catering students at Elgin Technical College. It was based on the current kitchen system in hotels and restaurants, copied from classic French cuisine, which the French chef Auguste Escoffier had introduced to the UK in the early 1900s. Although there was a recipe for Scotch Broth in the course textbook, it was never taught.[17] But this was Scotland. Not France!

Soon after my visit to the Applecross crofters, I abandoned my teaching career and took charge of the

kitchen at Loch Torridon Hotel in Wester Ross, once the laird's ancestral home. My mission: to cook Scottish.

What I'd failed to factor into the move was the hotel's plentiful supply of venison and my lack of experience cooking it. In at the deep end, I was rescued by Mary Holmes, the gamekeeper's mother, whose skill came from a lifetime's experience of cooking game. There was no better venison to be had in Europe than from these wild, majestic mountains. Feeding on rough grasses and heather, shot in its prime, carefully hung and carefully cooked, it was this which particularly impressed foreign guests who would have happily eaten it every night of their stay.

Other help in my cook-Scottish mission came from Florence Marian McNeill. Born in Orkney in 1885, and one of the first university-educated Scotswomen, she believed there was a cohesive force in folk culture and heritage that defined the identity of a country.

In the period between the two world wars she wrote *The Scots Kitchen* (1929), the first history of Scotland's food with recipes: arguing the value of preserving the good things from the past.[18] She, in turn, had been influenced by the journalist and editor, Christian Isobel Johnstone, who compiled (anonymously) a similar book in 1826 which became known as 'Meg Dods' after the feisty, but talented cook in Sir Walter Scott's novel *St Ronan's Well*, whom Johnstone borrowed for her cookbook.[19] Scott approved of 'Meg Dods' the cookbook. Our culinary heritage, he argued, should not be allowed to 'fall into oblivion in our

day'. Was this really possible?

It seems that it was. England was already ahead of Scotland by a century in publishing cookbooks. The first Scots who wrote cookbooks often copied English (or French) recipes. Exiled French chefs from the French Revolution in 1789 were now working for the UK's nobility, some writing cookbooks, published in English, about their native cuisine and including the French 'ragouts and fricassees' which so scunnered Burns when he was invited out to dine with Edinburgh society.

This was a wholesale importation of French cuisine. Not to be confused with the more subtle French influence on the Scots kitchen during the much earlier Auld Alliance with France. In the Torridon hotel kitchen I continued to practice the fundamentals of the stockpot as taught in Ceserini and Kinton's *Practical Cookery* 1962 (the City and Guilds text book) and in *The Chef's Compendium of Professional Recipes* 1963 *(*the Scottish Hotel School's text book*)*.

But my most valuable asset, without a doubt, was the high quality Aberdeen Angus beef and Blackface lamb which came from the Dingwall market: the crabs, lobsters and langoustines from creel fishermen; scallops from the divers; wild salmon and sea trout from the local rivers and lochs; and the fabulous venison. The plus point for the cook was that all this quality produce spoke for itself. It needed not much added, and nothing taken away. As Escoffier put it: 'Surtout, faites simple.' (Above all, keep it simple.) What

else-would you do with such produce?

Besides Alastair and Maggie, there were many other Gaelic-speaking crofters who taught me their simple ways with the area's historic foods: Alice's tatties' 'n' herrin'; Katie's *cean a croppaidh* (croppen heids, the west coast version of Shetland's kroppin); Rhoda's sheep's heid broth; Peggy's clootie dumplings; Mary's stag's head broth and her *pocha buidhe* (venison tripe) which became a popular menu item; and the unforgettable raw, sweet-pickled herring which old Murdo kept in a plastic bucket which appeared at ceilidhs in his home, washed down with malt whisky tasting of nectar from an unlabelled bottle.

A NATION OF INNOVATORS: A CHALLENGING MARKET PLACE: A NEED FOR PROTECTION

Usgebeatha, water of life (shortened to *usky*) was the Highland crofter's home-brew. When Burns arrived in Edinburgh after the first publication of his poems in 1786, it's very likely that the whisky he held in his hand, as he eulogised his haggis dinner in poetic manner, was not legal. The poor man's 'rascally' Highland gill, as he described it, was distilled in hundreds of improvised stills, hidden in the city's cellars by displaced Highlanders.

Though Scotland's first record of whisky is in 1494 (a product of the monasteries) the origins of the 'Highland gill' are hazy. It was made with sacks of surplus barley. After malting over a peat fire, it was fermented, then distilled twice through the pot-still when the middle cut (the drinkable part) was separated from the foreshots and aftershots.

It was a skilled operation. The spirit produced was strongly influenced by the quality of the malted barley, the pungency of the peat smoke, also the geological structure of the land which determined the nature of the local water. Highlanders had their gill (¼pt/142ml) with meals. Children got a 'nip' before going out on a cold winter's day. The Highlanders' distilling activities had been more or less their own affair until the Union in 1707, when tighter regulations and taxes were imposed. Despite this, an illegal market flourished (there were thought to be around 400 illicit stills in Edinburgh alone).[20] A war of evasion from the hated

excisemen raged. Whisky smugglers being shot by excisemen was not uncommon.

The war might have ended with a winner and a loser. Instead, the Excise Act of 1823 offered illegal single malt whisky distillers a chance to become legitimate. Then in 1832, the patent-still was invented. This speeded-up distillation into a continuous process, shortening the malting process, and producing a new type of 'grain' whisky which did not depend on local water and peat smoke for its character. In the late 1800s, the production of brandy was hit by a disease in the grapes and the Scottish whisky industry seized the opportunity to replace it on the world market. Between 1880 and 1914, Lowland whisky barons – at least one descended from a Highland crofter – built empires.[21] Their whiskies were complex blends. Using the unique flavours of the single malts, they improved the character of their lacking-in-flavour grain whiskies. Their aim: to produce blends to suit the large markets in England and beyond.

Blending single malts with grain whiskies might have been a good move for the whisky barons, but it prevented the unique character of the single malts flourishing in their own right. Their history is complex. But after much innovation in the distilling process, as well as imaginative marketing campaigns during the 1980s and 90s, today they hold a unique position in Scotland's whisky assets. Those single malt distilleries built in areas of soft water, flowing through peat over granite, are reckoned to be in the best position for making this whisky. The Spey valley, which now has the

greatest concentration of distilleries, has these conditions and its whisky trail is now a major visitor attraction.[22] *Usky* has come a long way from the Highland crofter's daily gill.

Scotland has had its share of dynamic characters, never happy unless playing with blueprints and planning new inventions, determined to make better out of good. Such were a group of farmers from the North East who, at around the same time as the whisky innovators, took the native black hornless (Polled) cattle and created a new breed: the Aberdeen Angus. Hugh Watson of Keillor in Angus was the first, followed by William McCombie of Tillyfour in Aberdeenshire, and later Sir George Macpherson Grant of Ballindalloch in Banffshire.

Keeping a sharp eye on practical qualities, as they built up their herds, hardiness to survive harsh winters was essential. They also had to thrive on low-quality pasture and rough grazing. And to mature early, converting these natural rations quickly, and effectively, into high-quality, well-marbled, good-flavoured beef. When the railway line opened in 1850 they were able to send their most valuable carcasses on an overnight train to London. In 1879, the Aberdeen Angus (AA) Cattle Society was inaugurated.

With entry to the EU in the 1970s a trend developed for a taller, fleshier animal without the flavour advantages of fat marbling. Continental breeds with this profile became popular and there was a mingling of these breeds with native Scottish breeds. Some detractors said that it was as damaging to the beef industry, as it would have been to the

whisky industry if they'd mixed French brandy with Scotch whisky. Basil Lowman, beef specialist at the Scottish Agricultural College agreed: 'There has been some damage to the perceived quality image of Aberdeen Angus beef by the trend towards fresh, pink, lean beef. I think farmers need to take much more interest in the finished product and its eating quality.'[23]

In the dynamic spirit of the early improvers, a counter-movement developed in the early 1990s when Geordie Soutar, an Angus farmer, began to reverse the infiltration of Continental genes when he sourced the remaining eight pure-line AA breeds. Others followed. Their success has ensured that pure-line Scottish AA cattle can now be removed from the endangered species list.[24] But sourcing it in the Scottish marketplace is not always easy.

When the local food network of butchers, bakers, greengrocers and fishmongers was prolific on every high street, locals could source fresh food (meat, fruit, vegetables, bread and cheese) easily and have confidence in its provenance, while also cutting out wasteful food miles. Since multiple food retailing by supermarkets changed this system in the UK, the small farmers and artisan producers who chose not to expand to meet the volume demands of the supermarkets, have been at a disadvantage. Many have given up. Many of those who did expand were also at a disadvantage, according to a report by the Competition Commisson in 2000 which reported that 'many suppliers commented on the purchasing power of the main

supermarkets and their ability to drive down prices to uneconomic levels'.[25]

A series of food scares did yet more harm to farmers and artisan producers, beginning in the late 1980s that 'most eggs' contained salmonella and culminating in the BSE revelations in 1998. At this point, consumer trust was at rock bottom. As were prices for farmers. Westminster's advice to Scottish farmers was to 'market' their way out of the crisis. But how? They were not retailers.

Angry at this advice, Jim Fairlie, a Perthshire sheep farmer, packed the camping gear and went off to France for a
holiday with his family. He hoped to come back restored but instead returned with a 'fire inside', set alight by visits to local French markets. The minister of agriculture, who said farmers must 'market', was right.

His wife calls him 'obsessional'. He thinks he's just determined… maybe a wee bit obsessional at times. He had been born a 'tounie', but after 20 years a shepherd he had become a 'teuchter'. He could see that tounies needed to know the truth about what the teuchters were selling. What had gone so badly wrong was the culture of deceit and rip-off. Trust had to be restored. Who better to do it than the primary producers?

The downside of being born a tounie was that he didn't know a lot of teuchters. A stall in Perth, selling his own lamb, would not make a market. Some teuchters were

cautiously encouraging. A band of stalwarts – Ian Millar of Jamesfield Organics, Irene Alexander of Bellfield Organics, and Andrew Johnstone of Hilton Wild Boar – stood by him. He negotiated with the council and environmental health. Dug his heels in against pressure to turn his idea into an 'event market'. It must be a monthly farmers' market if it was to become an integral part of Scottish life. In April 1999 Scotland had its first farmers' market.[26]

Since then, markets have been set up throughout the country, some more successful than others. There are now proposals for a few permanent covered markets. But so far, local meat, fish, fruit and vegetable sellers, as well as many artisan producers, such as cheesemakers, breadmakers, cake, confectionery and preserve makers, now have the opportunity to make that vital one-to-one relationship with their customers, and vice versa.

This movement has stimulated a grass-roots, buy-local-eat-local agenda which has the possibility of subverting the downside of the loss of local and affordable fresh foods. An early global voice in this subversion was Slow Food. Founded in Italy in 1986, it challenged the junk food diet of the fast food industry for its disruption to local food systems and traditional ingredients which are the lifeblood of local communities.

Besides farmers' markets, there have been other projects. The Food Futures programme in the late 1990s secured grants for, among other things, a producer–led Food Link Van for Skye, delivering fresh local produce to local hotels,

restaurants and shops.[27] Argyll and the Islands Enterprise sponsored The Arran Taste Trail (local food guide) which ran to three editions and won a Scottish Tourist Board Thistle Award.[28] The Ayrshire Food Network was set up to support all local food enterprises.[29] The Fife Dieters pledged to source 80% of their food from Fife in 2007, and are now moving on to new developments.[30] *The Larder* food guides, edited by Donald Reid, have provided a vital independent source of information about everyone committed to protecting traditional foodways and culinary heritage.[31] These are just a few of many new enterprises.

While all this keeps the momentum going, buyers in search of fresh, local and seasonal foods from small diverse retailers remain at a disadvantage in the UK. As Jim Fairlie discovered, not all countries have gone down the UK route of allowing supermarkets to dominate the marketplace. In France, and in other EU countries, small diverse retailers have been better protected. Their customers support the local economy by using them for fresh, local seasonal foods while stocking up on standard items from supermarkets.

A much earlier negative effect on the nation's local food supplies occurred in the Highlands when extensive depopulation in the crofting counties in the 1800s destroyed many communities and their culinary heritage. The repercussions from this reverberate today. In some areas more than others, an economic stranglehold by landowners has prevented the native population from maintaining sustainable communities. The hills and glens have been

emptied of native cattle and sheep. Much fertile land is no longer used to grow indigenous crops, such as bere, oats and tatties. Proposals to reverse this damage are now under review by the Scottish government, giving hope for the future of these endangered communities.[32]

Another negative effect has been Scotland's access to its historic fishing grounds and its supplies of seafood. During the UK's negotiations to join the EU, contentious bargaining over the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) resulted in Scottish fishermen being described as 'expendable', according to an official memo written by a Scottish Office civil servant after the UK's Accession Treaty was signed in January 1972.[33]

Though the Scottish fishing fleet was responsible for more than half the key UK fishing quotas, Scotland has been deprived a leadership role in driving reforms to the CFP and in negotiating for Scottish priorities in the annual 'gladiatorial' battle for fish quotas. This remains a Westminster negotiation. The MSP responsible for fisheries remains unable to negotiate at the top table for Scotland's fishermen.[34] By the early–2000s, the Scottish fishing fleet had been reduced by 40%. The Scottish fishing industry survives, only because of its strong community and family resilience.

EATING BETTER

How can Scotland eat better in the future?

Firstly, by supporting low-income communities, in areas of high need, to overcome the many barriers to eating a healthy balanced diet. A cause which Community Food and Health (Scotland) have been pioneering since it was set up in 1996 as the Scottish Community Diet Project when *Eating for Health: A Diet Action Plan for Scotland* was published but remains to be fully implemented.[35] Secondly, by restoring the land and the sea to those who want to produce food and catch fish. And thirdly, by everyone choosing food and drink which supports the dynamic characters making better out of good.

But here's a final thing.

The future of Scotland's food and drink depends on the next generation. When Maw Broon, the cartoon matriarch of Scotland's favourite tenement family, wrote a cookbook for her daughter, Daphne, before she got married, she was right: 'I've been too guid tae the bigger anes ower the years – Hen, Joe, Maggie an' Daphne,' Maw admitted. 'I've aye put their tea on the table. I wish they'd learned tae cook when they were wee!'

The first *Maw Broon's Cookbook* in 2007 was a huge success. Daphne could now make a pot of broth. But what about Horace, the twins and the bairn? She wanted them to cook too. Which is when I was adopted as the family's

‘auntie’ to help Maw write a cookbook for all the Bairns.

Maw wrote the introductions and geeky Horace wrote a nutritional guide to foods. There were whole-page Broons cartoons, foodie-type stories. Classic Broons jokes about food raised a laugh on every other page. We got the Bairns to test the recipes with us. I helped Maw write them and added some Scottish food history. An artist drew all the cooking steps, in a cartoon style, so it was all very easy to follow.

‘These recipes,’ said Maw, ‘are simple anes for making real food. And once ye get the hang o’ the basics, ye’ll probably hae my lot roon chappin’ at the door wantin’ their tea! They can smell a guid aipple pie fae a mile awa!’[36]

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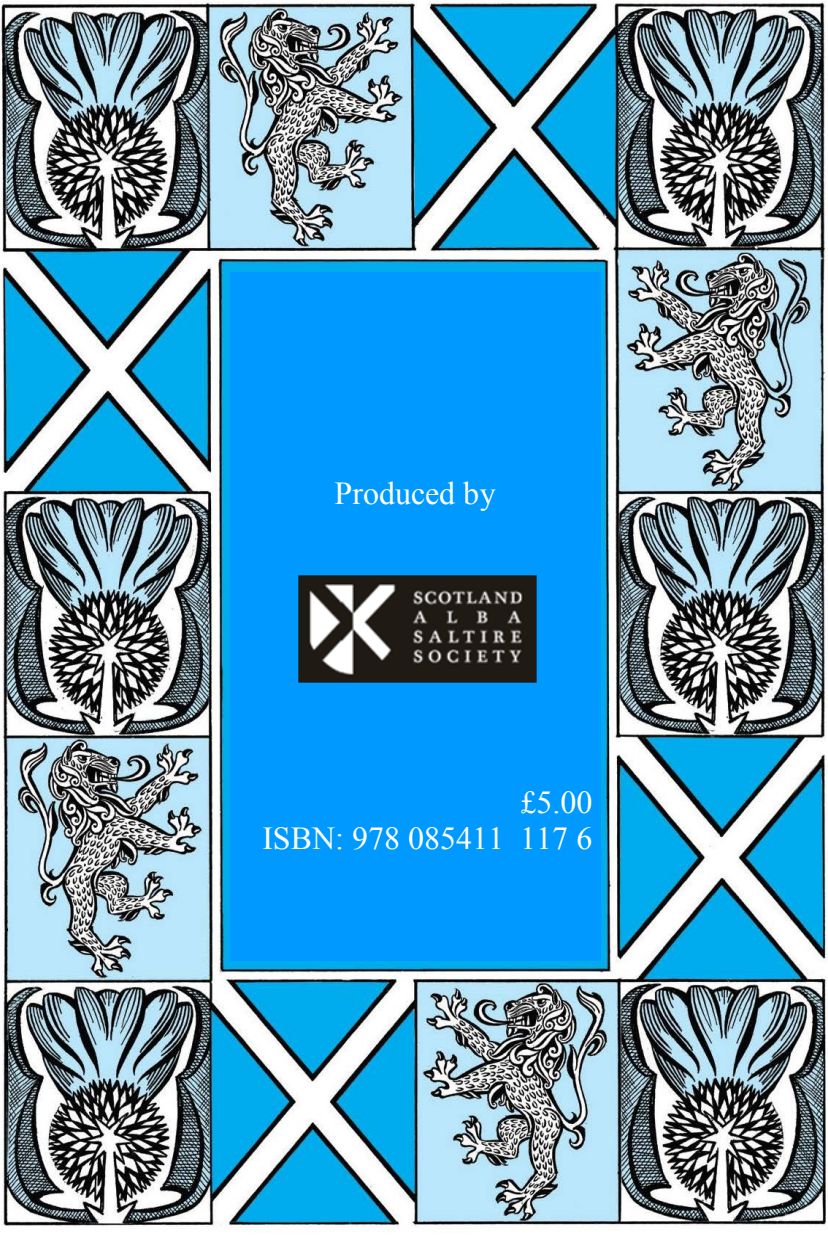

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