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## **Escape: Get away from it all and go cook**

**Rhiannon Batten discovers that home-grown cookery courses have something for everybody, from yummy mummies to dedicated foodies and dinner party divas**

Put down the Tunnock's tea cakes. Bin the Irn-Bru and ditch the Scotch pies. According to the latest edition of the glossy travel bible, Condé Nast Traveller magazine, Scotland's kitchens have never before been so sophisticated. In a 13-page article, the writer Sonia Purnell compares a recent gourmet weekend in Skye with her previous saturated-fat-laden journeys north of the border and congratulates the Scots for having "woken up to the fact that the moors and lochs of the Highlands form Europe's finest open-air larder".

Finding everything from "rich, creamy local cheeses and home-made cakes" in Skye's Cuillin View coffee shop to "tasty seafood chowder, followed by the sweetest local scallops" at a local guest house, Rowan Cottage — not to mention the obligatory foodie pilgrimage to The Three Chimneys — Purnell seems to have put the ghost of bad Caledonian meals past firmly behind her.

It's taken long enough. According to F Marian McNeill's classic book, *The Scots Kitchen*, as early as the late 18th century, English visitors to Scotland were moaning about the standard of their supper. One unhappy eater went so far as to joke of his travels north: "Never shall I forget the happy days I spent there amidst odious smells, barbarous sounds, bad suppers, excellent hearts, and the most enlightened and cultivated understandings."

Fortunately, if the same visitor were to fast-forward 200 years, he would have less trouble finding something positive to say.

Scotland's food producers, chefs and restaurateurs have known for a while that a transformation has taken place.

From Mull's Great Taste award-winning Island Bakery to Tom Lewis at Perthshire's Monachyle Mhor hotel, the truth is that good food, simply cooked, is becoming far more the norm than the exception all over Scotland.

One option for cookery-inclined visitors or locals planning a short trip is to sign up for one of a host of culinary classes and courses taking place across Scotland.

Many of the events are hosted in luxurious surroundings and offer participants the opportunity to venture out of the kitchen to explore. Food-related walking tours of Edinburgh, for example, meander along the cobbled streets of the capital's medieval Old Town, while those attending cookery courses at Myres Castle, set in 44 acres of land on the outskirts of Auchtermuchty in Fife, can experience the trappings of a 16th-century fortress transformed into a five-star hotel.

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Budding Scottish gourmards may be driven by their new-found passion for fresh, local produce, but the location plays a role too. Grazer or guzzler, visitors always appreciate a good view from the kitchen window.

### **The global grazer**

While the Edinburgh-based company Discover the Taste offers a year-round programme of one-off food-related courses, it is its two-hour walking tours of Edinburgh that have really taken off. Starting near Castle Terrace's farmers' market every other Saturday morning, these trips aim to give an introduction to the city's best independent food producers and delis, from artisan chocolatiers to suppliers of fiery Mexican chillis. Tours run with a minimum of six people and include a guide, refreshments and public transport where necessary. The next Discover the Taste walking tour takes place on August 27 and costs £15 per person (0131 453 1660; [www.discoverthetaste.com](http://www.discoverthetaste.com)).

### **The chocoholic**

If you want to find out about the king of cocoa, head to Coco of Bruntsfield, also in Edinburgh, for one of its Chocolate Connoisseur Evenings. During an hour of instruction you will discover how chocolate makes its way from bean to bar, learn the five sensory tests of detecting a superior chocolate — and undertake plenty of taste-based research. Each wannabe connoisseur also gets a glass of Banyuls red wine — regarded by chocolatiers as the only true accompaniment to chocolate.

The Scotch Malt Whisky Society, however, might disagree. In conjunction with a local chocolate shop and cafe, Plaisir du Chocolat, the society is hosting a chocolate and whisky tasting at its Queen Street branch in December.

The next Coco Chocolate Connoisseur evening takes place on August 25 from 7.30pm and costs £5 per person (0131 228 4526, [www.cocochocolate.co.uk](http://www.cocochocolate.co.uk)). For Scotch Malt Whisky Society information, visit [www.smws.com](http://www.smws.com).

### **The patriotic chef**

If it's a more hands-on experience you're after, try the Cookery School in Glasgow. The list of classes is so wide-ranging that, whatever speciality you want to home in on, chances are it will be taught here. Among the most popular classes are the one-day Scottish cooking courses. This year, in addition to the school's modern Scottish cooking classes, two new courses are available: new Scottish cooking and Scottish classic cooking. While the former runs through a more intrepid menu of dishes such as guinea fowl stuffed with goat's cheese, the latter sticks to traditional favourites such as cullen skink, clapshot, cranachan and other classics.

The next new Scottish cooking course takes place on Saturday August 27, with Scottish classic cooking on August 24. These run between 10am and 4pm and both cost £90 (0141 552 5239; [www.thecookeryschool.org](http://www.thecookeryschool.org)).

### **The yummy mummy**

Offering the perfect combination of glamour and education, Myres Castle, the luxury Fife retreat, has recently announced a series of one-day cookery classes to run over the autumn. Ranging from 15-minute suppers to 30-minute dinner parties, all begin with morning coffee in the drawing room before moving on to demonstrations and a practical class in the Victorian kitchen. Run by the head chef at Myres, Christopher Trotter, the focus is on getting the most from fresh Scottish produce (students are also given tips on the country's best shops and suppliers, as well as a booklet of recipes to take away with

them).

Day classes at Myres Castle cost £95 per person and accommodation is available at a special rate of £200 per person including dinner, bed and breakfast (01337 828350, [www.myres.co.uk](http://www.myres.co.uk)).

### **The sous chef**

If you've got a budding Nigella or Jamie at home and want to give them more of a challenge in the kitchen than making chocolate Rice Krispies, the Sticky Mitts summer fun home cookery course pack could be the solution. Designed for children aged 7 and up, the aim is to educate as well as entertain. Children are encouraged to get involved in preparing the recipes in the hope that they won't grow up unable to chop an onion. The pack comes with a folder, apron, shopping lists, teaching notes and 10 fairly sophisticated recipes, including mini strawberry pavlova, tomato, mozzarella and avocado salad and double chocolate and sultana crunch.

Older children may prefer the one-day foodies and future chefs course at Nick Nairn Cook School. This is suitable for 12- to 16-year-olds and is designed to get children and parents cooking together.

Summer fun courses cost £65 each and are available by mail order from Sticky Mitts (0870 240 6892, [www.stickymitts.co.uk](http://www.stickymitts.co.uk)). The foodies and future chefs course costs £65 per child and £130 per adult and takes place on October 8 (01877 389 900, [www.nicknairncookschool.com](http://www.nicknairncookschool.com)).

### **The dinner party diva**

Another popular one-day class at Nick Nairn's Trossachs-based Cook School is designed to brighten up those slightly tired dinner party menus. Informal dinner party courses run most months, allowing the menus to be shaped to what's in season. As well as practical advice on preparation, participants get down to the nitty-gritty under the expert tuition of one of the school's resident chefs. Expect hearty dishes such as chicken with chorizo and red peppers, followed by cinnamon ice cream and hot chocolate and raisin pudding. The school also offers posh dinner party courses. These are aimed at enabling you to really show off. The five-course, gourmet menus are promised to be as foolproof to make as they are spectacular to look at.

The next informal dinner party course costs £130 per person and is on September 1. The next posh dinner party course also costs £130 per person and takes place on September 23 (01877 389 900, [www.nicknairncookschool.com](http://www.nicknairncookschool.com)).

### **The dedicated foodie**

If you can't stand the heat, one excellent way to get out of the kitchen this autumn is to join a leading Edinburgh deli, Valvona & Crolla, on its September mushroom-hunting trip. The fungi foray expedition sets off early in the day with Professor Roy Watling, an expert mycologist. After a morning's dedication to the cause, mushroom-hunters are treated to a gourmet picnic supplied by Valvona & Crolla, before giving their crop to Watling to identify.

The next fungi foray is on September 24, from 7.30am to 3pm and costs £40 per person (0131 556 6066, [www.valvonacrolla.co.uk](http://www.valvonacrolla.co.uk)).

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