



It's that food time of the year

MCL had great fun at this year's Abergavenny Food Festival. Hannah Freeman and Millie Reeves went to talks, demonstrations and enjoyed everything else that was on offer...

The weekend of September 17 saw Abergavenny resplendent, decked in the flags, bunting and home-grown art that have become synonymous with the Abergavenny Food Festival.

Despite maintaining its local, family friendly feel, the festival played host to food producers from across the world.

Celebrity chef and long-running festival ambassador Cyrus Todiwala candidly described the festival as 'the best in the country' and throughout his 17 years association it has 'become a unique event and a hub of conversation in the foodie world'.

The festival is proud to be different and this year, debuted its farmyard; a zone dedicated to food production with live animals, to put the field to fork experience into perspective, and considering that many children today grow up believing that milk comes 'from the supermarket', it was an extremely useful addition.

The pride in local farming is at the hub of the Festival ethos, after all it was started by several local farmers hoping to champion the diverse and wonderful produce available after the industry was blighted by the BSE and foot and mouth crisis.

Fortuitously, the sun shone on Abergavenny and the party atmosphere continued into the evening with the popular night markets providing good food, an extraordinary variety of drinks and eclectic live music.

In the Market Hall, Festival sponsors Trealy Farm Charcuterie saw extremely brisk trade as did fellow sponsors Chase Distilleries, who effortlessly dealt with a queue up to six deep.

There was delicious pate, Cornish (happy) veal, Welsh live yoghurt, delicate fruit vinegars and even a chocolatier who had provided a wedding cake for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

Behind the Market Hall, nestled between multinational offerings, Wales' own Hangfire Smokehouse brought American barbecue home and, among dozens of stalls there was the opportunity to taste Isle of Wight tomato ketchup, a gin flavoured lemon curd, raw Welsh honey, fresh and crisp sourdough bread, locally produced poultry and some extremely fiery chutneys and relishes.

Adjacent to the Farmyard, you could indulge in an

enormous variety of cheeses, many from Wales and the Borders including the legendary Stinking Bishop, as well as excellent cheddar, goats cheeses and even some handmade crackers – a ready made picnic. Micro-breweries were aplenty, as were artisan cider producers and rather delicious British wines.

The hugely popular Gin Palace comprised six distilleries, all surprisingly different yet very much flying the flag for the once famous British gin industry.

White Heron British cassis and fromboise added a continental flavour and formed an elegant base for a gin cocktail.

Monmouthshire and south east Wales was well represented, the award-winning Chepstow based Preservation Society's chutneys ate extremely well with The Abergavenny Creamery's excellent cheeses, washed down with a Ty Gwyn cider then followed by a square or two of Black Mountain Chocolate.

In the castle, visitors enjoyed Chase cocktails, wood-fired pizzas and gently spiced falafel and had the opportunity to order organic veg boxes or to buy something for the garden from the 'Tools For Africa' charity stall.

The famous Rude Health Rant stage provided a platform for passionate foodies to express their views on the food industry as a whole and definitely provided 'food for thought'.

The ticketed events proved very popular, as ever, with appearances from Masterchef's Monica Galetti, Cyrus Todiwala and acclaimed chef and food writer Jose Pizarro and Jane Baxter.

Foraging and a distillery tour was also on the menu, as were tutored tastings and chef demos, many of which were hosted by local chefs and producers in the Market Hall – for all visitors to enjoy.

Abergavenny Food Festival's team hoped to achieve a unique festival, a family festival, not only in the 'family day out' sense but as a whole; there is great camaraderie behind the scenes and a deep set enthusiasm which will no doubt carry this festival for many years and I very much look forward to its future offerings.

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Alice Hart The Masonic Hall

The mysterious Masonic Hall – I say mysterious because no one knew where to find it – was the location of a delicious masterclass from former Waitrose Food editor, Alice Hart.

I was eager to sink my teeth into this talk – entitled *The New Vegetarian* – as I am a vegetarian myself and someone who is always on the lookout for new ingredients to experiment with.

The setting for the event – the attic room of the hall – lent itself well to the relaxed nature of the talk with audience members sitting together at picnic tables and chairs.

As a food stylist, Hart certainly knew how to whip up a great looking plate of food with her dishes – veggie koftas, cauliflower rice and a bhel-puri – all a vibrant work of art.

Taken from her book *The New Vegetarian* the plates she created aimed to showcase the diversity of veggie food and the fact that this food is for everyone not just us herbivores. While a show of hands indicated that most of the audience were in fact veggie, the smattering of people who weren't certainly had a satisfied look on their faces when sampling Hart's delights.

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