

# Top 10 foods to try in Wales

For years, Wales has offered visitors wondrous sights unlike anywhere else in the UK. Tourists will experience anything from the retina-stretching mountainous ranges of Snowdonia and the otherworldly uniqueness of Portmeirion, to the wild and gloriously windswept Pembrokeshire Coast and the fabulously expansive golden beaches of the Gower Peninsula.

The great food traditions of Wales stretch back centuries and often reflect an alchemic talent for cooking up something memorable from meagre ingredients. The country also benefits from a prodigious natural bounty sourced from land and sea.

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Don't leave Wales without trying...

## 1. Welsh rarebit



Providing etymologists with a headache for centuries – it was originally known as Welsh rabbit, though at no point was rabbit one of the ingredients. This is, quite simply, the world's finest cheese on toast. Individual cooks and experts will insist on certain cast-iron conditions, debating everything from the thickness of the toast to whether or not to add paprika. My personal, purist-angering tip would be to use the flavour-packed beer and mustard cheese Y Fenni (a cheese variety from Abergavenny), instead of the usual strong cheddar. You can always give it a French-style *croque madame* treatment and serve it with a fried egg on top, at which point it becomes buck rarebit.

## 2. Glamorgan sausage



The search for the perfect vegetarian alternative to the great breakfast banger was called off at the southernmost tip of South Wales where these intensely flavoured cheese sausages were created. The Glamorgan cheese that gave the sausages their name no longer exists, and has since been replaced by the intense, crumbly white alternative from nearby Caerphilly. If making them yourself, don't lower yourself to cheating by adding mashed potato to the mix, as Glamorgan sausages are a lesson in purest simplicity. You'll need leeks, cheese, seasoning, mustard, herbs, breadcrumbs. Ta-da! Or rather, "dyna chi!"

### 3. Bara brith



Take afternoon tea anywhere in Wales and the star of the show, usually to be found nestling on the highest tier, is the famous bara brith, a traditional fruit cake with a unique flavour. As is often the case with historic dishes, one suspects that the addition of half a pot of cold tea into the cake mix was the result of an accident made centuries ago, but without the comfortingly familiar notes of char, bara brith would be just another fruit cake. No visit to Wales is complete without at least one brith encounter.

### 4. Lamb cawl

With its bright, decorous use of daffodils, St. David's Day may well be one of the first augers of spring, but let's face it, it's still teeth-chatteringly cold out there in March. Help is at hand courtesy of this classic Welsh dish, which has a history as hotly contested as

anything in the great Welsh cookbook. Sharing its DNA with *lobscaws* from north Wales (and, it's contested, anywhere else within a hundred square miles) and even the humble Irish stew, Welsh cawl (or soup, as directly translated) is a slow-cooked lamb and leek broth whose foggy provenance means that you can embellish it with your own ingredients and little personal touches. The crucial ingredients are well-sourced lamb, time and your patience, for which you'll be rewarded handsomely. It's best enjoyed on a cold night in front of a roaring fireplace with a three-piece Celtic folk band playing in the corner. Try even more lovely lamb recipes for every season with our recipe collection.

## 5. Conwy mussels



The Medieval walled fishing village of Conwy in North Wales was recently the only UK town to be named by the Japanese tourist board as one of the most beautiful places to visit in Europe. If they plan their holidays judiciously, visitors will be able to enjoy what many people have cited as the best mussels they have ever tasted. The village sits on an estuary where the River Conwy meets the Irish Sea, meaning freshwater and salty seawater combine to give these plump, amber-coloured meaty molluscs the edge over any of their competitors. Meticulously kept beds and strictly observed time off for breeding means that Conwy mussels are very much a seasonal treat, loyal to the great tradition of only eating shellfish in months with the letter 'r' in the name.

## 6. Leeks



There is much speculation as to how the leek became one of the emblems of Wales, worn in miniature form on the lapels of proud Welsh folk for centuries on St. David's Day. It is said that St. David himself ate only leeks during his fasting period. Another suggestion is that Welsh warriors used to wear leeks on their helmets to distinguish themselves from their enemies (which alas sounds like an abandoned Monty Python sketch). Such conjecture aside, the humble leek is rarely given its due as a major player, often demoted to the lower orders and used as the base for stock or sauce. Leeks are firm, almost meaty vegetables with a subtle sweetness that make them versatile and adaptable. A good homemade leek and potato soup is without rival in the stomach-pleasing, inner warmth-providing stakes, but there are plenty of inventive ways to spring leeks upon your dinner guests. Try making your own... leek and potato soup or our leek & Caerphilly crumble tart.

## 7. Laverbread

Laverbread is known as either 'Welshman's caviar', a luxurious seaweed dish that's often mixed with cockles, or as that weird, slimy green stuff nudged grimly to the side of the plate when eating a full Welsh breakfast. The great 'love it/hate it' item on this list, laverbread encourages great passions either way, especially from diners expecting 'bread' of some description to play a part. Much like oysters, laverbread offers an intense taste of the sea, and healthy-eating-types should note that it contains blood-purifying levels of iron.

## 8. Crempogs

Welsh cakes are all the rage during St. David's Day celebrations, as are the slightly more obscure Welsh oatcakes, *bara ceirch*. However, at the risk of being controversial, I'm leaving them out in favour of these wonderful Welsh pancakes. Made with buttermilk and much thicker than normal pancakes, crempogs tend to be served hot, piled into a stack and drizzled with butter and honey in a manner as pleasing to the eye as it is infuriating to your dietician. Moreover, 'crempog' is one of the most purely enjoyable words to say out loud in any language.

## 9. Sewin and samphire



That seafood and shellfish provide much of Wales's freshest ingredients shouldn't come as a surprise given how much of the country is coastal. Seabass, grey mullet, John Dory and mackerel thrive off the Welsh coast, but the headline act has to be sewin, otherwise known as sea trout, which is only fished during a rigidly-enforced window in the summer. Often caught by coracleers – brave fishermen happy to float downriver on something the size and shape of an industrial-sized wok – sewin's diet of shrimps and crustaceans give it a rosy pink colour and a taste that knocks farmed salmon into a cocked hat. Best enjoyed simply, sewin pairs up especially well with wild samphire, which

grows in plentiful supply along the coast at Carmarthen Bay. Fill your plate with chunky fish fillets and fabulous shellfish with our top seafood recipes.

## 10. Salt marsh lamb

The often miserably rainy conditions that bedevil Wales in the winter are paid for in part by an expansive carpeting of lush green countryside that feeds some of the most prized livestock in the UK. Welsh black cattle has its admirers, but the Elvis Presley of Welsh meat is salt marsh lamb. Grazing on coastal areas that are often waterlogged by seawater (Anglesey in the north and the Gower in the south), salt marsh lamb dine out as much on samphire as they do grass, and their constant free-range roaming makes them much leaner than their slightly more fenced-in compatriots. The meat is luxuriously tender and has an unmistakable sweetness. Unlike a lot of lamb that gets rushed into action in order to be ready for the dinner table come Easter Sunday, salt marsh lamb is allowed to age for much longer, generally being available between July and October.

### Glossary

- cast-iron: firm and unchangeable
- crumbly: crisp
- char: partially burn so as to blacken the surface
- teeth-chatteringly: If your teeth chatter, they knock together repeatedly because you are very cold or frightened
- meaty: substantial
- alas: used to express unhappiness, pity, or concern
- stock / livestock: farm animals kept for use and profit
- slimy: unclean
- nudge: push gently
- grimly: decidedly
- knock sth into a cocked hat: be much better than something else
- samphire: a green vegetable which grows on British coastlines
- marsh: ground near a lake, a river, or the sea that often floods and is always wet

### Choose the correct dish

It's a slow-cooked lamb and leek broth to which you can add with your own ingredients.

They're made with buttermilk and are served hot, piled into a stack and drizzled with butter and honey.

It is a tender meat dish that has its own sweetness. It is traditionally eaten on Easter Sunday.

They're made with leeks, cheese, seasoning, mustard, herbs, breadcrumbs.

They're firm, almost meaty vegetables with a subtle sweetness.

It's fish that feeds on shrimps and crustaceans, which give it a rosy pink colour.

It goes well with a vegetable that grows along the coast at Carmarthen Bay.

It consists of toast with fine cheese, which can be mixed with beer and mustard.

It's a seaweed dish that's often mixed with cockles, and not everybody likes it.

They're plump, amber-coloured meaty molluscs.

It's a fruit cake whose batter has been mixed with cold tea.

# Loving Welsh Food

