

Ludlow Fare

“Oh I have been to Ludlow Fair/And left my necktie God knows where,” wrote A.E. Houseman over a century ago. During his lifetime Houseman was best known as a classical scholar and so his *“pints and quarts of Ludlow beer”* may have been, like another recently boasted 14 pints a day, more a product of imagination than of memory. At any rate, Ludlow’s modern Food and Drink Festival, now in its sixth year, appears to be a more sober though far from abstemious occasion; each day at closing time the crowds were merry but still upright.

This is a very different affair from the food-industry-dominated events which take place in Olympia and Earl’s Court. Occupying the big H-shaped marquee in the grounds of Ludlow Castle were seventy-three stalls, all of whose exhibitors came from within a thirty-mile radius of Ludlow. Those lucky enough to sample their wares, most of which would have been unfamiliar to visitors from outside the area, departed with a healthy respect for the Heart of England producers and even a guarded optimism for the survival of local food traditions. These were not expensive imported luxuries, but sausages and organic free range meats—there are half-a-dozen local butchers in Ludlow alone! – cheeses, pâtés (both meat and vegetarian), breads, wines, beers and cyders. The tents, furthermore, were full of the sort of average families you’d see at a motorway stop. Elitist? Don’t make me laugh!

Off to one side but open to the stallholder area was a demonstration marquee where local chefs whipped up a few of their choice recipes. These are a distinguished lot – there are three Michelin-starred restaurants within easy walking distance. After local food and garden writer Mirabel Osler wrote them up for the New York Times, they started getting bookings from all over America. But famous though they are, they enhance and express the local cuisine rather than dominating it. Shaun Hill, the best-known celebrity chef (he’d hate that label), runs a small six-table restaurant serving fixed-price menus at an inclusive cost which at most Michelin-blessed shrines would hardly cover the extras. And he’s there in the kitchen, not off somewhere promoting a line of eponymous sauces.

Also in the demonstration marquee Bob Kennard, the Soil Association Abattoir Campaign Co-ordinator, told us how close this whole interdependent network of small producers is to being destroyed by prohibitive charges threatening the survival of local abattoirs, already disappearing at an accelerating rate. If the small-scale meat and dairy herds are driven out of business, he told us, then grain production, on which everyone including real ale producers depends, will cease to be profitable in this country and we’ll be a giant step closer to a totally centralised world food industry.

On a lighter note, an open discussion was billed on the provocative subject, “Do the English really enjoy their food?” After a last-minute cancellation by the scheduled moderator, Mirabel Osler was asked to step in and she in turn asked me to share the podium. What sort of response would there be? We needn’t have worried: after all, whatever audience showed up would consist of enthusiasts who had come of their own accord to a festival entirely devoted to food and drink. In the event, the questions were reasonable, the responses were intelligent and informed, and after a very few minutes we two moderators could have crept away and let them get on with it. Some of the English enjoy their food very much, thank you, and they’ll do their best to keep it that way.

