

## ADVERTISEMENT PROMOTION

# North-east feast

In NewcastleGateshead, you no longer have to wait till the boat comes in for a food experience equal to anywhere in England. **Andrew Spooner** sampled its wares

I've never been to Cuba, so have never had a chance to try their famed *paladares* - the small, privately run restaurants, usually set in a family home, known for the simplicity and authenticity of their food. But, then again, until today, I'd never been to NewcastleGateshead either.

"I've made some fresh moussaka, home-baked cornbread and a big pot of Bosnian-style beans." Irena Carlton is a whirl of colour and energy as she moves briskly around her earthy kitchen in a suburb of Newcastle. "I've also made some *sattrica* - a mix of cottage cheese, yoghurt and spring onions. It goes perfectly with the beans." She's not wrong. With a riot of flavours and tastes encompassing Italian, Middle Eastern and Hungarian, Irena's Bosnian fare certainly hits all the right tastebuds.

For Irena, a social worker and Bosnian national with Croat and Italian roots, 2010 is her second year as a secret *paladar* - diners sign up and are sent to any one of several different "secret" addresses in the NewcastleGateshead area - within the renowned EAT! festival. "Last year I had up to 14 people in my home eating my food," she says. "I was really happy to have them here and happy to give them something else to remember about Bosnia rather than just the war. I'll be making some fresh baklava this year. You should come back and try it," says Irena.

"We're going to have five more secret *paladares* from several different ethnicities set up across the city during the festival this year," says Simon Preston, NewcastleGateshead's EAT! festival director. Now in its fourth year, and running from 12 to 27 June in 2010, EAT! is one of England's leading food and drink festivals. "One of our main aims is to showcase the best food available in our region, and there are some really excellent restaurants and producers in the north-east," says Simon. "We want to make local, seasonal and healthy food the given rather than the exception."

The range of events in this year's EAT! is simply phenomenal. There is the giant confectionery of the Cakebook model city (see sidebar opposite), Fairtrade City Fetes and the Great North Eco-Feast. Then there's the Mad Hatter's Tea Party on Tour, which is three local schools working with restaurants and hotels in NewcastleGateshead to create a massive afternoon tea for up to 500 pupils and parents.

"Our launch event is The Big EAT! Weekend, when we'll be taking over the streets in a giant celebration of all the excellent food available in the north-east," says Simon. "There's going to be, among plenty of other events, a Food Heroes Market, beer and chilli festival, street food festival, World Cupcake sweetstake and even a Food Adventure Playground."

Over the past decade it's fair to say NewcastleGateshead has undergone massive



Clockwise, from top: Irena serves up a Bosnian-style *paladar* feast; foraging for wild garlic in Jesmond Dene; Matthews Cheese at Grainger Market - all part of NewcastleGateshead's EAT! festival; Newcastle's bridges Mark Pinder, Owen Humphreys

transformations. The handsome streets of Newcastle city centre have now been brilliantly complemented with Gateshead's commitment to the arts and contemporary architecture. Walk along the banks of the Tyne and you can see this transformation in full effect - the plunging arcs of the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, the handsome lines of Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and the daring of The Sage Gateshead's world-class music venue.

Food has also been at the forefront of NewcastleGateshead's transformation, and there's few better placed to comment on this than Clare Armstrong, head pastry

chef for Michelin-starred restaurateur Terry Laybourne's 21 Group of eateries. "I'm Newcastle born and bred," says Clare, as we sit down to a sumptuous feast of all things chocolate at the Cafe 21 restaurant in the fashionable Quayside area of Newcastle. "I developed my love of cooking and baking through my mum. She was always making cakes and pies."

After a career that took Clare through some of the world's top five-star hotels she finally returned home, taking up a role with the 21 Group 10 years ago. "The quality of food in the region is incredible these days, and we're



Low Res

Best bacon butty in England? Wm Wight on Fish Quay, North Shields Mark Pinder

now able to hold our own against anyone. It's simple really, at 21 we just aim for the best local, fresh produce."

One innovative part of EAT! is a foraging tour over six half days in local woodlands called Found. You'll be accompanied by a foraging expert, such as Martin Charlton. "For me, one of the most incredible wild plants is wild garlic," he says. We're deep into some woodlands just outside the city centre and Martin is even giving me serving suggestions. "A wild garlic pesto is just perfect drizzled over gnocchi," he says, "and the great thing about it is that it's really easy to spot from the smell. Just tear a leaf and you can't miss it." Martin doesn't stop there, showing me plants as diverse as sandleeks, ground elder (an alternative to spinach) and nettles. "What's available changes with the seasons," he says. "In spring you'll find lots of greens and stuff good for salads. In summer and autumn there's mushrooms, roots and berries, while in winter you can still get nettles and even some mushrooms." And is it easy to learn what is safe? "Be very careful picking mushrooms you don't recognise, as some are deadly," says Martin. "It's always best to stick with what you know first and just progress from there."

One person who is used to sticking with what he knows is Martin Ponton, owner of the Wm. Wight food store on the Fish Quay, North Shields and proud winner of EAT!'s best bacon butty award. "We've always used just the best, properly hung smoked bacon, produced by local butchers," says Martin. "We don't buy anything from supermarkets and pan fry all our bacon in lard." My butty comes in a massive roll, stuffed full of four pieces of tender, meaty cuts - it's enormous and a perfect accompaniment to the spring sunshine and mug of tea. With its clientele of urbanites, council estate kids, fishermen and local housewives, there's much about Wm Wight's that encapsulates the down-to-earth NewcastleGateshead experience.

Inside there's a cornucopia of boiled sweets, homemade pease, black and white puddings. Dumplings, local chutneys and a variety of snacks that includes a pease pudding, stuffing and onion gravy sandwich complete the picture. For Martin it's a winning formula. "Good local products with great taste," he says.

Back across the Tyne to South Shields and I'm heading to one of the north-east's most celebrated restaurants, Colmans. The winner of so many national awards it would take half a page to list them, Colmans is a purveyor of some of the most famous fish and chips in the country. The judges of those awards are not wrong. Everything from the crisp light, batter to the freshest Haddock I've ever tasted, is spot-on - they even list the names of the boats they bought today's catch from.

Yet, one of the most memorable things about my NewcastleGateshead experience, as well as the fantastic array of eating opportunities, is the people. "We have incredible culture, stunning coastline and gorgeous countryside in the north-east," says Simon Preston, "but it's the unique people that really make it happen. They're warm, friendly and very proud of what their region has achieved. They make the festival what it is." Some might say it's so welcoming it's like the whole of NewcastleGateshead has been turned into one giant *paladar*. Who needs Cuba?

*Andrew Spooner travelled to NewcastleGateshead with East Coast Trains (eastcoast.co.uk), whose major services run direct to Newcastle from London, the East Midlands, Yorkshire and major centres in Scotland. For times and fares call 08457 225225*



## BEST OF NEWCASTLE-GATESHEAD

### CAKEBOOK

The fantastic centrepiece of the EAT! festival will involve 100 teams of members of the public making 100 giant replica edible cake models of NewcastleGateshead's 100 most iconic structures - from Newcastle United's St James' Park to the Gateshead Millennium Bridge. All the cakes will eventually be arranged into a model city. Luckily, Cakebook has the 21 Group's Clare Armstrong (see main feature) to help out, while the event organisers have also created a veritable baking social network complete with recipes, hints and the opportunity to sign up and get involved. For full details of Cakebook visit [cakebookeat.ning.com](http://cakebookeat.ning.com)

### GRAINGER MARKET

Located in the heart of Newcastle's historic Georgian Grainger Town is Grainger Market, a traditional covered market that provides a marvellous counterpoint to supermarket culture. Fresh produce, including seafood, fruit and veg, meat, bakery goods and even boiled sweets - much of it locally sourced - is delivered in very affordable, down-to-earth, NewcastleGateshead style. Grainger Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Mon and Wed 9am-5pm; Tues, Thurs-Sat 9am-5.30pm

### BARN ASIA

Newcastle's first pan-Asian restaurant, Barn Asia features all things great from Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. With a highly original decor and alfresco dining available, this is one of NewcastleGateshead's finest new restaurants. It has been voted the Hardens Remy Martin NE Best Restaurant of the Year 2009. Waterloo Square, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 4DN; 0191-221 1000, [barnasia.com](http://barnasia.com)

### JESMOND DENE HOUSE HOTEL AND RESTAURANT

Overlooking the wooded valley of Jesmond Dene and just a five-minute drive from Newcastle city centre, Jesmond Dene House brings together contemporary style with traditional English charm. Any one of the 40 bedrooms offers understated luxury, comfy furnishings and flatscreen LCD TVs. With the best fresh produce and fine, flavoursome food, the restaurant is exceptional as well. Feast on beef from the Tyne valley, venison from County Durham, oysters from Holy Island and herbs from the hotel garden. Jesmond Dene Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 2EY; 0191-212 3000, [jesmonddenehouse.co.uk](http://jesmonddenehouse.co.uk)

For more information, and lots of special offers, see [EatNewcastleGateshead.com](http://EatNewcastleGateshead.com)