

The joys of al fresco dining

Eating outside has never felt better. **Richard Bath** tried a day of al fresco meals at the pristine Straloch estate in Perthshire and came away a convert to living off the land. Photos **Russell Cheyne**



Dining by candlelight: Our meal beneath the stars was a memorable triumph.



View to a thrill: When one end of the lunch hut comes down, diners get an unrestricted view of the Cairngorms.

It's difficult to imagine a more serene and picturesque spot than Straloch. Nestled just off the moor road which winds its way between Pitlochry and Blairgowrie, this 3,000-acre estate butts onto the Cairngorms National Park and has as its centrepiece a stunning Edwardian Lutyens-style house. Once you turn off the glen road and onto the estate there are no public roads until you near Grantown-on-Spey, 70 miles to the north. This remote slice of Highland Perthshire is as achingly beautiful as Scotland gets.

When Will and Lucy Holt started helping run the estate for Lucy's mother Maggie several years ago, they set about modernising the place with an almost evangelical energy. Lucy, in particular, has been a force of nature. Farmhouses have been renovated, holiday cottages rebuilt, the restoration of their old fishing bothy started.

Straloch has always been home to Lucy, but letting out cottages on the estate has caused her to look afresh at her family home. 'Sharing this lovely place with people has been a reminder of just how wonderful Straloch is,' she says. 'It's been a source of real joy to have people here, so we've looked for ways to make the experience as complete as possible.'

That desire to ramp up the experience for visitors led Lucy and her right-hand woman Penny Kemish to do something that already took up a fair portion of their waking hours: think about food. They were already catering for deer stalking parties, and not only was Penny's cooking attracting rave reviews, but so was the experience of eating at their lunch hut nestled among the hills, especially as one whole end of the hut opens to give a view straight onto the hills.

'We started doing picnics for people staying in the holiday cottages,' said Penny. 'I'd drive up and prepare everything so guests could walk up and have an amazing lunch with the sort of views most people can only normally dream about. They just went down so well that we decided to expand

'Straloch's lunch hut is nestled among the hills, which come into full focus when the whole end of the bothy swings open to reveal an unforgettable panorama'

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Above: Home-made Scotch eggs and sausage rolls in the lunch hut.
Top right: Breakfast on the loch.



the plan to include breakfast and dinner, and it's been a runaway success.'

Crucially, this part of Perthshire has a famously rich and varied larder, so as well as being able to use venison from Straloch's plentiful roe and red deer, they can source organic produce of every kind from the immediate area.

The updating of the walled garden has also proved to be a godsend. As well as herbs and vegetables, there is now a noisy gaggle of new hens – drafted in after a pine marten ate the previous population – producing free-range eggs with vivid yellow yolks. There's even honey from a neighbour's hives, and with so many outstanding producers nearby, there's no excuse for mediocre fare.

Fortunately, Penny is an accomplished cook whose meals so far have been well-received. Not only is she able to offer lunch, but breakfast and dinner are also now on the menu. We were fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the meals on offer, starting with breakfast on the jetty by the trout loch in front of the main house. With everything from ham and cheese croissants to home-made granola, plus a full-Scottish, we started our day munching in the sunshine without a care in the world.

A good lunch of produce largely drawn from the estate was transformed into a stellar once-in-a-lifetime dining experience thanks to the views, but it was the evening meal which came as the biggest surprise. The walled garden, where as a teenager Lucy used to jump her Highland ponies over the babbling burn and which her mother Maggie, a keen gardener, has spent much of the past fifty years renovating, has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis.

In the centre of the walled garden was a groaning trestle table for ten which was laden with flowers from the gardens and surrounded by huge candles which glowed into the early hours. The three-course meal was outstanding, and as we sat talking late into the night it became one of those nights where you just feel happy to be alive.

It also made me realise why Lucy and Penny are so determined to share these perfect settings. In fact they aren't just allowing holiday guests to come and experience the best that Straloch has to offer but are now also planning to take dinner bookings in the walled garden for special occasions (there's a sideless tent in case of rain). Honestly, I can't imagine anywhere I'd rather break bread with my nearest and dearest. ☺

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Top left: Linger at lunch. Above right: Home-made maple and pecan granola. Above: Lunch platter. Right: Whisky cake. Opposite page: Penny's peerless picnic pie.



Breakfast

Maple & pecan breakfast granola

Ingredients

50g pecan nuts
50g pumpkin seeds
50g sunflower seeds
1 tbsp sesame seeds
50g sultanas
50g sour cherries
250g porridge oats
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tbsp desiccated coconut
6 tbsp maple syrup
Finely grated zest of 1 orange (optional)

Method

Preheat oven to 160°C, line a baking sheet with parchment to prevent sticking. Roughly chop the pecan nuts, place into a large bowl with all the other dry ingredients. Mix well. Pour in the maple syrup, together with the orange zest if using, stir together well to ensure everything is coated. Pour mixture onto the baking sheet and spread out

well, pop into the oven for 20-30 mins.

Monitor granola, stir every 10 mins or so to prevent the edges from catching, leave in oven until a nice golden brown colour. The mixture will not crisp up until it starts to cool. Leave the granola to cool on tray until completely cold, then break up and keep in an airtight container. I like to serve it with Greek yogurt. This will keep in a container for 3-4 weeks.

Lunch

Straloch picnic pie

A firm favourite at Straloch picnics. Each small pie will serve 2-4, dependant on appetite. I like to make a batch and freeze (not that they last long). It is possible to change the pie up to one 20" tin, but I find the pastry does not hold so well. I love the puff pastry as it keeps the pie so light compared to traditional hot water crust pastry.

Ingredients

2 x blocks of puff pastry
400g of good quality sausage meat or sausages



Il fresco eating

(skinned). If you can get the pork and apple variety, even better
2 eating apples, peeled cored and grated
2 onions, peeled and grated
2 tbsp of thyme leaves
6 thick slices of cooked ham, fat trimmed
Dijon mustard
Beaten egg to glaze
3 x 4.5" deep spring form cake tins
Baking tray

Method

Heat oven to 190°C/170°C fan/gas 5. Grease the cake tins well. Divide the pastry up to create three blocks to line tins and three smaller blocks to create lids.

Roll out the larger blocks evenly and line each tin, leaving plenty overhanging at the top. Roll out the smaller blocks, use the tins as a guide to cut three circles for lids, put to one side.

When you grate the onion and apple, there will be a lot of juice. I use a clean tea towel or muslin to squeeze out all excess juice, which will ensure your pastry doesn't get too soggy when cooking. Then place apple and onion in a large mixing bowl, together with sausage meat and thyme. Give this a really good mix together with a touch of seasoning. Then divide this mixture into six equal portions.

Take the thick slices of ham, spread each with a thin layer of Dijon mustard. Line the base of each pie with one slice of ham, cut and shape if necessary.

Then take one portion of the sausage meat mixture and flatten out on top of the ham, take the second slice of ham and place on top, finally the second portion of sausage meat on top of the ham creating the top layer. Repeat with the other two tins.

Place the circle pie lid on top of the pie. You can then use any technique you like to seal the pie – I personally like to crimp over the sides of the pastry onto the lid, or you can use a fork to seal the pie, whichever you prefer. Make a steam hole in the centre of the lid, then glaze the lid with the beaten egg.

Place the tins on a baking tray. Place in the middle of the oven for 30 mins. Ensure that the steam hole does not close over, use a skewer or sharp knife to keep open. After the 30 mins assess the pie, if golden brown use the skewer to check the cooking through the centre of the pie, the skewer needs to come out piping hot, if you are not happy, place back in the oven for another 10 mins at a time. When you are happy with the cooking, take the pies out. Place on a baking rack, I usually run a knife round the tin and release the spring to aid cooling and keep the pastry crisp.

When the pies are cooled enough to handle, remove from tin. It is then up to you, either enjoy deliciously warm, cool further to room temperature, or refrigerate and enjoy sliced. I also freeze when cold, they keep perfectly and benefit with a crisp-up in the oven when thoroughly defrosted.

Granny's whisky cake

Ingredients

250g sultanas
250g raisins
250g currants
85g mixed peel
50g glacé cherry halves
14fl oz your chosen whisky
160g butter

✿
'A pine marten ate their last gaggles of hens'
✿



160g soft light brown sugar
3 large free-range eggs
200g plain flour
1 tsp baking powder
2 tsp mixed spice
25g ground almonds

Method

This is the first time I've shared this recipe! In a large bowl, mix all the dried fruit together. Cover the fruit with the whisky and cover the bowl with clingfilm. Soak for at least 24hrs.

Pre-heat the oven to 160°C, either butter and line 4 x small 5" cake tins or 1 x large 9". I also line the outside of the tin with brown paper to prevent the edges from catching.

In a large mixing bowl, cream the butter and sugar together. Then add the eggs, flour, baking powder and mixed spice all together. Mix well until combined. Then throw in the almonds and all the soaked fruit. Stir carefully but ensure that it is well mixed through.

Tip the mixture into the large tin or divide into the smaller ones. Place on a baking sheet and into the oven.

The smaller cakes should take about 45 mins to an hour (oven dependent). The larger can take 1 hour 30mins or more. You just need to keep a check on them – if the tops look to be browning too quickly and the mixture still looks wobbly then use a bit of tin foil to cover the top.

Check the centre of the cake using a metal skewer, if it comes out clean the cake is cooked. When cooked, cool the cakes completely in the tins. Store in an airtight container. These will keep up to six months, to be honest the longer you keep them, the better because they mature.



Clockwise from top left: Braised ox cheek wellington; Penny works her magic; Victorian venison and walnut stew; ready for action in the walled garden.

Dinner

Victorian venison & walnut stew

Ingredients

1kg diced venison
2 medium carrots, diced into large pieces
2 medium onions, diced into large pieces
500ml good quality beef stock
1 jar of pickled walnuts (containing 4-6 walnuts)
1 tbsp plain flour
1 tbsp caster sugar

Method

Pre-heat the oven to 140°C. Heat a glug of olive oil in a lidded ovenproof dish, seal the venison on the oven top until brown all over. Stir in the onion and carrot with the meat. Cover the ingredients with the beef stock and season well. Place dish, with lid on, in the oven for 3 hours.

Stir the stew 2-3 times during cooking. Towards the end of the cooking time, place the whole jar of walnuts, juice included, into a food processor, add the flour and sugar and blitz well. When the 3 hours are up, stir in the walnut paste to the stew. Place dish back in the oven, uncovered and turn the heat up to 180°C.

Monitor the stew for a further 40-60 mins. The stew will be quite dark in colour (this is the walnuts). Stir occasionally to prevent catching on the side of the dish. The walnut paste should thicken the sauce to the stew. It is a question of personal taste as to how thick you would like the stew. Obviously the longer you cook, the further you reduce the sauce, creating a thicker, more intense flavour. Be careful not to overcook and



dry the meat out. I like to serve this with a creamy mash potato and green veg, but it goes equally well with a nice crusty baguette. This is also easy to batch cook and freeze portions.

Braised ox cheek wellington with peppercorn gravy

Ingredients

1 trimmed ox cheek approx. 350g
1 tbsp plain flour
1 tsp mustard powder
1 tbsp rapeseed or veg oil
1 small red onion, chopped
3 thyme sprigs
1 beef stock cube
2 tbsp dried porcini mushrooms
Knob of butter
1 crushed garlic clove
100g chopped chestnut mushrooms
4 slices prosciutto
1 pack of rolled puff pastry
1 beaten egg
100ml double cream
1 tsp crushed black peppercorns

Method

Preheat the oven to 140°C. Use a suitable oven proof casserole dish (with a lid) to heat the oil on the hob. Cut the ox cheek into four, dust the pieces in the plain flour mixed with the mustard powder. Shake off the excess flour, and then brown in the hot oil.

When the meat is browned, add the onion to the pan, cook until slightly caramelised. Add the thyme,

stock cube and porcini, pour 450ml of water into the pan and season well. Stir to combine all ingredients, cover with lid and place in the oven for 3hrs. Check after a couple of hours, stir if required, add some more water if beginning to dry.

When the cooking time is up, remove the ox cheek from the pan, use two forks to shred the meat on a plate, remove any large pieces of fat or sinew. Strain the cooking liquid into a clean saucepan and place to one side.

In a separate pan melt the butter, add the garlic and sizzle for 1 min. Add mushrooms and stir. Cook for 10 mins until pan is dry, season well.

In a bowl, add the shredded meat, mushrooms and a couple of tablespoons of the cooking liquid, then mix well. Chill for at least 3 hours. I find that if you can leave this to chill in the fridge for 24-48hrs the flavour increases.

When ready to assemble, roll the pastry out onto a board. I like to use two circular cutters for the base of the wellingtons. Then use a larger circular cutter for the top. This is not rocket science, you are just looking to make a sealed parcel, so be creative.

On the base of each wellington use two slices of the prosciutto to form a cross, split the chilled meat mixture in two, place one half in the centre of the cross, fold the prosciutto up over the meat to encase it so that you seal the mixture in.

Brush the edges of the base of the wellington with the beaten egg. Place the lid of the wellington over the meat parcel, using your hands to seal the mixture in the pastry and use a fork or fingers to crimp the edges. Again, you can get creative with your decoration of the parcel, I like to just gently score a criss-cross pattern. Brush all over with the beaten egg. Make sure to use a sharp knife to pierce a steam hole in the top of each parcel.

Chill the parcels for 30mins – 24hrs. When ready to cook, preheat the oven to 180°C. Place the wellingtons on a lined baking sheet. Pop in the oven for 30mins until golden brown.

Whilst the wellingtons are cooking, warm up the cooking liquid, add the cream and peppercorns. Keep warm until ready to serve. Make sure you check the seasoning of the gravy, and adjust accordingly. Serve each wellington with a jug of peppercorn gravy and some seasonal veg.

“The walled garden, where Lucy once jumped her ponies, has been transformed”