



RIPE FOR THE PICKING

“WE’RE TRYING TO CREATE a taste of a specific place,” explained Tom Calver, the cheese maker at **Westcombe Dairy** (westcombedairy.com). That place is the county of Somerset, where a patchwork of green pastures is stitched together by hedgerows thick with cow parsley and wildflowers. Ivy swallows up telephone poles, and herds of Friesian and Ayrshire dairy cows roam the hills as morning mists pool in valleys.

Three hours west of London by car, Somerset has recently become a bohemia for former city dwellers who have moved to towns like Bruton and Frome on the region’s eastern fringes. This bountiful land was already recognized for its cheddar and West Country cider, and now a new young wave is building on that legacy with independent shops, boutique hotels, and restaurants with a hyperlocal ethos.

Calver showed me around his cheese cellar, which is carved into a cool hillside. Wooden shelves were stacked with around 5,000 rounds of cheddar; a robot nicknamed Tina the Turner busily flipped the boulder-like behemoths. In recent years, the Westcombe team has adopted an increasingly regenerative approach on its farm, having planted a complex seed mixture of grasses, legumes, and herbs. “We’re concentrating on the microbial diversity of the soil,” Calver said, explaining how what the cows eat “is reflected in the quality of the cheese, especially if you’re not pasteurizing it.”

On a weekend in Somerset, ex-Londoner **Stephanie Cavagnaro** finds a bucolic county forging a new creative and culinary identity.



▲ Catherine Hill, a cobbled street in the town of Frome, Somerset.

Beyond a chipped white barn door was the Dairy Shop, full of Westcombe’s charcuterie and wheels of beech-smoked cheddar. I tried a slice of the traditional cloth-bound Somerset cheddar: it tasted nutty, caramel-sweet, and slightly wild.

This holistic approach to the land is shared by the **Newt in Somerset** (thenewtinsomerset.com; doubles from \$1,150), a hotel on a 1,000-acre working estate that is deeply rooted in its Somerset heritage. The gardens and ancient woodlands are centered around the 17th-century Hadspen House, where the Newt opened its first hotel rooms, but new accommodations opened on the property in June 2021. On an electric buggy, I zoomed through acres of young orchards beneath a bruised blue sky to stay at the Farmyard, which had once been a cluster of dairy-farm buildings.

One of them has been turned into the Farmyard Kitchen, a cavernous expanse of glass, wood, and stone. I darted in for dinner as rain pummeled the surrounding hillsides and cows sheltered beneath twisting oaks. A series of stunning tapas-style plates emerged from an open kitchen; their ingredients came largely from the Newt’s gardens.

“The food here is driven by the land,” the estate’s head chef, Alan Stewart, told me the following morning as we strolled through the produce garden. Neat rows of climbing French beans, brassicas, and summer squash sprouted between brick-lined ponds that harbored great crested newts. “I try to encourage the chefs to come into the garden at least once

ROBIN BUSH/GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE: MAUREEN EVANS/COURTESY OF OSIP



Osip restaurant’s chef, Merlin Labron-Johnson, on one of his farms, which sit less than five miles from his kitchen.



a day,” Stewart added. “It’s very much about cooking straight from the ground.”

Head cidemaker Paul Ross is also helping establish the Newt as of one England’s pioneering cider producers. On a tour of the press and cellar, which has towering stainless-steel fermentation tanks, I learned that the estate grows 70 apple varieties, most of which are native to Somerset. One of them, the Dabinett, is used to make an oak-barrel-aged, single-varietal tippie that represents a robust departure from the usual blended styles. The Winston Sparkling Cyder was also revelatory—a dry, champagne-style cider with hints of crisp green apple—while the Fine Cyder

▲ The Smiljan Radić–designed pavilion at the gallery Hauser & Wirth Somerset, in Bruton.

► The private courtyard of the Number One Bruton hotel, in Bruton.

was light, aromatic, and winelike. Next, I visited the honey-hued market town of Frome. Within its compact medieval center is steep



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▲ Ceramist Fi Underhill throwing a pot at Ground, her studio and shop in Frome.



▲ The Old Pharmacy, a wine bar, bistro, and grocery shop in Bruton.



and cobblestoned Catherine Hill, a street flanked with shops selling rustic blooms, handmade women’s wear, and Somerset sourdough. I slipped inside **Ground** (fiunderhill.com), a ceramics studio and shop owned by artist Fi Underhill. Behind the cheery yellow façade, its window packed with dried tansies and joyful helichrysums, shelves displayed speckled gray mugs, pink pour-over sets, and cream-colored bowls. A long table was lined with sleek white plates, still dusty from last night’s glazing.

Bruton, Frome’s swankier cousin to the south, became a cultural powerhouse when Hauser & Wirth opened a gallery on Durslade Farm in 2014. Bruton’s high street is small but mighty, with lifestyle shops championing British makers. A highlight is the Scandi-chic **Caro** (caro-somerset.com), where the goods range from wild-white-sage smudge sticks to the shop’s own line of chocolates, infused with pine, juniper, and other flavors of the countryside.

Across the street is **Number One Bruton** (numberonebruton.com; doubles from \$185), a boutique hotel that opened

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NAOMI WOOD; EMMA LEWIS/COURTESY OF NUMBER ONE BRUTON; MAUREEN EVANS/COURTESY OF OLD PHARMACY; NAOMI WOOD



◀ A guest room at Number One Bruton.

four new rooms in a medieval forge in May 2021. Mine was a summery stunner with exposed beams, pink-striped curtains, and patterned lampshades. Owner Claudia Waddams, a Somerset native, called on her network of regional artisans to provide items like handmade goat-milk soap and cheese, milk, honey, and cider for guests to enjoy in their rooms.

The hotel’s tiny restaurant, **Osip** (osip-restaurant.com; tasting menus from \$79) was awarded a Michelin star in January 2021. “We’re not exclusively vegetarian,” the young chef, Merlin Labron-Johnson, told me. “But the idea is that what’s



◀ Caro, in Bruton, carries fashion and home décor by local makers.

coming out of the ground defines what we put on the menu.”

Osip’s natural palette of stone and wood evokes the surrounding land, while most of the ingredients of my six-course lunch were sourced from it. Smoky yellow zucchini scrolls were stuffed with citrus and cold, creamy ricotta, while a delicate sheep-milk pudding rested in a refreshing compote of white peach and elderflower. Most of what’s served is grown on Labron-Johnson’s farms, and he ambitiously aims to be self-sufficient with fruits, vegetables, and herbs by the end of 2023. “It’s quite easy to control, because I do actually grow everything myself, and I’m the chef so there’s that kind of synergy,” he added.

Garden-grown fare also supplies his latest endeavor, the **Old Pharmacy** (oldpharmacybruton.com), which opened in an adjacent space in July 2021. This laid-back grocery, café, and wine bar sells provisions including Osip’s raw honey, as well as small plates like roasted frigate peppers with smoked cod roe.

A church bell rang as I strolled past stone cottages crawling with roses and field gates cloaked in thick brambles. I climbed a hill crowned by a lonely limestone dovecote. Cows grazed on the meadow that danced at its feet. Deep in the valley before me was Bruton, the golden town traced by the gentle river Brue. Rising in all directions beyond were pockets of copper beech and bold green hills dolloped like mounds of sweet cream—a view you could almost taste. 🌐



▲ Fish with lemon and herbs at the Farmyard restaurant, at the Newt.



Great British Bites

CRANACHAN

WHAT IS IT?

A pudding of Scottish oats topped with raspberries, honey, whisky, and cream. More traditionally, a Scottish-style cottage cheese called “crowdie cheese” is used instead of cream (*cranachan* means “churn” in Scottish Gaelic).

WHERE IS IT FROM?

Scotland.

WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

Visit the **Cranachan Café** (cranachancafe.co.uk), in central Glasgow, which touts the dessert as its signature dish.

TELL ME MORE.

Usually eaten around the raspberry harvest in June, *cranachan* is also served on January 25 as part of the Burns Night supper, which celebrates the life and legacy of 18th-century poet Robert Burns. —R.M.