

Scone Spy

Our undercover cafe critic rates the bakes



● Scones with a view on Iona.

Argyll Hotel on Iona

When it comes to seeking out the best cafes in Scotland, never let it be said that Scone Spy doesn't put the effort in.

While The Sunday Post budget perhaps doesn't stretch to excursions to the Inner Hebrides, I was lucky enough to be on the beautiful island of Iona last week and, of course, I sought out the best in baking.

We decided upon the Argyll Hotel, a pretty stone building that looks like it was, at one time, a number of seafront houses.

Inside, it is a bit of a labyrinth of rooms, but we soon find our way to the main dining area.

Luckily, the hotel had fresh scones ready. Our luck held too as we ventured out to the picture perfect outdoor eating area – a large garden with benches and picnic tables. There, the sun was shining down, sparkling off the water. This is, without doubt, the most scenic setting Scone Spy has ever had the pleasure of working in.

The scene improved again as the scones arrived, their deep golden crusts adding to the stunning views. The scones came with a great serving of fluffy cream and



Scone score
Golden baked beauties with good cream and jam.
10/10

On my plate

WORDS
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I am always on the hunt for new adventures and experiences, and when they have a foodie element, I can't say no. So when I heard that Visit Moray Speyside – with the help of Scotland Food and Drink – is working hard to promote the region as a food and drink paradise, it's safe to say I was intrigued. Despite having lived in the Highlands for a good few years now, I haven't ventured into the neighbouring Moray many times – though I definitely have learned to pronounce it "Murray" after a few stares. With that in mind, I headed across the border to find out what it had to offer the foodie in me.

Goat cuddling at Elchies

I will admit that, approaching Elchies Farm near Aberlour, I was a little worried about the thought of goat cuddling and a foodie experience being one and the same.

Run by Julie Comins and husband Brian, Elchies has the biggest meat goat herd in Scotland, as well as sheep, alpacas and some new arrivals in pig form. This time of year is busy as the team checks on pregnant goats every two hours through the night.

We headed for the barn with the baby goats, some of which were only a couple of weeks old. Once they were used to us being there, we headed in among them. The next half hour was punctuated by "awww"s and "look at that one"s as we petted, played with and cuddled the little goats, and jumped as they nibbled our trousers.

Julie talked openly about what lay in their futures. What I thought would be quite a jarring conversation – as I held a tiny one on my lap – was actually incredibly interesting. I appreciated the transparency with which they work, not shying away from describing the circle of life.

Vegetarians might squirm, but the goat pie we enjoyed afterwards tasted even better knowing how much love the meat had been reared with. Paired with a dram and Brian's whisky knowledge, it felt like a truly authentic way of learning about food and drink production in the region.

Cullen Skink experience

Did I ever imagine my 5ft self would don a bonnet and shawl and see how far I could carry my 6ft 5in boyfriend on my back? No, but there was method in this madness.

Kathleen Whitham, chairwoman at Buckie Heritage Centre, said fishermen in the area would choose their wives "not for beauty, but for brawn" as they would have carried the men through the shallows to their boats to save them getting wet feet. I likely would have stayed single after



From goats to gardens, Moray hits the mark

Four enthralling experiences that showcase region's finest

my pitiful performance. It would be impossible to explore Moray's foodie scene without Cullen Skink. Kathleen explained the soup first came about when a fisherman's wife was looking for a new way to use haddock scraps, so combined them with potatoes to form the dish. Traditionally, it would have been simmered in a heavy black iron pot over a fire and served with oatcakes or bannocks.

Usually, the experience would involve a guided stroll along the coast and on to Cullen itself to enjoy the delicacy on the beach but, unsurprisingly, the weather wasn't on our side. There was luckily a back-up plan and we enjoyed a cup of steaming soup from Cafe Coull in the comfort of the museum. It was deliciously creamy with generous chunks of tattie and smoky fish. Perfect for a typically chilly spring day on the Moray coast.



● Goat cuddling near Aberlour, main; a green feast at Gordon Castle.

Sensory experience at Gordon Castle

As I stepped into the huge greenhouse, the heady scent of blooming roses took me back to my nanny's garden. Beyond the glass, however, things were a little different.

Gordon Castle's walled garden was created over 200 years ago, but changing owners allowed it to fall into disrepair. In the last 10 years, though, owner Zara Gordon Lennox has made it her mission to restore it to its former glory – and then some.

The garden was redesigned by leading garden designer Arne Maynard, combining modern techniques with tradition. Flowers, trees, herbs, fruits and vegetables are arranged in gorgeous patterns across eight acres. You can explore the gardens at your leisure, but if you really want to dig deep into their history and the restoration project, you can book a sensory tour with Zara or head gardener Ed Bollam. On it, you feel herbs between your fingers, smell their perfume, taste peppery radishes dug from the ground, watch gardeners tend to each plant and hear bees buzzing between them.

Finishing with a gin and tonic made using botanicals from the gardens, my senses felt well and truly treated.

Rising Roots

In the basement of a grand, 18th-century home on the Moray coast is the last place you would expect to find a farm. But that's where Rising Roots was born.

Daniel Oliveira came across microgreens in health-obsessed California while travelling and brought them back to Scotland. He set up his vertical farm in the basement of Shempston House on his uncle's estate and started growing. Spreading the word about his microgreens, herbs and edible flowers by knocking doors and visiting kitchens, business took off.

Stepping into the tiny basement felt like a sci-fi film, with shelves full of herbs and the sound of machinery keeping the environment perfectly controlled. Daniel cut herbs for us to try and they certainly packed a punch. A real highlight followed as he led us to a huge terrace where he had prepared a lunch spread complete with the brightest-coloured salad I had ever seen, made from the treasures of his farm and gardens.

For more information and to book any of these experiences, head to tasteofmorayspeyside.com

Which Wine?

Our expert Diana Thompson chooses the best bottles for you



Descombes Château Pougelon Fleurie, from £19.99, Majestic

Bursting with perfumed blackcurrants and elegant soft tannins. Enjoy in the sun with a BBQ.



Garganega Pinot Grigio, £6.50, M&S

Lively lime and pear characters from Pinot Grigio with the Garganega grape bringing more complex nutty apricot notes.



Edouard Delaunay Septembre, Bourgogne Chardonnay, from £13.99, Majestic

Stunning Chardonnay offering richness with finesse. Beautiful buttery ripe tropical fruit balanced by refreshing elegant citrus characters.

[@WineEventsScot](http://www.wineeventscotland.com)



● Vivi's interior design is immaculate and homely.

Restaurant of the week

Vivi, South Bridge St, Airdrie

Location

Near to the Top Cross in one of the town's main thoroughfares.

First Impressions

The long and narrow restaurant is immaculately decorated with lots of interesting trinkets, yet still retains a homely and friendly feeling.

Service

Our server, Paolo, informs us he is helping out for the evening, but he is a familiar face from Airdrie's Italian restaurant scene, including the much-missed Guidi's. He's a complete professional and guides us through the menu, specials and drinks on offer.

Menu

The choice of options does well to straddle two camps – specialist Italian dishes and more universal, familiar, fayre that will please most taste buds. For example, the starters feature antipasto and burrata, but also has chicken BBQ wings. There are around a dozen pastas.

a similar number of pizzas, some chicken dishes and some standard sides. There are also specials, a couple of British dishes and a Sunday roast.

Taste

The bruschetta mix starter was fantastically tasty. Such a simple dish, but one so easy to get wrong and make bland. No such worries here. The tomatoes were outstandingly tasty and the peppers were also seasoned to perfection. We both had the spaghetti alio and olio for our main courses. Again, another simple dish which takes a degree of skill to make it as interesting and tasty as it can be, and the kitchen passed with flying colours.

Ambience

A convivial atmosphere on a busy Saturday evening, with the restaurant also doing a brisk trade on takeaway orders.

Value

Two starters, two mains and four drinks for less than £60.



P.S. Always a great sign of an authentic Italian restaurant is having Ichnusa, the brilliant Sardinian beer, available at the bar.