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Bread of heaven

The revamp of Hurst House Hotel is one reason to head for the green, green grass of Carmarthenshire. The fabulous produce is another

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Taste of the west ... Welsh laver bread. Photograph: Alamy

Neil Morrissey might seem an unlikely standard bearer for Welsh cuisine, but laver bread and cockle cakes are as much a part of Hurst House, the hotel he part-owns in Carmarthenshire, as the silver cow-skull sculpture in the restaurant. His interest in seaweed is an astute one; showcasing local specialities helps focus attention on an area often overlooked by visitors passing through to Pembrokeshire. Besides, excellent produce is what this area of west Wales has always been about. Salt-marsh lamb, black beef and scores of distinctive cheeses make the area a top choice for a food-based road trip, even if you're not planning to behave badly.

Hurst House, on the flat marshes of Carmarthen Bay, is a good place to start. Currently in the middle of a £5m expansion - a sum which is staggering

locals: "So you like gold taps then?" a barman in nearby Laugharne sniggered when I said where I'd been. I stayed pre-refit (the restaurant reopens on August 25, and the rest of the hotel mid-October), and the look, which isn't going to change, is actually more bashed-up than bling-bling. Time-worn floorboards and squishy brown leather sofas contrast with a sleek, back-lit bar and abstract paintings of women throwing their arms around.

It gets packed on Sundays with families tucking into enormous roasts; at night it's a mix of locals and hotel guests trying bara brith (a moistly delicious fruit cake, made here into a whisky-infused syllabub). A four-course Welsh menu (£38.95) celebrates all things traditional, including cawl, a meat-and-veg broth served with cheese and bread. The salt-marsh lamb is so tender you could cut it with a teaspoon. But chef Dion Tidmarsh's style also encompasses contemporary dishes with a local slant, such as scallops on lobster biryani, confit of duck with bubble & squeak, Llanboidy cheese & leek risotto. Breakfast was less successful, with fake jam, candyfloss-sweet porridge and butter infused with fridge aromas.

A vegetable and herb garden, "loads of stock pans", a new spa and private members' club are coming on board once the refurbishment is complete.

Even self-catering cottages are getting a makeover here. One of the best is Cefnmeurig Self-Catering for Softies, an 18th-century farmhouse about 15 minutes from Laugharne, which is cosily decorated with flashes of designer brilliance. A gourmet hamper is thrown in, too.

Dylan Thomas described Laugharne as "the strangest town in Wales," then moved here. He divided his time between home in the Boathouse (now a museum) and Brown's pub. Now part-owned by Morrissey, it's still a gritty affair, with characters straight from Under Milk Wood, set in the town, as regulars.

Another local legend is George Tremlett, owner of the town's bookshop (where you'll find the tourist office) and a great source of stories. Ask him about the farmer boarding a bus with a pig in tow who asked for a return and a single to the abattoir in nearby St Clears. Piggie products that might still

pass through St Clears include Parma-style Carmarthen ham. The company that makes it, Albert Rees, sells bacons and hams from a handful of outlets including Carmarthen market.

Picnic staples can be snapped up from the WI stall and the Farmhouse Cheese Shop, where top buys are organic Pen-y-Bont goat's cheese and Teifi (Welsh gouda). Royal Cake, at the Richardson's Home Baking stall, has an impeccable pedigree - Prince Charles picked up a slab on a visit to the baker's home village of Llansteffan, ate it in the helicopter on the way to Highgrove, and liked it so much he served it with coffee at his wedding to Camilla.

Hunger at crisis point, I moved to the multi-award-winning Angel Inn at Salem, run by Rod Peterson, former Welsh Chef of the Year. This quaint pub in a tiny hamlet serves sublime food. I wanted to bathe in the velvety wild-garlic soup that had all the complexity of a good wine. A party from Swansea called me over to admire their meringue-topped queen of puddings.

Nearby Llandeilo is vying for "cittaslow" (slow town) status, a movement backed by the Cawdor hotel. This slightly incongruous 23-room boutique townhouse has an enormous restaurant serving a population of just under 3,000 - where do the punters come from? There were only 11 of us for dinner, but by the weekend every room was occupied. My room on the top floor was all floorboards and exposed beams with a view to the park and hill-top bandstand where local youths snogged and smoked illicit cigarettes. As Dylan Thomas's contemporary cronies in Brown's testify, even in this newly glam part of Wales, some things never change.

· Hurst House, Laugharne (01994 427417, hurst-house.co.uk) doubles from £150, B&B. Cawdor Hotel, Llandeilo (01558 823500, thecawdor.com) doubles from £65, B&B. Cefnmeurig (029 2089 9280, visitwestwales.com) sleeps up to seven; one-week from £660. Angel Inn, Salem (01558 823394). Visit Wales: 08708 300306, visitwales.co.uk. Carmarthen market: 01267 228841, carmarthenmarket.co.uk. Carmarthen ham: carmarthenham.co.uk.