

FOOD & DRINK

## Crafty chefs use their loaves

Bread and butter has become a course in itself at many restaurants, as *Sue Quinn* discovers



Bread, miso butter and wagyu dripping at Ynyshir

There was always bread and butter on our table when I was a child. To be precise, a stack of shop-bought sliced white with the texture of fluff, which my late father would slather with margarine straight from the tub. How things have changed.

Bread and butter is now a delicious course in its own right on many menus. No longer just a means of keeping diners happy until the proper food arrives, it's a harbinger of cheffy things to come and a hallmark of a restaurant's commitment to getting the basics right.

Gone are baskets of sliced baguette left on the table, and waiters brandishing tongs and trays of rolls at your elbow. These days, bread and butter often means house-baked loaves served warm, cocooned in tiny hessian sacks. Sourdough made from local grains milled in-house and proved for days. Cultured butter whipped up from scratch, studded with crisp nuggets of chicken skin or flecked with seaweed. Umami-packed clouds of butter imbued with bone marrow, slicks of chicken fat or wafts of pine smoke.

During a recent visit to Michelin-starred Ynyshir restaurant with rooms in Wales, I devoured sourdough made with local grains, hand-milled in the kitchen and then proved for seven days to tease out deep and tangy flavour. The bread's crust was burnt, but in a good way, to render it chewy and redolent of Marmite. A slice of this heaven was accompanied by a cube of house-made cultured miso butter made with local cream: sweet, salty and with notes of caramel. A scoop of whipped wagyu beef dripping was perched on a pile of crunchy crumbs of fried-off Wagyu fat to add a little texture. Astonishing.

I ask Ynyshir's chef Gareth Ward why he goes to so much trouble to make his bread and butter course. "In my opinion, bread and butter is the life and soul of our restaurant," he says. "You can tell a lot by a chef's bread and butter – it signifies what you're all about."

Ward originally served his bread and butter in the standard way at the start of the meal. But he promoted it to a course in its own right 18 months ago. "If you stick a big bowl of bread on the table with some butter on the side, people eat it because it's there, but they don't necessarily appreciate it," he says.

The bread and butter served at Oklava, a contemporary Turkish restaurant in London's Shoreditch, is now iconic. Warm bread perfumed with the Turkish spice mix baharat is served with a sticky mound of medjool date butter. At one point, fans so yearned for the butter that Oklava's chef director Selin Kiazim sold it at Selfridges. But she has to whip up 4kg (9lb) a week just to meet demand at the restaurant. Kiazim believes people love bread and butter because it has a special place in their hearts – it does in hers. She invented her date butter as a farewell dish for fellow bread and butter-loving friends who were leaving the country. The bread is based on a recipe used by her grandmother, a prolific baker, who lives in Cyprus. "Her bread was cooked in the wood-fired oven, and when it came out fresh we couldn't wait to slather it with butter," Kiazim recalls.

Traditionally, bread and butter has been a way to fill up cheaply, but no longer. Wholesale butter prices have soared by more than 70 per cent in the past year, making it something of a luxury. Bread and butter with all the bells and whistles can occasionally set you back more than £4 à la carte.

Kiazim isn't surprised that chefs are using bread and butter to showcase their skills. "As good as regular bread and butter is, we like to push boundaries and create new ideas," she says. "Why not do that across the whole menu, from the moment the diner sits down and wow them with bread and butter?"

When chefs aren't making their own butter, they're buying from artisan producers such as Abernethy Butter in Northern Ireland. "More and more restaurants are serving good bread and butter," agrees producer Allison Abernethy. "They know if they're going to serve fabulous bread, there's no point putting rubbish butter on it."

Restaurants like Fischer's at Baslow Hall in Derbyshire serve bread with a selection of Abernethy butters – dulce (seaweed), smoked, salted and unsalted – and a mound of delicious gourmet salt on the side, so diners can add their own seasoning. "If customers know that a chef can get the basics like bread and butter right, they know the rest of the menu is probably going to be good, too," Abernethy says.

If my father ordered bread and butter in a British restaurant these days, he would barely recognise what was put in front of him. But after a slice of homemade sourdough, served warm with a slick of chicken butter, I know he'd ask for more.

*Abernethy's smoked, dulce, salted and unsalted butters are available to order online from [abernethybuttercompany.com](http://abernethybuttercompany.com)*

#### Restaurants with amazing bread and butter

##### **The Sportsman, Kent**

Chef-proprietor Stephen Harris not only churns his own butter, but also makes his own salt to season it, created with seawater gathered from the Kent coast, just beside the restaurant.

##### **Restaurant Roots, Bournemouth**

Chef-proprietor Jan Bretschneider serves a course of house-baked bread, crudités, rillets or terrine, and two flavoured, home-churned Jersey butters, such as chive, morel, roast garlic or Marmite.

##### **The Three Chimneys, Isle of Skye**

The bread course might include a selection of cheddar, leek and walnut breads accompanied by seaweed and smoked pine butters.

##### **The Manor, Clapham, London**

Diners swoon over warm rye sourdough served with savoury chicken butter that glints with nuggets of crispy chicken skin. Smoked bone marrow butter served at sister restaurant The Dairy in Clapham is also raved about.

## Recipes

### **Ynyshir's miso cultured butter**

Ingredients:

**1 litre double cream**  
**200g live yogurt**  
**30% light miso (weigh once butter is cultured)**

Method:

Stir together the cream and yogurt and cover in a cloth or cling film. This needs to be left at 40C for four days to culture.

After four days check to see if a sour cream has been made – if not, leave for a further day.

Once sour, leave in the fridge overnight to set.

Transfer the cultured cream to a stand mixer and whisk until the cream splits – you should have a yellow fat and a white liquid. As soon as it splits stop whisking.

Pass off the buttermilk (the white liquid) using a muslin cloth, squeezing the butter to remove all liquid. This can then either be thrown away or used for something else. At this point you should have a dry, firm butter.

Weigh the butter and add 30% light miso. Put this back into a kitchen aid and mix.

Shape butter into desired sizes and shapes and then store as you would regular butter.

### **Oklava's medjool date butter**

Makes about 700g

Ingredients:

**200g medjool dates, pitted**  
**15g caster sugar**  
**35ml black rice vinegar (buy from Asian supermarkets)**  
**500g unsalted butter, softened**  
**Flaky sea salt**

Method:

Put the dates with the sugar and vinegar in a small pan over a medium heat and cook until slightly jam-like; crush the dates a little as you go.

Allow the date mixture to cool fully then combine with the soft butter.

Transfer to a container or mould and leave to set in the fridge. Serve with a little flaky sea salt sprinkled on top.