

Carol Wilson tells readers about her Gourmet Getaway in Wirral

I was delighted when Thornton Hall Hotel invited me and a small group of food writers from around the UK for a two-day visit – my companions were Karen Burns-Booth from North Wales, Hannah Freeman from South Wales, Joan Ransley from North Yorkshire, Ian Wisniewski from London, and Martin Pilkington from Preston. For some, it was the first time they'd been to Wirral and they were keen to learn more about the region and its food and drink.

The reason for our visit was not only to experience staying at this privately owned, smart but unstuffy hotel and to sample its terrific food but also to visit some local food producers who take pride in their food. Wirral and Cheshire can boast plenty of creative people who make high-quality food and drink.

Our group are all members of the Guild of Food Writers and we have a deep interest in artisan food – where and how it's produced and the story behind it, especially the person behind the label on a pack or bottle and the skilled chefs who devise and cook restaurant menus. Nowadays, consumers are putting much more thought into what they buy and where it comes from and want good quality produce and something different from what's available in the local supermarket.

Our first stop was to Wirralstone Farm, tucked away off the Chester High Road. Mark Carus breeds award-winning Tamworth, Lop, Berkshire and curly-eared Mangalitzas and supplies his excellent pork to Thornton Hall hotel. These happy pigs are free to roam in the woodlands and fields and on the day we visited, it was blisteringly hot, so the pigs and their adorable little piglets had wisely decided to wallow in the cooling mud or retreat into their shady little 'houses'! Mark had also arranged tastings of gelato ice cream from Chilly Stuff (made from Appleby's Farm milk), a welcome surprise on such a hot day.

A short drive later we arrived at the Wirral Distillery, run by a small team of artisan distillers producing small batch gins. Different gins are identifiable by their unique botanical profiles, although all gin must contain juniper as this is a legal requirement – without this, you can't have distilled gin! Wirral Gin is floral and aromatic with bog myrtle included in the botanicals. Wirral literally means 'myrtle corner', from the Old English *wir*, a myrtle tree, and *heal*, an angle, corner or slope. It is thought that in the past Wirral was overgrown with bog myrtle, a plant still plentiful around Formby.

At this small distillery the range of gins includes Everton Gin, Ormskirk Gin, Bulldog Gin, and many more besides. There's also a range of coloured flavoured gins such as Rose, Violetta, Lime and Coconut, and an unusual Persian Blue, an intriguing gin made using a traditional combination of botanicals, along with Marshmallow Root.

Wirral Distillery also makes a unique gin, exclusive to Thornton Hall – the superb Torintone, created specifically to Thornton Hall's own recipe after many test tastings with Geoff Dale, Thornton Hall's general manager (who is very knowledgeable about gin). The name comes from the Domesday Book, due to the fact that the settlement which many years later became the village of Thornton Hough was recorded as Torintone.



Later we enjoyed an informal evening meal in the relaxed atmosphere of The Brasserie at Thornton Hall, choosing from a large selection of tasty hot and cold dishes freshly prepared by the hotel's chefs.

Afterwards we sampled the luscious gin and vodka based liqueurs from local makers Windsor's Fruit Liqueurs. Mary Walton soaks fresh fruits in

alcohol for months before bottling the liqueurs by hand and also makes a unique Smugglers Rum Shrub, made to an ancient recipe – an echo of the days when smuggling was common along the coasts of Wirral and Liverpool, to avoid the high taxes levied on imported goods, particularly alcohol. The evening ended with delicious cocktails created by Mary's barman, Sam Turner using the liqueurs, Prosecco and fruit juices. A great way to end a very pleasurable day!

After a leisurely breakfast next morning we set off for NoWFOOD, located on the main campus at the University of Chester. This project, valued at £5.1 million, has been co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the University of Chester. A centre of excellence for food science and technology for producers across the region, NoWFOOD encourages and supports small- and medium-sized food businesses by providing them with the latest facilities and expertise and also allows them to explore new markets and develop new product ideas.

It's the first single venue in the North West to offer a complete end-to-end product development and testing service to food producers in the region with hands-on specialist technical support, test kitchens, incubation space for start-ups, sensory testing units, and ongoing business advice. Small

producers can move away from their home kitchens into serious, professional production kitchens with the latest equipment. A food development kitchen is also available for hire, with more specialised equipment. Both kitchens can be hired for short-term or long-term usage. With equipment including Rational steam ovens, Thermomix and Robot Coupe food processors, a blast chiller, Hobart blenders, a vegetable preparation machine, water baths, vacuum sealers, a filling machine, a packaging machine and a walk-in cold room, this is a fantastic facility for food producers. Larger food companies can access new technologies and processes such as the sensory unit offering consumer tastings, insights and opinions.

Centre Manager Jeff George showed us around the kitchens, meeting rooms and labs and on the day we were there we watched a food company, the intriguingly named '9 Meals from Anarchy' making organic vegetable stocks from their own home-grown organic vegetables. We came away highly impressed by NoWFOOD's cutting-edge technology and the opportunities it offers to the region's small independent food producers.



Lunchtime and Thornton Hall treated us to a very special picnic in the lovely walled garden at Burton Manor. The hotel staff served us their award-winning afternoon tea – a selection of mouth-watering finger sandwiches, plus delectable cakes, fancies and freshly baked scones, with custom-made jams and curds produced specially for the hotel by Pant Glas Bach Preserves in North Wales. This afternoon tea deservedly won the 'Best Tasting Afternoon Tea' at the Afternoon Tea of the Year 2018 held in London.

Thornton Hall beat off some stiff competition from hotels such as the five-star Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park and was the only finalist outside of London. An incredible triumph!

Our final visit of the day was to Chilli Gourmets in Lower Heswall. Jane Fern grows around sixty-two varieties of chillies, ranging from the very mild to mouth-searingly hot! The best seller is Purple Haze, a medium heat Cayenne chilli that changes from a beautiful purple colour to a purple-tinged red. The colourful chillies looked beautiful and we tasted several varieties. Jane also makes wonderful award-winning chilli relishes, pickles and sauces, which we enjoyed with her home-made bread. We picked up some tips too – Jane says that chillies can be frozen, both whole or chopped, but don't allow them to thaw out – use them from frozen in cooking.

Back to Thornton Hall hotel and a chance to unwind in the hotel spa with a choice of relaxing treatments or a cooling swim in the pool before dinner in the hotel's imposing Oak Room.

The exciting Tasting Menu for the six-course formal dinner was devised by Lawns Restaurant Head Chef Chad Hughes, Kitchen Manager Sam Wilson and the team (there are 22 chefs at the hotel!) and was accompanied by wines from Tanners Wine Merchants who supply quality wines from small producers to Thornton Hall. The very knowledgeable Adrian Patterson from Tanners guided us through the different wines served with each course, with his expert tasting notes. Abdallah the restaurant manager ensured every course followed seamlessly.

With a fabulous choice of dishes on the menu, including hand-dived scallops, Butter-poached Lobster, Welsh Lamb with 'charcoal mayo', an outstanding selection of cheeses and sumptuous desserts such as Apricot Soufflé with Lavender Ice Cream, there were so many great dishes it was difficult to choose – but we managed! I was intrigued by one accompaniment to my choice of the delicious third course – Halibut, Smoked Potato, Fennel and Dee Estuary Offerings. The latter comprised Purslane, Sea Aster, Samphire and Sea Plantain foraged by Chad Hughes around the Dee Estuary. Chad is a great forager and regularly travels all over the region to forage for wild plants for the restaurant menus. I was particularly fascinated to learn that he makes capers from immature elderberries!

Our meal ended with a selection of chocolates from chocolatier Neil McGrath, who makes chocolates for the hotel. His latest creation is a moulded white chocolate with a filling containing sun-dried tomatoes and basil. It sounds an odd combination, but the flavours actually work together very well and it was scrumptious.

Our two-day stay had passed all too quickly, but after breakfast there was just time for a tour of the hotel and a visit to Thornton Hall's new venture – their own small garden with herbs and beehives. The bees are settling into their new hives and Thornton Hall's own honey will be available to buy.

We loved our splendidly stylish bedrooms and the attentive service from all the cheerful, hardworking staff – everyone goes the extra mile to make you feel very welcome and comfortable – a testament to Geoff Dale, who's been at the hotel for seventeen years. My food writing colleagues enjoyed the experience so much, they're going to go back to the hotel for a long weekend and there's no better recommendation than that.

Carol Wilson's latest cookbook is *Liquorice: A Cookbook: From sticks to syrup: delicious sweet and savoury recipes*. Available from all good bookshops and Amazon.