

## Forget Rock, make tracks for marvellous Mwnt

Caroline Cadwalladr, The Observer

**It may have been raining pretty much all summer, but nothing can dampen the enthusiasm with which Wales is reinventing itself. Carole Cadwalladr heads home to find a bright new era of chic hotels and cooking to make Rick Stein blush**



Newgale on the Pembrokeshire Coast in Wales, which is fast becoming as popular as Cornwall. Photograph: Crown copyright (2008) Visit Wales

Oh, people can be such snotbags when it comes to Wales. How they go on and on about the rain, how it's always raining. How the concept of the gastropub has yet to make the great leap westward. How, just as you've lost your way, on a hillside, in the rain, a farmer will appear and tell you to buggeroffmyfieldrightnow.

But that's enough about me. At least, having grown up in Wales, I also know about the green greenness of its hills and the soft softness of its rain. (Being Welsh, I am impervious to rain; it simply beads at my neck and runs off my back.) Not to mention the strange wondrousness of the vowellessness of its towns: Ynysddu, Bwlchgywn, Eglwyswrw - hello? are you still with me? - and my very favourites, the delightful Plwmp and the marvellous Mwnt. Repeat after me, Rhosllanerchrugog, Dwygyfylchi, Blaenllechau. And yet I still find myself making snarky metropolitan comments about the poor quality of the cappuccinos and complaining about the over-dependence of the public houses on scampi and chips.

And then I find myself driving through the clouds above the Preseli mountains and down into a forgotten valley behind the sea in Aberaeron to a hotel called Ty Mawr where the dreamiest combination of roast hake, samphire and Penclawdd cockle sauce is waiting for me. By coincidence, I ate at Rick Stein's Seafood Restaurant in Padstow earlier this summer, and that was good. But this, cooked by Paul Owens, a Swansea boy, with all ingredients

sourced within what seems like 500 yards of the house, is, I would say, even better.

It turns out that I haven't been paying attention. Or that I've missed the signs. Or maybe I saw them (when I went to the pub in Little Haven, Pembrokeshire, earlier this year, it had turned into a boutique hotel, which is quite annoying, actually, when you're after a drink and it's been fully booked for weeks) and yet I still didn't put the pieces together.

But something has happened. People keep on saying the C-word: Cornwall. And while there have been new gastro places creeping over the border from England for a while now, the Felin Fach near Brecon, and the Bell at Skenfrith, it's West Wales - an arc that takes in Cardigan Bay in the north down to Gower in the south - that has changed quite recently and quite suddenly; overnight it seems.

The great perk, it turns out, of being a depressed rural economy, where the average GDP is less than 75 per cent of the European average, is that millions of pounds of EU money has been pumped into tourism in the last two years. Which, it turns out, buys an awful lot of fancy bath taps.

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