



The Arbroath Smokie

Our award-winning photojournalist Tom Langlands sinks his teeth into some of Scotland's classic culinary culture



Strolling through the old fishing village of Auchmithie - perched on the high, red-sandstone cliffs of Scotland's east coast - I passed by the vernacular, stone-built cottages that once housed the community's many fishing families. Where the buildings end, the cliff top vista opens up to provide spectacular views over Auchmithie Bay. Here was the starting point in my quest to better understand and appreciate the world-famous delicacy that is smoked haddock - or more specifically - the Arbroath Smokie.

Breathing in the fresh, salt-laden air blowing off the North Sea, I headed down the centuries-old track that links the village with the now-dilapidated harbour in the bay below. At the end of the 18th century, Auchmithie had a population of 180 and a fishing fleet of 6 boats. Today, an old, wooden boat dragged up on the foreshore is the only reminder of the community's fishing industry that peaked at the end of the 19th century, and which boasted over 30 boats sustaining a population of 400 persons. While many of these boats operated inshore, seeking out lobsters and crabs, several larger vessels would venture into more dangerous waters in search of haddock, cod and herring. Historically, salt was used to preserve foodstuff, but in Auchmithie there was a unique tradition of cooking and preserving fish by smoking them in wooden half-barrels sunk into the ground and covered with damp hessian sacking.

Norse invaders, who arrived in their longboats, settled in the area around Auchmithie Bay in the 11th century, and tradition has it that they brought the hot-smoking technique with them. To this day, there

are similar smoking techniques carried out in parts of Scandinavia. If Auchmithie was the birthplace of the Smokie, I was still at a loss to understand why it became synonymous with Arbroath, and so I headed three miles south to that little fishing town, famous in Scottish history as the place where the Declaration of Arbroath - often referred to as the Declaration of Independence - was signed in 1320.

Arbroath harbour is big and bustling. Large areas are given over to modern marina moorings with small cabin cruisers and yachts, but I sought out the working parts of the harbour where the lobster creels were stacked on the quayside and the fishing boats were unloading their catches. In conversation with the local fishermen, I discovered that during the 19th century, Arbroath harbour had expanded into an important trading port, with ships sailing to and from Scandinavia, northern Europe, and as far afield as North America.

Auchmithie had always been the prime fishing port in the area. However, as Arbroath expanded with improved harbour facilities, greater opportunities for trade and better housing, many residents relocated there. They brought with them the skills for smoking fish that, by now, had been perfected over several centuries. With the ability to sell their wares to a wider market, buyers associated the product with Arbroath rather than Auchmithie, and so it became known as the Arbroath Smokie.

Wandering through the streets away from the harbour, I found a couple of smokehouses that served up smoked fish of varying species.



These were more commercial ventures with big, brick smoking-sheds and tall chimneys, and seemed a far cry from the traditional methods of wooden half-barrels and damp hessian sackcloth.

Nonetheless, I had lunch in a restaurant overlooking the harbour and ordered an Arbroath Smokie. It was golden-brown and perfectly palatable, but I had no idea how it stacked up against those cooked and prepared in the ancient ways of Auchmithie. Thus, my search for the holy grail of Arbroath Smokies continued, and it wasn't long before I met Iain Spink.

Spink is a fifth generation producer of Arbroath Smokies, and I caught up with him at Dunfermline Farmers' Market on a wet Saturday morning. I had no difficulty in finding him; the smoke signals rose periodically over his stall, and the delicate aroma of smoke-cooked fish hung in the air. There were at least a dozen customers waiting to be served and I must have passed the same number walking through the market eating their hot Smokies from the paper they were served in. I introduced myself as he lifted the damp sackcloth from his wooden half-barrel, sprinkled on some water, and sent another aroma-laden cloud of smoke over the market.

Lifting a specially-shaped wooden stick onto the barrel over which pairs of haddock were hung, Spink explained the process and its history, "Although historically haddock were landed at Auchmithie, most fish are now landed and purchased at the fishing port of Peterhead in the north-east of Scotland. They are then transported by road in refrigerated containers. I only buy the best quality haddock that has been gutted at sea as soon as it has been caught."

Back in Arbroath, he prepares the haddock by removing the heads, cleaning out the belly cavities and laying them on a layer of salt. A further layer of salt is then placed over the fish and they are left between two to twenty-four hours. Typically, around six hours is the norm, but it depends upon the size and moisture content of the fish, as well as environmental conditions at the time. They are then sized in pairs and tied by the tails with traditional jute string before being dipped in cold water to drain off excess salt. A fire is then lit inside the wooden barrel, but that too must meet certain requirements. "Only hardwood logs can be used to generate the necessary aromas and flavours. Softwood



produces too much resin that taints the fish." The pairs of fish are then hung over wooden sticks placed across the barrel before being covered in damp hessian. As with many parts of the process, it is experience that determines how long the fish is cooked. Typically, it is around forty minutes, but the sackcloth is occasionally wetted and removed for a quick inspection with a sprinkling of water thrown over the fish if necessary.

Spink can trace his fishing family roots back to the early 1700s, when his grandfather's side of the family lived in Auchmithie. His father, Robert (Bob) Spink, was instrumental in securing 'Protected Geographical Indication' (PGI) status for the Arbroath Smokie in 2004. PGI status determines that only haddock smoked according to traditional methods and within an eight-kilometre radius of Arbroath can be described as Arbroath Smokies. And while Spink is regarded as an ambassador for the delicacy, his life almost took a different direction. Having worked in the family fish business in Arbroath after leaving school in the 1970s, he headed for Inverness when the business was sold in 2001.

There, he embarked on a career change that saw him graduate with a degree in Applied Environmental Science. With his skills at preparing Smokies, he would occasionally take a break from his studies and sell his wares 'direct from the barrel' at Highland games. His reputation for the quality of the product grew, and soon he was in demand at various markets across Scotland.

Although there are several unrelated Spink families producing Smokies in Arbroath, Iain Spink - and his father and grandfather before him - have spent years mastering the art of creating the Arbroath Smokie. Smoking haddock is a process that Spink acknowledges has changed over the years. "Centuries ago it was a much tougher process, aimed principally at preserving the fish for longer periods. The result was a harder, saltier and smokier process than current buyers would choose.

"The Arbroath Smokie of today is a process of ongoing evolution. It shares the same processes and skills as in the good old days, but it has been refined to produce a more delicate and finely balanced flavour that is sought after by some of the nation's top chefs."

My Smokie was served on paper, straight from the barrel. Spink deboned it in an instant and its piping-hot flesh broke away easily in my fingers from the golden-brown skin. It had the texture of velvety, soft flesh that crumbled in the mouth with flavours of woodsmoke and the sea. This was seafood at its best - prepared with decades of experience, and garnished with centuries of culture and history.

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