

Water levels in Padstow's inner harbour are controlled by a tidal gate, meaning it's kept wet all the time. Prior to this, it would dry out on every ebb tide

SORRY, RICK: IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU

Oysters, crab, lobster and other seafood delights – not to mention Sunday lunches and the winner of the National Fish and Chip Awards. Don't tell **Neil Davey** dining in Cornwall begins and ends with Padstow and Rick Stein

CORNWALL'S SCENERY HAS POETS WAXING LYRICAL AND ARTISTS REACHING FOR THE OILS

Is it possible to write about Cornish food and not mention **Rick Stein**? Well, er, no, apparently not. Wherever you go in Cornwall, Stein's shadow seems to touch everything. Not that that's a bad thing, of course. But the more you explore, the more you realise that while Stein undoubtedly helped push things forward, the real star is Cornwall itself.

Neil Haydock, executive chef at the Watergate Bay Hotel, agrees. "Obviously Rick started it off, then so many of us came here, all guns blazing, thinking we'd revolutionise the place, but we're the ones who changed. Cornwall does that. We're really chilled out and that's influenced our food."

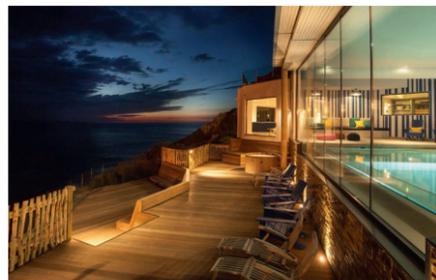
Rick Stein, wildly famous for his seafood restaurant in Padstow, once told an interviewer he'd like to be remembered for cooking a 'nice bit of fish'.

And, in turn, the food – "I think we have a better source of ingredients than even London", he says – has influenced Haydock and all of the cafés, restaurants, hotels and pubs we visit on our all-too-brief tour of this beautiful corner of England. The 'Padstein' effect may have got the culinary tourism ball rolling, but Cornwall is a place with a food culture that's so much bigger than one man.

It's also a place with the sort of scenery that has poets waxing lyrical and artists reaching for the oils. Its tumbling



IMAGES FROM THE TOP: Kids playing on the beach at Watergate Bay, near Newquay; the pool terrace at the Watergate Bay Hotel; St Michael's Mount is reachable via a man-made cobbled causeway – when the tide's out



hills, expanses of water, chocolate box villages, windswept coastlines and miles of beaches, such as Watergate Bay, are all lit and shadowed in dramatic fashion by meteorological extremes. "We're the warmest county," says Haydock, "but we're also the wettest." As for the whole 'grockle' thing and hostility towards non-Cornish folk, we see no evidence, receiving the warmest of welcomes at every juncture.

The week started in Falmouth, a port town of great maritime heritage and, yes, a certain degree of tourist bait. Even so, it's a town not without its foodie charms – for example Harbour Lights, winner of the National Fish and Chip Awards 2012 – and

MERCHANTS MANOR

Billing itself as a country house hotel doesn't paint the entire picture for Falmouth's Merchants Manor. The main house dates from 1913, while the accommodation – bright, modern, with a hint of beach chic – is more recent. Ditto the large swimming pool, the compact but well-appointed gym, the gardens and dining areas in this pleasingly Tardis-like establishment. It shows that the owners have spent nearly £1m on a refurb in the past year, and their relaxed but professional attitude permeates everything. They do a damned fine Sunday lunch too. merchantsmanor.com

it's a pleasant place to walk off a delicious, robust Sunday lunch from Merchants Manor, then work up an appetite for a well-cooked fresh lobster dinner at Amélie's At The Smokehouse in nearby Porthleven.

Being in a contrary mood, we shunned the more obvious destinations – sorry Land's End – and instead spent a happy morning exploring St Michael's Mount, a National Trust property around 400m off the coast at Marazion and, according to legend, the setting for Jack the Giant Killer's exploits. You can take that as you will, but the more provable history – of the 12th-century church and priory, and the castle that's still home to the St Aubyn

Photographs by Christopher Marsh / Alamy, Kristin Friek 2012, Andrew Ray / Alamy



ABOVE: Bird's eye view of Port Isaac, which is home to restaurants that serve up fish so fresh, chefs have to wait for rigor mortis to end. RIGHT: Houses atop the cliffs at Port Isaac



family – is fascinating and the views, both back across the causeway and further up and down the coast, are terrific. And should there be any doubts of that sense of pride in the local larder, the café here should dispel them: the crab in my sandwich is so fresh a vet could have it scuttling sideways again.

It's a similar story elsewhere, from the **Porthilly oysters** at The Old Coastguard in Mousehole (the sweetest I've ever had, anywhere) to the geographically annotated menu – Camel Estuary mackerel, Padstow crab – at the lovely St Moritz Hotel. Perhaps the best example comes in the

aforementioned, ludicrously perfect village of Port Isaac. The setting for *Doc Martin* – and a quite remarkable amount of Martin Clunes-inspired international tourism – you'd forgive them a little for selling out. Instead, it's a place of immense charm. Having bypassed Nathan Outlaw's restaurant – it's brilliant, but we already knew that – we stumble across Cupcakes Café, a quirky local spot offering slices of homemade battenberg cake the size of my face and a delicious crab rarebit that would have some London chefs weeping. When I ask where the crab came from, the lady on the counter gestures to a shack 20 yards away, overlooking the cove. "There," she says. "Caught this morning."

It's an exchange that comes up again the following day – after I check into the oh-so-chilled Watergate Bay Hotel – over a beer with Haydock. He laughs and nods. "We have a couple of guys who bring fish to us off the boat. We have to leave it in the fridge overnight because it's still got rigor mortis when we get it.

"It's inspiring. We don't have to think about seasons, it's what's in the fridge, it just appears on our doorstep." Almost literally: Haydock gestures to the hill overlooking the hotel. "I mean, we've got Red Ruby cows in that field up there," he says.

Later, as I take a mind-clearing stroll along the spectacularly vast beach at Watergate Bay – "the world's best spa" as

Porthilly oysters are hand picked from beds in the estuary of the River Camel, near Porthilly in north Cornwall. The oysters won gold in the British Oyster Championship 2013.

Haydock calls it – the reason I'm struggling to separate Cornish food and Cornwall becomes clear. The sea is stunning and teeming with delicious life, the countryside is glorious and contains farms and wild game – it's all inextricably linked. Cornwall doesn't have a larder. Cornwall *is* the larder. A delightful and beautiful one at that. **e**

For further details, see visitcornwall.com, or call 01872 322900 for the Visit Cornwall brochure. For more about the hotel, visit watergatebay.co.uk, call 01637 860543 or email life@watergatebay.co.uk

I ASK WHERE THE CRAB CAME FROM. THE LADY ON THE COUNTER GESTURES AND SAYS 'THERE'

ST MORITZ HOTEL

Glorious white against the Wadebridge hilltops, the St Moritz Hotel neatly combines a classic, art deco-inspired look with all the mod cons, ably straddling the chic world of the 1920s with everything you'd expect from a modern hotel. Service is efficient but with a sense of fun, and the rooms – particularly the suites with vast balconies overlooking the sea – are sleek and comfortable. Facilities are top notch, with a beautiful pool, and the spa is highly recommended, as are the restaurants where head chef Jamie Porter – ex-Stein, almost inevitably – is doing marvellous things with local ingredients, of course.

stmoritzhotel.co.uk