The Story of Isle of Man Food & Drink
An Island of distinctive food and drink

A typical 1800s Manx working class diet might include:

Breakfast: (7am)
Porridge
Fried ham or a boiled egg
Soda or barley bread

Dinner: (Noon)
Lentil or pea soup, or
Sheep’s head or chicken broth
Potatoes and herring, or
Potatoes or fish with buttermilk, or
Bacon and beans

Sunday Dinner
Roast lamb, potatoes, cabbage
Sago (imported) or batter pudding

Tea (4pm)
Boiled eggs
Soda cakes
Manx biscuits with raspberry or strawberry jam

Supper (7pm)
Porridge for the children,
fish for the adults (kippers in season, or skate with bread and butter)

Cheese was placed on the table at almost every meal.

The Isle of Man, while relatively small, has a wealth of natural resources, including healthy seas and the soil and climate required to grow grass for livestock-grazing. Historically, rural Manx people were able to live on a subsistence diet of locally sourced food, including barley bread, salted herring, and vegetables such as potatoes. Meat was more of a luxury, although pigs were often kept and records suggest that goat meat was more commonly eaten than lamb. These dietary patterns remained largely unchanged until the growth of the tourism industry and the urbanisation of the Manx population in the late nineteenth century.

The Island was also home to several distinctive breeds of animals. A small, wild mountain pig known as Purs was esteemed for its ‘admirable meat’, which was so admirable, in fact, that the breed became extinct by the early nineteenth century. Loaghtan sheep, believed to have been introduced by the Vikings and still in existence today, also formed part of the local diet – sheep’s head broth was a common dish in the countryside.

‘The sea feedeth more of the Manksmen than of the soil. It yieldeth to the islanders presently of divers sorts of fish, but of no one sort so much as of herrings, in their season.’

William Blundell
1876
The urban, and typically more affluent, population primarily consisted of people from other parts of the British Isles who had moved to the Island to enjoy a better quality of life. While the upper classes bought local produce, they often prepared it according to their own ancestral recipes, rather than Manx tradition. Hotels and cafes, too, would cater to the visiting population's dietary preferences instead of showcasing traditional Manx dishes, using Manx meat in recipes such as Cornish pasties and Durham cutlets, for instance.

Much has changed since the 1800s but locally produced food remains an important part of our culture, making a significant contribution to the Island's economy.

Due to an abundance of quality produce, the Isle of Man has been able to support an export economy since the 1700s when red, cured herring was exported to plantations in the West Indies. By the second half of the nineteenth century, local production of certain foodstuffs, such as grain, kippers and cattle, had increased exponentially in order to meet overseas demand as well as feed the increasing numbers of visitors to the Island, particularly working class visitors from the industrial north-west of England.

Despite this increase in local production, however, it soon became necessary to import some goods, particularly fresh fruit and vegetables, due to the growing number of summer visitors flocking to the Island for a seaside holiday and the resulting rise in demand. For instance, 90,000 tourists visited the Island in 1873, rising to 663,360 in 1913.

Today, Manx products may be found all over the world. For instance, 1,500 tonnes of cheese are exported per year, primarily to North American markets, 7,000 tonnes of queenies, king scallop, crab and lobster as well as 1,000 tonnes of beef and 600 tonnes of lamb.
A thriving food and drink culture

Local produce has always been, and continues to be, central to the Manx story. The popularity and increasing number of exhibitors at the Isle of Man Food & Drink festival, along with the growth in entries to the Guide to Isle of Man Food and Drink – from 51 in 2009 to 101 in 2015 – are both strong indicators of a very healthy sector and positive growth.

There are many ways for you to get involved and support our local producers and food and drink businesses...

Farmers’ Markets, which have existed on the Island for hundreds of years, bring together local people who are passionate about growing, making and selling Manx food and drink. See www.iomfm.co.uk for up-to-date information on when and where you can find your local Farmers’ Market.

The Isle of Man Food & Drink Festival, an annual event since 2009, celebrates the diversity and quality of the Island’s produce. It hosts more local producers and products in one place than any other event on the Island and has also attracted thousands of visitors each year.

The Isle of Man Beer and Cider Festival, also an annual event, showcases the Island’s impressive and distinctive range of breweries and microbreweries.

For more information on the Island’s lively food and drink scene, please see www.gov.im/foodanddrink and pick up a Taste Directory and a Guide to Isle of Man Food and Drink which features sections on visits, eating out and cookery schools as well as local food and drink businesses.

In 2014, the Government introduced Food Matters, a food business development strategy which works in tandem with Vision 2020’s strategic goals to invest in local producers. This initiative plans to increase the value of local food and drink production by £50 million over the next 10 years.