



# ‘Great chieftain o’ the puddin’-race’

It might be made from sheep’s offal and forever associated with Scotland’s infamous bard, but haggis—which will be consumed around the world at Burns suppers this week—is as popular as it ever was, says Flora Watkins

**T**HE Scots have a wonderful word for the cold and gloom at this time of year. *Dreich* describes superbly the damp, dark days of midwinter when the immortal memory of Scotland’s most celebrated poet, Robert Burns, is celebrated on his birth date, January 25.

Hot, steaming haggis will be piped in to Burns suppers across the country on Monday and wherever there are Scottish expatriates. The ‘great chieftan o’ the puddin’-race’ has become so embedded in the national consciousness that Mel Gibson was invited to cook it on a TV show during the filming of *Braveheart* and three ‘haggis, neeps and tatties’ fences featured at last year’s European eventing championships at Blair Castle. (However, due to the typically Scottish summer, the ‘haggis’ element had to be removed, as so many horses struggled to jump it out of the deep mud.)

However, the origins of haggis are as obscure as Scotch mist. Savoury puddings boiled in an animal’s stomach are universal and date back to at least Ancient Greece. The food writer Nichola Fletcher—who, for many years, produced a venison haggis at her deer farm near Auchtermuchty in Fife—discloses that the first references to haggis she has found are in 15th-century English cookbooks. Isn’t claiming haggis as an English dish, as Burns himself might have said, a bit ‘warm-reekin rich’?

Not at all, contends Mrs Fletcher, ‘but it was Robert Burns who turned it into iconic Scottish food. This is peasant food. It’s the sort of thing you want to eat when you’ve come back from hill walking. When you’re wet and cold, haggis, neeps and tatties are as good as it gets.’

James Macsween, whose Edinburgh factory sells some £4 million of haggis a year, points out that Burns’s *Address to a Haggis* isn’t just a celebration of this poor man’s dish, it’s also a biting satire on the pretensions of the Scottish bourgeoisie of the time. The ‘ploughman poet’s’ praise of the unpretentious haggis was in stark contrast to the dainty French dishes favoured by the aristocracy, who turned their noses up at such unpretentious fare.

Haggis, jokes Mr Macsween, was ‘the original boil-in-the-bag ready meal’. The only stipulation is that it must contain offal. Mr Macsween’s features minced lamb and beef, oatmeal, onions, seasoning and spices. He also makes a three-bird haggis, a venison one and two vegetarian versions, which are surprisingly popular with meat eaters.

Mrs Fletcher adds that haggis should be nicely peppery, but warns that ‘there’s a lot of disgusting haggis out there’. As an undergraduate at Edinburgh University, I was

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nearly put off for life by the version served in Pollock Halls of Residence, which resembled the contents of a can of dog food. Happily, Scottish friends converted me (after a due amount of teasing about three-legged haggis being hunted through the heather).

All the stockists listed (*see box*) have been recommended by Scottish COUNTRY LIFE



‘Gie her a Haggis!’ Oh, go on then. Tatties and a dram of whisky, too, please

readers for the ‘honest sonsie faces’ and ‘gushing entrails’ of their haggis.

The rituals of Burns Night are reassuringly familiar. After the Selkirk Grace, the haggis is piped in (one proud Scot in exile, the Radio 4 newsreader Susan Rae, once improvised with a trombone player at her London flat). The *Address* is read and, at the appropriate point, the haggis is pierced with a dagger (the *sgian-dubh*) and served with neeps (what the English think of as orange-fleshed swedes) and tatties. Then, there’s the Toast to the Lasses and response; later, there are recitals of Burns’s poetry, often singing and sometimes a *ceilidh*.

Don’t slosh a dram over your meal, says Mr Macsween, as it’s ‘a waste of good whisky and good haggis’. He advises that it’s best accompanied by a full-bodied red wine or a dark beer.

Mr Macsween estimates he’ll attend a dozen Burns suppers this month, including one in Brussels. Expatriates will go to extreme lengths to feast on their national dish. Prof Martin Hogg of Edinburgh Law School remembers a Burns supper in Regensburg in Germany at the height of the BSE crisis, when one of the guests ‘had to smuggle a large quantity of haggis in his luggage’.

In her book *The Haggis: A Little History*, Clarissa Dickson Wright relates tales of the diplomatic bag being used to sneak supplies into the British Embassy in Washington DC, due to the American ban on imports of sheep’s lung. However, Mr Macsween is hopeful of getting a modified haggis into America in time for Burns Night 2017.

Haggis can be enjoyed anywhere—on the Caledonian sleeper, in a bap leaning against the Aga, at a midweek kitchen supper—but it’s Burns and the immortal memory with which it is inextricably entwined.

When Miss Rae organised her first Burns Night supper, she was ‘seized by a not entirely accurate nostalgia, a yearning for something I hadn’t really experienced’, Burns suppers being largely men-only affairs when she was a young girl growing up in Dundee. However, with 20 friends crammed around her dining table, the *Address* read ‘magnificently’ by Paddy O’Connell of Radio 4’s Broadcasting House, the drink flowing (the trombonist drank most of the 10-year-old Macallan) and the humble fare carefully cooked and presented, it was, she recalls, ‘a most enjoyably rumbustious affair’.

As Burns himself recommended: ‘But, if ye wish her gratefu prayer,/Gie her a Haggis!’ Just remember to hide the best Scotch. 🐣

### Where to buy haggis

- **Macsween, stocked in most supermarkets (0131-440 2555; [www.macsween.co.uk](http://www.macsween.co.uk))**
- Findlays of Portobello, Edinburgh ([www.findlaysthebutchers.co.uk](http://www.findlaysthebutchers.co.uk); 0131-669 4559)
- **Lindsay Grieve, Hawick, Roxburghshire (01450 372109; [www.lindsaygrievehaggis.com](http://www.lindsaygrievehaggis.com))**
- Brian Devlin Butchers, Dollar, Clackmannanshire (01259 42139)
- **The three butchers in Castle Douglas, Dumfries & Galloway’s food town: Ballards (01556 502501; [www.ballardsbutchers.co.uk](http://www.ballardsbutchers.co.uk)), Grierson Bros (01556 502637; [www.griersonbros.co.uk](http://www.griersonbros.co.uk)) and S. Henderson (01556 502654)**
- For a great haggis supper, visit The Bay Fish & Chips, Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire (01569 762000; [www.thebayfishandchips.com](http://www.thebayfishandchips.com))
- **Nichola Fletcher’s book, *Ultimate Venison Cookery*, contains a recipe for haggis (01337 828369; [www.nicholafletcher.com](http://www.nicholafletcher.com))**

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