



Portrush

Portrush Harbour is lined with seafood restaurants and the fishing boats that supply them. OPPOSITE Will Abernethy churns butter in the traditional fashion

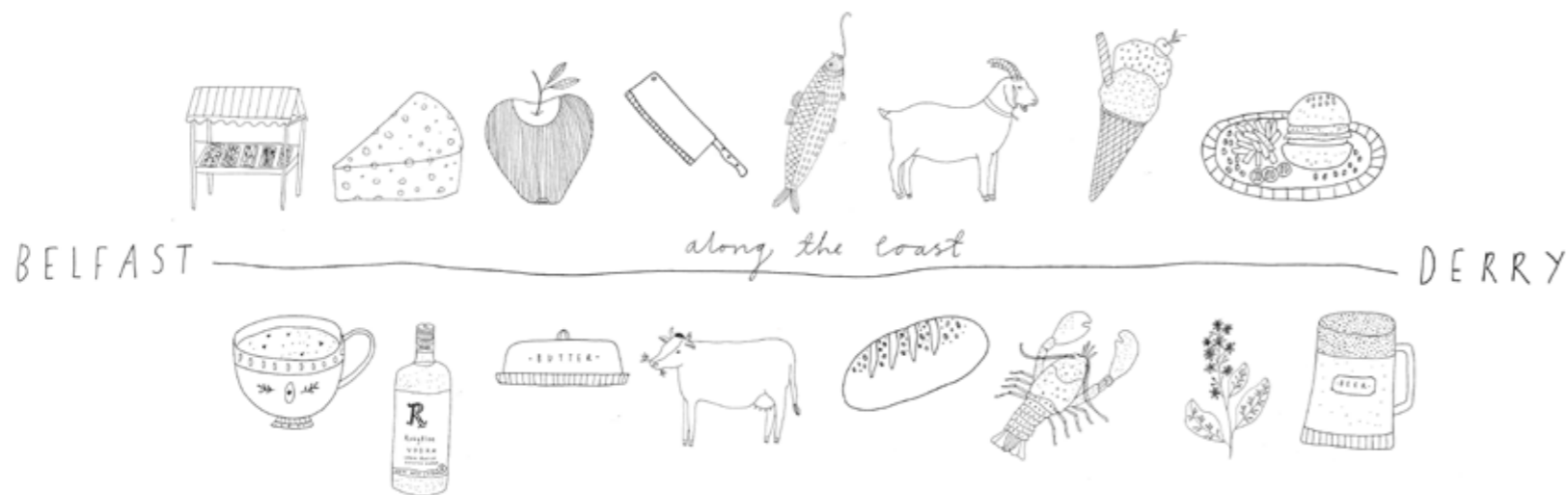


NEW TRAVEL SECRETS

FIELD & SHORE

Northern Ireland is a fresh addition to the visitor map – take a road trip to meet a new generation of food producers who are drawing the best out of its epic-worthy landscapes

WORDS GABRIELLE JAFFE @gjaffe
PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY
@montgomeryphoto



IT'S SATURDAY MORNING AT ST GEORGE'S and the market in central Belfast is thick with competing aromas: crisping bacon from an Ulster fry, rich coffee and the sweet fragrance of dahlias on a farm stall laden with rhubarb, blackcurrants and a rainbow of fruit juices.

Nearby a band plays *Here Comes the Sun* and, as if on cue, the daylight filtering through the Victorian glass roof intensifies. At an open door behind the seafood traders, a gull waits for scraps. A young fishmonger holds up today's haul: a gleaming, pinkish-orange slab of salmon. Next to him, Alan Coffey, a moustached old-hand in his yellow fisherman's wellies, shucks oysters for a buyer who can't wait until he's home to try them. 'We've always been spoilt for seafood, with all the loughs and the Irish Sea,' says Alan, surrounded by evidence of this – heaps of crabs, lobsters, mussels and winkles.

Over the three decades that Alan has run a stall, the market has transformed along with the nation. When he started, St George's predominantly sold fresh produce to the neighbourhood. In 1999 – a year after the Good Friday Agreement signalled peace for Northern Ireland – the market reopened following an extensive restoration, and alongside the butchers, fishmongers and fruit-and-veg sellers sprung vendors selling hot food and artisanal goods. 'During the Troubles, if there was a bomb in Belfast, no-one came that day,' recalls Alan. 'Now people travel 50 miles to the market and make a day of it.'



One of the new wave of stallholders that helped make St George's a destination is **Suki Tea (suki-tea.com)**. From selling a handful of flavours at the market in 2005, including its signature Belfast Brew – a kick-you-out-of-bed strength of cuppa – the boutique blender now exports worldwide. The company also runs a tea academy out of its warehouse located on the Peace Line – a barrier built in 1969 to separate clashing Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods, now covered in murals and messages. 'We've seen the market blossom. It's a real springboard for food and drink entrepreneurs,' says Suki Tea founder Oscar Woolley, as he balances manning the stall and cradling his little boy in his arms.

St George's is a microcosm of the city as a whole. People once feared going out after dark. Now areas like Belfast's Cathedral Quarter are crammed with busy restaurants and pubs. Throughout Northern

Ireland there's a confidence growing in the culinary scene as a new generation experiments with the raw materials that have always been there.

BEYOND BELFAST

'There's an insane amount of produce here,' says Mike Thompson, slicing car wheel-sized rounds of cheese, in preparation for one of the regular tasting nights he holds at bars in and around Belfast. After training at the School of Artisan Food in England, aged 26, he launched **Mike's Fancy Cheese (mfcheese.com)** with the help of a crowd-funding platform. Sourcing from a farm four miles from his workshop in Newtownards, he created Northern Ireland's first raw-milk blue cheese, christening it Young Buck. Skinny-jeaned and bespectacled, Mike is aware that had he grown up somewhere else, he might have been an artist or musician: 'It's not difficult to see why creative people are drawn to making food here. It's so easy to work directly with farmers.'



In this predominantly rural country, no-one is more than a few miles from fields. Not far from the soils where Comber spuds grow – a varietal with the same protected status as champagne – Barbara and Stuart Hughes hit on a novel idea: the first Irish potato vodka. 'Perhaps we liked eating them too much to use them for alcohol,' jokes Barbara, offering an explanation for why no-one in Ireland had ever attempted this before. In a small warehouse in Lisburn, the couple hand fill each bottle, selling under the name **Ruby Blue (rubybluespirits.com)**. Here they also create natural liqueurs using berries and host Pimp my Bellini cocktail classes.



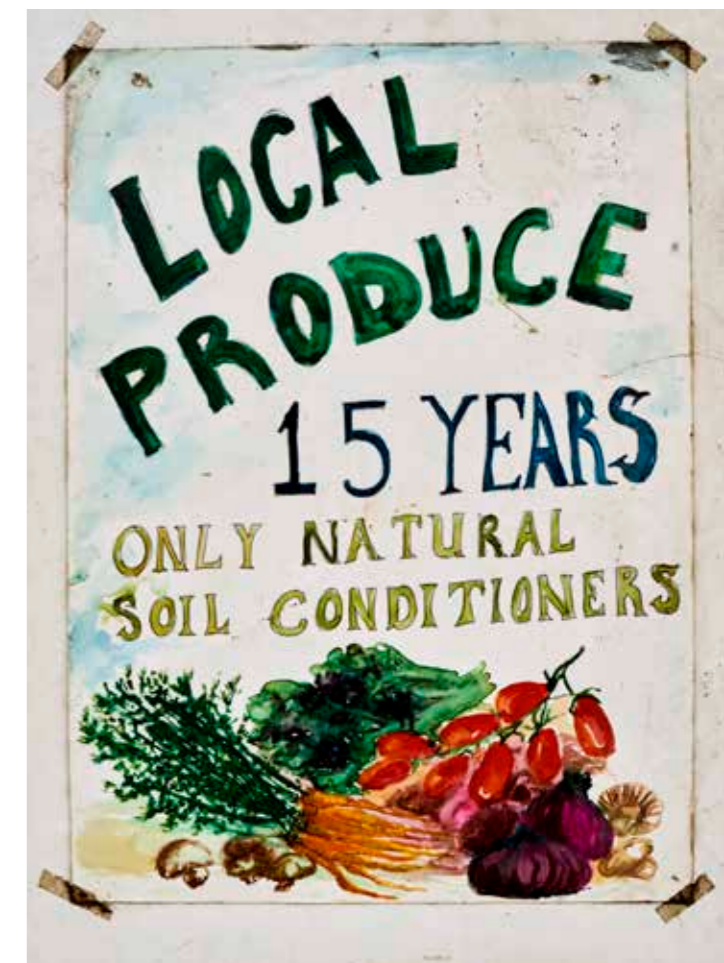
Sometimes the connection between farm and final product is even closer. In Armagh, the orchard county southwest of Belfast, a long road colonnaded by pines leads to the white manor house of fifth-generation growers Philip and Helen Troughton. They used to send their 80-acres of apples to southern cideries; now they blend their own 'from blossom to bottle' **Armagh Cider (armaghcider.com)**. A tang fills the room where they press the year's harvest. Outside, low-pruned trees quiver in the breeze as guests arrive for one of their open farm days. 'This new artisan food and drink culture – it's all part of the nation growing up,' says Helen.



It helps that the country has a long bucolic history to build upon. While in the rest of the UK mega-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT St George's Market mixes producers and gourmet food; a sign at the market; Barbara and Stuart Hughes, founders of RubyBlue vodka; apples used to make Armagh cider



ILLUSTRATIONS: RYN FRANK

At Ursa Minor Bakery in the seaside town of Ballycastle, Dara O hArtghaile makes sourdough bread, in an artisanal process that takes 36 hours



Abernethy butter (LEFT) and Peter Hannan's 80-day-plus aged steaks (RIGHT) are produced in Northern Ireland and sold to some of London's top restaurants

farms of over 200 acres have become the norm, in Northern Ireland, most are still small-scale, managed by one family who've been on the land for generations. Ruddy-faced and strong-armed, Will Abernethy looks like he's stepped straight out of a pastoral scene from the 19th century as he enters his barn in Dromara, County Down. He winds the handle of a century-old churner and in five minutes the butter is ready to nudge into a Swiss Roll-like shape with a pair of wooden paddles. 'Our butter is the most yellow in the world because we've got so much good grass in Northern Ireland,' says Will, the cows outside offering a lively moo. Though the technique behind it is traditional, **Abernethy Butter** (abernethybuttercompany.com) made a name for itself through 21st-century marketing. Will's wife Allison caught Heston Blumenthal's attention on Twitter and now their butter is served in his and Marcus Wareing's Michelin-starred restaurants.



A 30-minute drive away, past more impossibly green fields, stands another spot known to top chefs: Hannan Meats in Moira. Owner Peter Hannan is checking chambers lined with Himalayan salt blocks that look like pink marble. Through ageing in here, well-reared local beef is made even better, the flavours concentrated and the tenderness increased. The standard time is 28–45 days, but they also age to 80, 100 or even 400 days. Hannan Meats used to only sell direct to restaurants but when dozens of people started turning up at his warehouse unannounced, Peter opened **The Meat Merchant** (themeatmerchant.com), a shop for the general public. 'We've always been doing things well in



Northern Ireland,' says Peter, in a lilting accent that gives away he's originally from the south, though he's lived across the border since 1982. 'We were a well-kept secret. Now the world's waking up to it.'

ALONG THE COAST

North of Belfast and into County Antrim, the landscape swells in waves like the Irish Sea beside it, forming a series of nine glens. Quilted with fields and seamed with hedgerows, one of these valleys, Glenarm, is where Peter picks up his choicest cuts. 'It's not just about saying we're organic,' explains Adrian Morrow, the estate manager at **Glenarm Cast** (glenarmcastle.com), as he tends to his prized chestnut-coloured herd. 'By not using artificial fertilisers, we allow clover to grow with the grass. You can taste it in the meat.' Glenarm Shorthorn beef us to only sell wholesale but after constant requests, it was added to the menu of the estate's tearoom, a simple, jolly space that seems fashioned after *The Great British Bake Off*. After sating themselves on home-baked cakes and sandwiches, visitors amble through the castle's walled garden, admiring the stately 500-year-old yew hedge and the vegetable patch where artichokes and honey-scented sweet peas grow to *Jack and the Beanstalk* proportions.



Continuing along the coast, the bounty of land and sea is evident in the roadside honesty boxes, selling everything from fresh eggs to seaweed. The trail leads to Ballycastle, a seaside town known as a food destination, with its regular Naturally North Coast and Glen artisan market. Among those leading the culinary charge here is Ruairidh Morrison. In his →





Becky Cole (LEFT) helps look after the goats at Broughgammon Farm with her husband Charlie Cole, who also runs foraging classes in White Park Bay (RIGHT)



North Coast Smokehouse (northcoastsmokehouse.com), whiskey and wood perfumes the air – a scent that gives away his technique. Using beech or chips from old barrels from the Bushmills Distillery, he smokes sugar- and salt-cured salmon and dulse seaweed. ‘People here had a rough old time,’ says Ruairidh. ‘But since the peace process they’ve been able to explore the finer side of Northern Ireland – the beauty of the landscape, the quality produce.’

Dara and Ciara O hArtghaile are living this ideal. Having moved back to Ballycastle in 2012 after living in New Zealand, the couple founded their own bakery-café. They named it **Ursa Minor** (ursaminorbakehouse.com), referencing their son’s ‘Little Bear’ nickname, and painted the walls baby blue and yellow. While Dara kneads the sourdough, Ciara bakes sweets such as bilberry tarts. ‘Because it’s rural here, you make your own jobs,’ says Dara. ‘We’d be more successful in a city but you can’t beat being by the sea.’ They often combine work and pleasure, heading to White Park Bay, a beach beside a hillside where Ciara forages for meadowsweet and wild thyme for her cakes: ‘The other day we went collecting and saw porpoises,’ she recalls.

On the other side of the bay from where Ciara picks flowers, cliffs loom over a ragbag of rockpools. It’s here that Charlie Cole of **Broughgammon Farm** (broughgammon.com) hosts seaweed harvesting courses, guiding students through specimens from kelp (‘a treacly flavour when dried’) to sea spaghetti (‘the Italians pickle it’). Charlie loves the shoreline but he’s mostly found on the farm. A few years ago,

he convinced his parents to raise male kid goats, which having been born in the dairy industry would otherwise have been killed at birth. Though Broughgammon’s Billy Burgers are novel for the country, Charlie insists he’s building on a long-running tradition that emphasises what the animals are eating and the environment they are in: ‘There’s a beautiful honesty to Northern Irish food. It’s not tarted up like French cuisine; it lets natural flavours speak.’

Fisherman David Mulligan also claims the ecosystem is responsible for the taste of his catch. Most mornings he boards his boat in **Portrush** – a harbour that’s a 20-mile drive from Ballycastle, past the striking pillars of the Giant’s Causeway and the ruins of Dunluce, the real-life location of Pyke Castle in *Game of Thrones*. Today’s commute is soundtracked by pounding waves, tinkling halyards and crying gulls. Checking his lobster pots, David’s in real luck: a 6lb whopper that’s twice the size of his normal take, royal blue on its back, pale orange on its underside. In past decades, he sold most of his lobsters abroad; now most end up in eateries within 100 yards of the harbour. ‘There’s a growing appreciation here of taking time over a restaurant meal,’ he says, ‘of slowly cracking the shells.’

DEEP INTO DERRY

Crossing from County Antrim to County Derry, there’s one final seven-mile stretch of sand before the coast curves inwards to form Lough Foyle. Beside the grass-covered dunes at Castlerock is the green truck of **Braemar Ice Cream** ([@BraemarFarm](https://www.instagram.com/BraemarFarm)), →



Fisherman David Mulligan claims the lobster caught near Portrush Harbour tastes better thanks to the area’s cold waters

Dave Kane checks on the rape crop at Broglasco Farm in County Derry; the black seeds are turned into award-winning Brighter Gold oil




Fish tacos at the Pyke 'N' Pommies street food stall and craft beers at Walled City Brewery are among the draws of the emerging food scene in Derry City

tempting dog-walkers, swimmers and surfers as they make their way to the waves. This is as fresh as it can get – the creators source milk from their own cows, grazing three miles from the beach. ‘There’s a lot of farms diversifying like us,’ says Ruth Pollock, who milks the herd, prepares the ice cream and serves behind the van. ‘People like to understand where their food came from, to meet the makers.’

Nearby at Broglasco Farm, Dave and Leona Kane are also used to fielding questions from curious customers. Their ivy-clad farmhouse has been converted into a working museum showcasing how their **Brighter Gold** (brightergold.co.uk) rapeseed oil is made. In the former pig enclosure turned gift shop, there’s bread for dunking into samples of their product – liquid sunshine, infused with garlic, basil or lemon. Outside, a sea of rape plants undulates in the wind, the flaxen-coloured pods starting to reveal the black seeds within. The Kanes have grown rape for generations but it was only recently that they tried cooking with it. ‘I thought Richard was mad,’ says Leona. ‘It turns out rapeseed is one of the healthiest oils around.’ They began selling six years ago, naming their brand after the Brighter Hoard, an Iron Age stash discovered on their land in 1896 and now on display in the National Museum of Ireland. ‘With our oil it feels like we stumbled on a pot of gold,’ she says, pointing out the numerous awards they’ve garnered.

‘We’re surrounded by the world’s best produce. Why wouldn’t you want “grown here”, over “flown here”?’ says Kevin Pyke, a chef who uses Brighter Gold, alongside other home-grown ingredients at

Pyke 'N' Pommies (@PykeNPommies), his converted sea container-cum-food-stand beside Derry’s River Foyle. Inspired by his global travels and the bounty of his local area, he hawks dishes from ‘Today’s Catch’ fish tacos to ‘Legenderry’ burgers made from beef raised 10 minutes away. Launched in 2013, Pyke ‘N’ Pommies is emblematic of the wider regeneration taking place in Derry, a city with a long history of division, with Catholics living on one side of the river and Protestants on the other. Built two years before Kevin opened his doors, the Peace Bridge – a graphic steel swerve of a footpath over the water – has helped connect the two communities. ‘I’ve got a really diverse group of customers,’ says Kevin. ‘Food brings people together.’

Across the bridge, **Walled City Brewery** (walledcitybrewery.com) proves that drinks can too. Lodged inside a former army barracks, this bar draws crowds from both sides of the city with its craft beers. A hoppy scent hangs over the wood-beamed space. Chalkboards announce regulars, such as Derry Milk, a chocolate stout, as well as specials such as Forager, a lager made with nettles picked metres away in St Columb’s Park. ‘When I left the city in 1996, I never thought I’d come back,’ says owner James Huey, a Protestant who worked in Dublin, before returning to Derry with his Catholic wife. Now, where once there was the whir of army helicopters, there is only the hum of brewing tanks. 



GABRIELLE JAFFE is our contributing editor. After this trip, she now dreams of running off to the countryside to found her own farm.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

NORTHERN IRELAND

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus, British Airways, easyJet, Flybe, and Ryanair fly to Belfast and Derry from various UK airports including Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool, London and Manchester (from £42; ryanair.com). Alternatively, take the ferry from Liverpool or Cairnryan (from £198 per car; stenaline.co.uk).

GETTING AROUND

Public transport outside Belfast can be patchy. To get to the more remote areas in this feature, you'll need a car.

A range of car hire outfits can be found at the airport (from £12 per day; rentalcars.com).

FURTHER READING

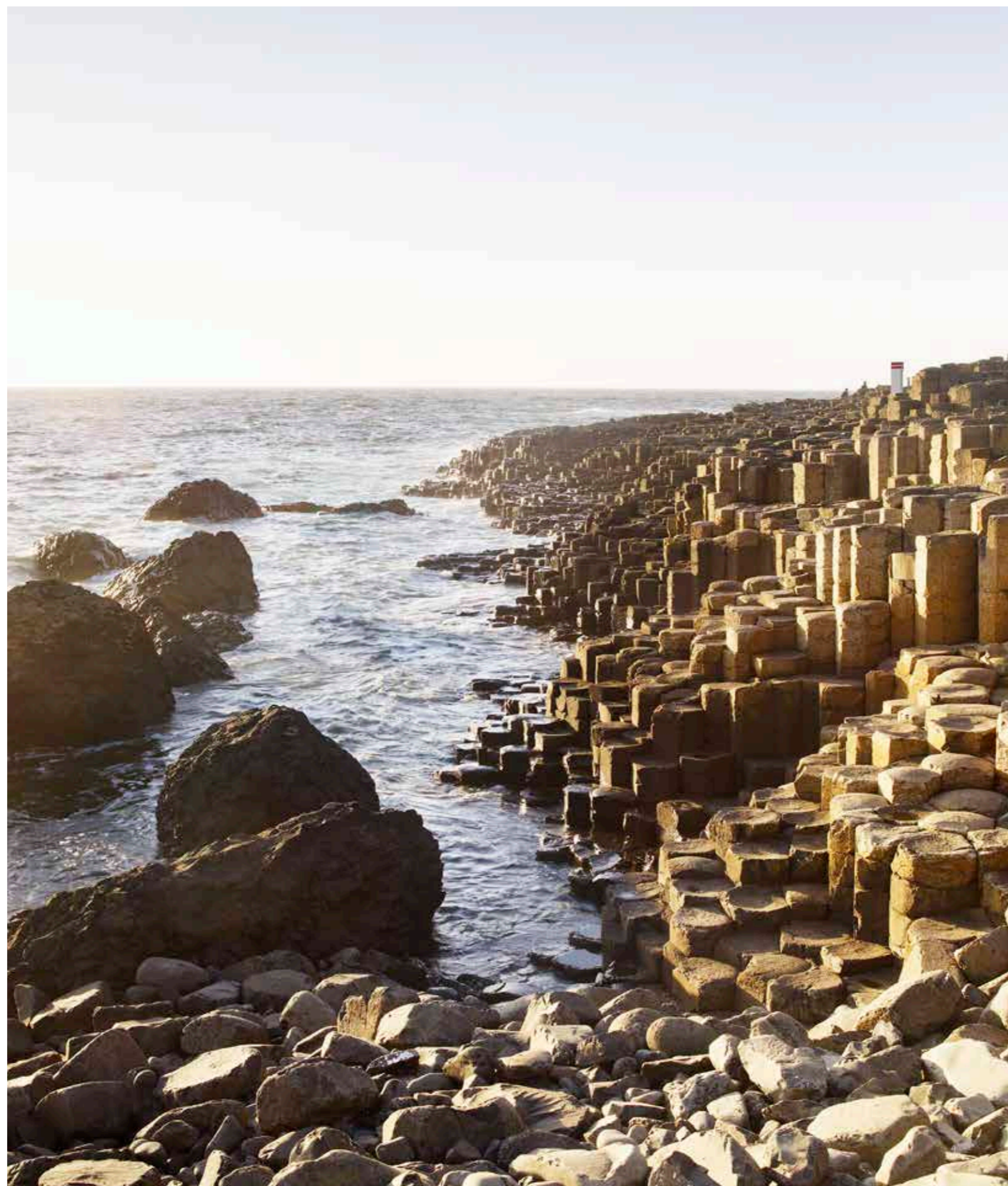
For more information, visit discovernorthernireland.com and nigoodfood.com. Delve deeper into everything the country has to offer with our *Ireland* guide (£16.99) or download the Belfast, Counties Down & Armagh,

Counties Londonderry & Antrim chapters from shop. lonelyplanet.com (£2.99).



MAP KEY

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Abernethy Butter | 11 The Meat Merchant |
| 2 Armagh Cider | 12 Mike's Fancy Cheese |
| 3 Ballycastle | 13 Portrush |
| 4 Belfast | 14 Portstewart Strand |
| 5 Brighter Gold | 15 Ruby Blue |
| 6 Broughgammon Farm | |
| 7 Castlerock | |
| 8 Derry/Londonderry | |
| 9 Giant's Causeway | |
| 10 Glenarm Castle | |



FOOD TRIP

Your step-by-step culinary adventure



1 Arrange your visit to be in Belfast on Saturday morning, when **St George's Market** is at its best (a traditional fruit-and-veg market is held on Fridays and there's a more arts and crafts focus on Sundays). Guides at the **Belfast Food Tour** lead groups on a gourmet crawl along the market stalls, meeting producers and sampling everything from pastries and freshly ground coffee to artisanal sausages, before moving onto surrounding traditional bars, delis and a final lunch stop in a top restaurant in the lively **Cathedral Quarter** (£50; tasteandtour.co.uk).

2 In the heart of the Cathedral Quarter, in a palatial building that once housed the Ulster Bank, **The Merchant Hotel** (pictured above) has 26 rooms in the original Victorian wing and a further 36 in the new Art Deco-themed wing. The hot tub in the rooftop spa has unrivalled views of the city and the gilded columns and cupola in the Great Room make for a grand backdrop for breakfast (from £160; themerchanthotel.com). For a guided visit to the Peace Line and murals, **Black Cab Political Tours** provides plenty of background and context (from £35; touringaroundbelfast.com).

3 Dine on a Michelin-starred meal at **OX** restaurant (from £45 for a five-course tasting menu or £16.50 for a main; oxbelfast.com), where the Belfast-born and Paris-trained head chef Stephen Toman

transforms local ingredients such as mussels and wood pigeon into artfully presented dishes. With options including sumac-spiced poached eggs and coconut and caramel-topped waffles, **General Merchants** is a top brunch option (dishes from £5.50; generalmerchants.co.uk), while **Deane's Meat Locker** is the place to sample steaks from Hannan Meats, cooked to perfection (steaks from £17; michaeldeane.co.uk).

4 Wind up the coast until you hit **Ballycastle**, a seaside town with a thriving food scene, best when the Naturally North Coast and Glens artisan market is on (naturallynorthcoastandglens.co.uk). Beside the marina, join the queue at **Morton's** (028 2076 1100), an old-school chippy where the fish arrives daily from the family boat. Down a country lane, **North Coast Country b&b** is run by an affable couple who serve a mean Ulster fry, with eggs from their own hens and locally sourced ingredients (from £80; northcoastcountrybedandbreakfast.com).

5 Continue west to explore the world's most beautiful drives, passing the cliffs and long sandy stretch of White Park Bay, the nerve-jangling rope bridge across to Carrick-a-Rede island and the Unesco-listed **Giant's Causeway** (pictured left), with its otherworldly rock columns (discovernorthernireland.com/causeway).

6 Stop off at **Portstewart Strand**, a National Trust-owned beach that's overlooked by **Harry's Shack**, a laid-back restaurant run by a Heston Blumenthal-trained chef, serving perfectly executed staples such as cider-braised mussels and lightly battered fish and chips (pictured above, left; mains from £14; facebook.com/harrysshack). Nearby, **At the Beach** is a wonderful b&b with sea views and touches such as soft terry robes and a Nespresso machine in every room (from £115; at-beach.com).

7 If you're in Derry for the weekend, book onto a four-hour **Saturday Made in Derry** tour to meet producers and chefs, giving tasters of over 20 different foods and drinks, from craft beer to local cheese (£47; madeinderryfoodtours.com). A short stroll from the Peace Bridge (pictured above), **Browns in Town** cooks hearty dishes including braised lamb shoulder and seafood chowder with homemade bread (mains from £14; brownsrestaurant.com).

8 Situated beside the historic walled city, in an Edwardian building that was once a private members' club, **Derry's Bishop's Gate Hotel** has 30 individually styled guest rooms. Afternoon tea, including finger sandwiches and homemade scones, can be taken in leather armchairs beside the fireplace in the library room (from £100; bishopsgatehotelderry.com).