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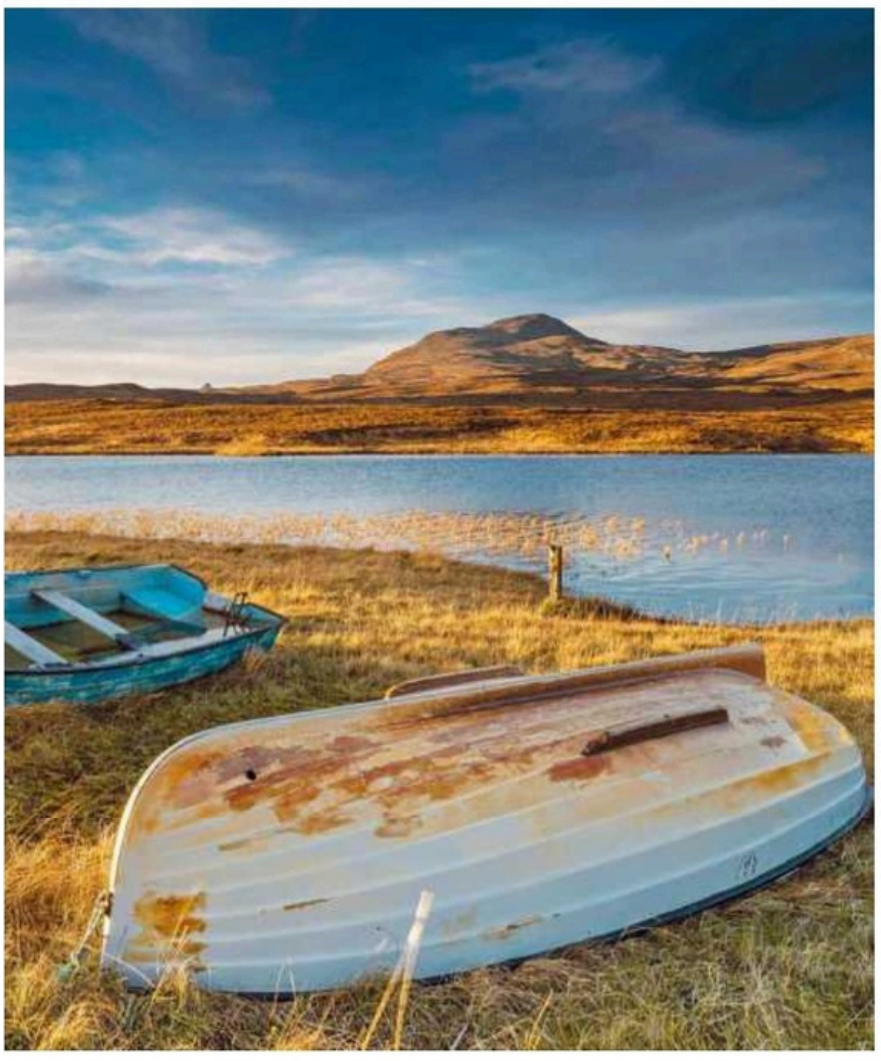

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SPOTLIGHT ON The Highlands

The Scottish Highlands offers rolling hills, rugged coastal paths and plenty of unforgettable food to keep you fuelled

Words LUCY GILLMORE

Lucy Gillmore is a freelance travel writer and previous deputy travel editor of The Independent. She lives in the Scottish Highlands and has a particular interest in sustainable travel and meeting artisan producers from each place she visits. @lucygillmore

BLACK ISLE BREWERY BAR, INVERNESS
Downstairs, a sprawling bar scattered with huge farmhouse tables, upstairs, a roof garden strung with fairy lights and garden shed booths, this is the earthy eatery from Scotland's first organic microbrewery over the bridge on the Black Isle. The wooden brewery on a working organic farm is a grain-to-glass story, with the barley grown in its fields. It also rears Hebridean sheep and grows produce in the 'no dig' garden to top the artisan wood-fired pizzas in the bar. Think venison salami with organic smoked cheddar and mushrooms, or black pudding and goat's cheese with sage and honey – all washed down with an organic beer flight. *blackislebrewery.com*

BAD GIRL BAKERY, MUIR OF ORD
Fans once made a beeline here for its gin and tonic cupcakes. "Bad girls make good cakes" is the tongue-in-cheek catchphrase behind Jeni Iannetta's colourful café stocked with devilishly indulgent bakes, including banoffee sticky bun croissants, lemon and torched meringue cheesecake, and gooey slabs of neapolitan loaf: layers of vanilla sponge, roasted strawberry buttercream and dark chocolate frosting. She's penned a cookbook, runs cookery classes and now has a second spot in the revamped Victorian Market in Inverness – opposite virtuous sister business the Good Girl Greengrocer. *badgirlbakery.co.uk*

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FISH SHOP, BALLATER
Run by Ayrshire-born chef Marcus Sherry and, front-of-house, his Australian wife Jasmine, interiors are fishing themed – a shoal of willow fish suspended from the ceiling, portraits of Aberdeenshire fishermen and photos of women sorting the catch. Sustainably sourced Scottish seafood is centre stage, all hand-dived, creel- and line-caught. The signature snack is a moreishly sweet Macduff crab crumpet, with mains including roast Shetland halibut and lobster tagliarini. *fishshopballater.co.uk*

NEWHALL MAINS, BLACK ISLE
One of the Highlands' fanciest farmstays, this honey-hued 18th-century steading, on a peninsula between the Cromarty Firth and the Moray Firth, has been converted into a gourmet hotel. The restaurant, Spruce, is headed up by chef Matt Heeley, who did a stint at The Newt in Somerset. You'll find hand-dived Orkney scallops in a shellfish bisque, linguine with Cromarty Firth lobster, Peterhead cod, Scottish asparagus and squid. Every Sunday afternoon guests can tuck into a wood-fired Sunday roast, with classic cuts from the farm slow-cooked over the Argentinian asado grill. *newhall-mains.com*

GLEN LYON COFFEE ROASTERY AND CAFÉ, ABERFELDY
This rustic roastery and café has a whiff of a Wild West saloon on the covered wooden porch peppered with comfy sofas, while inside there's a wood burner to huddle round while you enjoy single-origin espressos, pour-overs or flat whites. Fiona and Jamie Grant started roasting coffee in a shed beside their house down one of the most beautiful glens in Scotland. Today, it's B Corp certified, with a coffee academy and trips to meet growers on the menu. Cakes and croissants are supplied by three local artisan suppliers: the Glenlyon Tea Room, Ballintaggart and the Wild Hearth Bakery. *glenlyoncoffee.co.uk*

This rustic café has a whiff of Wild West saloon on the covered wooden porch

WILD GORSE KITCHEN, BELLADRUM
At Belladrum, a Highland estate near the Beauly Firth, the ancient stone steading is now home to a vibrant creative community including Julia Kirk's Wild Gorse Flower Studio; Circa Botanica, her botanical lifestyle emporium; and, in the old potato shed, the Wild Gorse Kitchen. The menus are plant-based with breakfast specials including French toast with balsamic strawberries, black pepper, whipped cream and basil. Weekly changing topped sourdough specials have featured cherry balsamic jam, melted brie, roasted beetroot and toasted almonds, or for a vegan option, curried hummus, pomegranate, roasted cauliflower, pickled apricots, dukkah and orange zest. *wild-gorse.co.uk/kitchen*

Dunkeld

FOODIE TOWN SPOTLIGHT

Dubbed the gateway to the Highlands, Perthshire's prettiest village with its ruined Gothic and Norman cathedral on the banks of the River Tay and jumble of restored 17th- and 18th-century cottages is also its undisputed foodie capital. The high street is a medley of butchers, bakers, smoked salmon makers, cafés, delis and wine merchants jostling for space with galleries and vintage stores.

One of the stars is *The Great British Bake Off* semi-finalist Flora Shedden's bijou pitstop, Aran Bakery, that's all white tongue and groove, house sourdough, rosemary, sea salt and garlic focaccia, doorstop sandwiches and speciality pastries.

Just around the corner is Dunkeld Whisky Box, a bottle shop and tasting space for lesser-known malts. Go to Shannon's eclectic food store for artisan rubs and spices, and a side order of "love and chat", then to Livvi's Little Lunchbox to pick up whisky barrel chip smoked Dunkeld salmon. Stay at The Taybank overlooking the river, once owned by Dougie MacLean, who penned Scottish folk anthem Caledonia, now a pub with Scandi-style rooms, buzzy restaurant and sprawling beer garden with firepit and outdoor cinema screen.

THE LOVAT, FORT AUGUSTUS

At the western end of Loch Ness in the village of Fort Augustus, The Lovat's fine dining restaurant, Station Road (a nod to the fact this was once an old railway hotel), is chef-owner Sean Kelly's stage. Many of the ingredients for the exquisite seasonal tasting menus are grown in the hotel's kitchen garden or foraged in the hills or on the banks of the loch. The bread course is the star – the signature beremeal and treacle bannock made with an ancient Orkney barley (bere) served hot from the skillet with a sea-salted butter and cod roe mousse. It comes complete with the recipe to take home on paper laced with wildflower seeds for planting. *thelovat.com*

Many of the ingredients are grown in the hotel's kitchen garden or foraged in the hills

PHOTOGRAPHS: JAMES GRANT, CHRIS CLOSE PHOTOGRAPHY/PHOTODISC/GETTY

THE WALRUS & CORKSCREW, INVERNESS

A peppering of pavement tables and, inside, sheepskin-strewn pews, Inverness's first wine bar takes its job seriously. There are more than 250 wines on an eclectically curated list, with flights and tastings. The food is no afterthought either: sharing platters of local charcuterie or cheese including dry-cured venison fillet and salami from Great Glen Charcuterie and East Coast Cured in Edinburgh. Cheeses are sourced from organic family-run Connage Highland Dairy, which produces Clava brie and crowdie, and Highland Fine Cheeses with oatcakes and chutney. Owners Sarah and Rob Steadman also have a gourmet deli up the road. *thewalrusandcorkscrew.co.uk*

DUN ALUINN, ABERFELDY
Architect and interior designer Susie Whyte and her husband John Burke who, handily, owns an award-winning construction firm, transformed this grand old house into a design-led exclusive stay – now relaunched as a gourmet hotel. Chef John Christie grew up on a farm and provenance is key here. With a house party vibe, dinner at the long communal dining table displays their passion for local and seasonal produce, such as West Coast brown crab with fermented daikon, garden radish and dill, or salt-baked beetroot, goat's curd and pomegranate molasses with candied pecans.
dunaluinn.com

With a house party vibe, dinner at the communal dining table displays their passion for local produce

THE DIPPING LUGGER, ULLAPOOL
A popular pitstop on the NC500 roadtrip, Ullapool on the west coast, once the hub of a thriving herring industry, is home to this destination restaurant-with-rooms. In an 18th-century manse named after a traditional fishing vessel, The Dipping Lugger hosts chef David Smith's tasting menu showcasing scallops plucked from Loch Broom's salty waters alongside dishes such as pan-fried cod with baked lemon, hand-rolled pasta and tiny shrimp. Owners Robert Hicks and Helen Chalmers also have a micro-distillery. Their signature Seven Crofts gin is named after Ullapool's seven original homesteads, while Fisherman's Strength has notes of ripe blaeberries and cracked black pepper.
thedippinglugger.co.uk

THE OLD BRIDGE INN, AVIEMORE
On the edge of the Cairngorms' outdoor capital, Aviemore, beside the River Spey, this popular gastropub and bunkhouse is famous for its live music, and prides itself on its locally sourced and reared produce. Highland lamb koftas with a bulgur wheat salad and mint yogurt dressing, and Edinvale Farm grass-fed Scotch beef fillet, rosemary-scented mushrooms, roast vine tomatoes and twice-cooked hand-cut chips have all graced the menu. There's lot of local ales on tap and, naturally, a great selection of malt whiskies. *oldbridgeinn.co.uk*

At night the space morphs into a craft cocktail bar with espresso martinis and mini doughnuts

PERK COFFEE + DOUGHNUTS, INVERNESS
During the day this is a popular pitstop for a flat white and artisan doughnut. The dough is proved for 24 hours and the glazes, fillings and toppings are all made in-house, too. Choose the signature Old Faithful dipped in cinnamon sugar or go for one of the specials that makes the most of seasonal fruit or recreates classic desserts. At night the space morphs into a craft cocktail bar with espresso martinis and mini doughnuts on the menu. *perkcafe.co.uk*

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