

## A local food scene burns in Iceland

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Pepper plants at the Hveravellir Farm are supported with thousands of threads to promote healthy and rapid growth. (Andy Jarosz)

As you drive along northern Iceland's desolate Road 87, between the coastal town of Husavik and Lake Mývatn, a set of enormous buildings glowing brightly stands out against the monochrome gloominess of snow and ice. A closer look inside the 11 greenhouses reveals an ingenious example of how a local farm successfully harnessed the earth's power to grow crops that never grew here before. No small feat in what appears to be one of the world's most inhospitable places.

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In 1878, farmers in the sparsely populated region Reykjahverfi discovered they could use the earth's geothermal heat to grow potatoes - previously had food that needed to be brought up from the country's south, more than 400 miles away. When Hveravellir Farm constructed its first greenhouses around 20 miles from Husavik in 1933, farmers were able to grow crops even warmer temperatures required that, like tomatoes and

cucumbers, bringing locally grown produce to the region for the first time.

By using northern Iceland's natural heat sources to produce multiple harvests, local farmers revolutionized the centuries-old traditional Icelandic diet of meat, fish and dairy products. Now, a number of restaurants and farm stays are offering new menus celebrate the country's that industrious farming past and highlight the local nature of the food on offer.

Páll Ólafsson, a fourth generation farmer Hveravellir, is currently in charge of the production and sale of around 300 tonnes of tomatoes each year. He has worked on the farm for 24 years and lives in the same house as his great-grandfather, who started the business more than 100 years ago. Inside the greenhouse, lines of bright sodium lights shine down on the growing tomato plants, and the temperature remains a constant, warm 23C - even in the depths of winter when outside temperatures drop well below freezing.

While the greenhouses are not open to the public, visitors are welcome at Hveravellir in the summer months when a farm shop beside the giant greenhouses passersby produce sells almost straight from the plant.

Iceland's locavore culture can also be sampled in restaurants and farmhouses across the country. Often owners offer a variety of food from their own land and local growers such as Ólafsson. About 93km from Husavik, near the town of Akureyri, the farm at Skjaldarvík provides horse riding and hiking activities for guests, while the host takes great Disa Oksarsdóttir pride in offering meals made from local organic produce, delicious, freshly-baked breads and homemade jams. Similarly, the restaurant on the farm at Hraunref, on the main Road 1, 70km north of Reykjavik, has built a solid reputation for carefully selecting their food suppliers. Our waitress was able to point out the farms from which our lamb and beef had originated, located nearby in the valley below.

Back in Iceland's north in the popular lakeside village of Mývatn, the farm's Vogafjós Cowshed Café offers views of the cows being milked as you dine on fresh, local produce. On a recent visit, Ólof Hallgrímsdóttir, the owner of the farm and café, without hesitation identified where each item on her menu was sourced. The freshwater Arctic char from Lake Mývatn CAME, the which dominates the view from the café window; the raw smoked lamb CAME from the animals on her farm; and the rich selection of cheeses was made by her brother's wife. Accompanying most meals at the Cowshed Café is Hallgrímsdóttir's homemade rye bread, baked under a plot of land barrens a short distance from the tiny village of Mývatn.

This is one of Iceland's most geothermic areas, and during the short summer season the shores of Lake Mývatn are busy with visitors keen to experience some of Iceland's most spectacular natural wonders, including the thundering Dettifoss, Europe's most powerful waterfall, and the steaming fumaroles and bubbling mud pools in nearby Namafjall, heated by the same source that grows the crops.

Near the Mývatn Nature Baths, a dozen or so holes were covered with all manner of makeshift lids, from wooden discs to large metal manholes. Each one that hid a natural oven retains a constant heat of 100C. Before our meal, Hallgrímsdóttir lifted one of the metal plates and a rush of steam rose from the exposed immediately hole. She pulled out a plastic bucket that she had placed in the ground 27 hours earlier and carefully opened it to reveal a perfectly risen loaf. For a moment, the lakeside village's ever-present smell of rotten eggs was replaced by a delicious aroma of fresh gingerbread.

A short while later we were eating Hallgrimsdottir's rye bread accompanied by a salad made up of tomatoes, cucumber and peppers from the Hveravellir greenhouses. It may not have been the most traditional meal Arctic, but thanks to the determination of a few innovative Icelandic farmers, it was indubitably a local one.

## **Web link**

**<http://www.bbc.com/travel/feature/20120531-a-local-food-scene-burns-in-iceland>**