

the HUNT for the ORMER

For the first few months of the year, on the full or new moon, the people of GUERNSEY head to the *beaches to forage* for the ormer, an edible shellfish. We join the annual foodie pilgrimage

WORDS *Clare Gogerty*



THIS PAGE, FROM ABOVE LEFT An ormerer in traditional ormering garb: a Guernsey sweater and a basket; ormer shells are lined with opalescent mother-of-pearl OPPOSITE Walking over the causeway from L'Erée Headland to Lihou Island at low tide. The rockpools around the island are good ormering territory

The fishmonger at Seafresh on the harbour of St Peter Port, Guernsey, is showing me a pair of handsome crayfish. Huge-clawed, enormous in girth and expensive, they are destined for a dinner party in one of the island's smarter homes. Also spread out on the marble slab before him are other local delicacies: the chancre ('shanker') crab, a slack-jawed monkfish and a great quantity of mackerel. But one particular shellfish, a food dear to the Guernseyman's heart, is absent: the ormer.

This enigmatic shellfish, *Haliotis tuberculata*, was once plentiful in the waters around the island – legend has it that 20,000 were caught in one day in 1841 – and foraging was part of daily life. Islanders tell of when they'd return home with sacks full of ormers and dump them on the kitchen table.

Sadly, over-fishing has rendered them scarce and these days the ormer has become a gourmet ingredient that sells for up to £100 for ten. Consequently, fishing for them has been restricted by Guernsey's Sea

Fisheries Committee to a few 'ormering tides' on the full or new moon from 1 January to 30 April. During these times, islanders troop down to the rockpools revealed by low tides, with nets and waterproofs to prise the molluscs from their craggy moorings.

Intrigued, I am in Guernsey to hunt for the ormer, to discover why it's so important to the local people and find out what it tastes like.

THE ORMER

My first sighting of the mollusc comes on a visit to the Little Chapel, built single-handedly by Brother Déodat, a member of a religious fraternity in the parish of St Andrews. The chapel was Déodat's third attempt to create a miniature version of the grotto and basilica at Lourdes, France. Its small dimensions (9 x 6ft) are compensated for by its over-the-top decoration: it is festooned with shards of crockery and shells, the centrepiece of many of the designs being the ormer itself.

It is easy to see why the ormer lends itself to embellishment: a large, ear-shaped shell

(its name comes from the French for sea ear: *oreille de mer*), its rim is punctured with circular respiratory pores and is lined with mother-of-pearl. They burst from the Little Chapel walls in petal-like clusters. But I'm not looking for ormers to decorate my home, I'm looking for ormers to eat.

THE HUNT

To help me in my search, I team up with David Wilkinson, Sea Fisheries officer and Guernseyman. Equipped with Wellingtons and ormering hooks, we walk over the man-made causeway (which was created by seaweed harvesters in the 19th century) from L'Erée Headland to Lihou Island, the most westerly point of Guernsey.

David explains that the minimum size of ormer that can be collected is 8cm, which is measured along the longest axis of the shell. He pulls out a pocket-sized caliper, custom-made for ormer measuring. As well as helping me find a few specimens, today he is on the lookout for other ormerers to

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THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The Little Chapel was decorated with shells, pebbles and broken china by a local monk; ormers are used to embellish the chapel; each shell must measure 8cm before it's taken; Lihou Island; a freshly 'turned' ormer OPPOSITE Looking out through the pines to Lihou Island

ensure that their catch is within this limit. He spots two men immediately, up to their necks in the ocean feeling about in cracks and crevices for their catch, a method known as 'cricking'. David explains that it is illegal to dive for ormers, so the ormerer's head must always remain above water and wetsuits cannot be worn. Failure to do this can incur a fine of up to £5,000 or six months in prison. We keep a careful eye on a man swimming out along the shoreline in case he makes a sudden, illegal dive.

The low tide means that expanses of rock and heaps of seaweed usually underwater are exposed. I poke about among a heap of bladderwrack, not sure what I am looking for. David shows me the correct method of 'turning' – rolling a rock over to see if any ormers have fastened themselves to its rear. We try a few with no luck before turning one to reveal a tiny, lonely ormer. As it is below the legal limit, we leave it well alone.

Our continued, unproductive efforts at turning are interrupted by a man wearing a

Guernsey and carrying a wicker basket: the traditional garb of the ormerer. He opens the basket and shows us his catch: several plump, glistening ormers. 'Go further out,' he says, 'where no one else has been.' We dutifully head to the edge of the sea and turn a few rocks before finding a bumper clutch of ormers clinging fiercely to the underside of one large boulder. David measures one, finds it large enough to take, then employs his ormering hook to prise it free. He wrestles with a couple more and we finally have enough to cook and serve. And, fortunately, I know just the man to do it.

THE CASSEROLE

At local restaurant The Pavilion Brasserie in St Saviours, chef and proprietor Tony Leck is waiting for our catch. Tony, who has more than 20 years' experience on Guernsey and has run the restaurant for ten years, specialises in cooking local produce: chancres crab and Guernsey bean jar (a stew) often feature on the menu; the ormer, due to its

scarcity, less so. He explains that the traditional method of cooking ormers is to give them a good bashing to tenderise, then slow cook with a strip of belly pork, carrots and shallots. I leave him to it and return two hours later to a plate of steaming ormers. The molluscs sit on top of a pile of buttery mashed potato surrounded by carrots and shallots, and drenched in gravy. And, as for the taste of the ormer: I think it's fair to say that it's subtle, more like squid than an oyster. It makes the basis of a good hearty meal, good fuel for a walk along Guernsey's coastal paths. I understand why the locals are anxious to get their hands on it.

For more on Guernsey, see visitguernsey.com. *The Pavilion, Le Gron, St Saviours (01481 264165, thepavilion.co.gg).* The cookbook Tony Leck's Pavilion On A Plate, with more than 100 recipes from the restaurant, is available for £20 through the website.

See coastmagazine.co.uk for more features. Tell us about your foraging adventures on Twitter and Facebook

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