

SPEARS'

Hastings Food and Wine Festival

Mark Nayler, Friday, 21st September 2012 <http://www.spearswms.com/spears-world/food-friday/37552/hastings-food-and-wine-festival.shtml>

Up until last weekend, all I knew about Hastings was that it was by the sea and lots of people there didn't have jobs. However, last Saturday I jumped on the train at Charing Cross and headed down to their annual Seafood and Wine festival, now in its seventh year, to find out more.

First impressions on arriving, even on a gloriously sunny day, were not great. The drab and rather run down new town is not much to look at, and rather compounded the negative things I had heard about Hastings. However, after a ten minute walk the dilapidated sea-front buildings and inane amusement arcades give way to the old town and The Stade, the stretch of beach on which the festival was situated.

The old town is comprised of charming narrow streets, lined with quirky independent shops — in particular antique stores and second hand bookshops — cosy pubs and restaurants, with a bustling, friendly atmosphere quite unlike that one experiences when first arriving in the town. And on The Stade, just up from the beach, where dozens of local fishing boats stood marooned on the sand after finishing their morning's work, the festival was in full swing.

Stands galore were serving the best fish and wine 1066 country has to offer. The first stop-off point, for some light refreshment, was the

stand of Carr Taylor Vineyards. Based in Westfields, Sussex, this family estate has been producing wine since 1971; no time at all when compared to more established continental estates, but you wouldn't have known to taste it. A Vintage Sparkling – winner of a bronze medal at this year's UKVA English Wine of the Year – was delicious, releasing an explosion of fruity sweetness in your mouth, after which more mellow flavours followed.

There was so much to do, see and taste, it was almost overwhelming, but spurred on by the excellent English wine I headed straight to the stall of a local Indian restaurant. The chefs at Jali, whose restaurant was just a few hundred yards away on the main drag, had prepared a seafood curry with the morning's catch; crispy, spicy prawns roughly three times as large as those found in supermarkets went superbly with a korma sauce and fragrant rice.



Wine tastings at Hastings Food and Wine Festival

The atmosphere was wonderful, with hundreds of people enjoying the sunshine and packing the rectangle of stores and stands. Webb's restaurant, a local favourite and again with its flagship store a stone's throw away, occupied a large stand in the middle of the mayhem, and were serving all manner of delicious fish, including beautifully citrusy whitebait. Paul Webb, owner and head chef, staged a cooking

demonstration in the afternoon to share his secrets. He prepared three fish dishes live, talking his audience carefully through the recipes, and – best of all – left them at the back of the room afterwards to taste. The turbot, served with steamed local vegetables and a delicate sauce made from fish stock, cream and a hint of paprika, was especially delicious.

This is how I passed my first afternoon in Hastings, wandering around in the beautiful sunshine, from stall to stall, always with a glass of the local excellent cider or wine in hand, and tasting some of the freshest fish one is likely to come across in this country.

Come early evening it was time to retreat for a pre-dinner drink to the Cloudsley, where I was staying that night. Owned and run by photographer Shariar Mazandi, this quirky B&B was quite unlike any other I had stayed in. He instantly makes you feel as if you have gone over to a good friend's house, opening a bottle of Rioja and carefully talking you through the African masks and his photographs of LA gangsters on the walls. Mazandi's love of photography permeates the entire establishment, with stacks of books of the works of his favourite artists in each room.

Interestingly, Mazandi has a policy of no televisions in his B&B, believing their absence makes it easier for people to properly relax and get away from it all. Initially sceptical — why shouldn't you be able to watch TV, if you choose to? — I was soon won over by this. After an excellent supper at



St Clements restaurant in nearby St Leonards, I returned to the Cloudsley exhausted. Whereas I probably would have turned the TV

on had one been there, I instead became absorbed in a fascinating book of photographs by Don McCullin.

The next morning, after a rather unusual but tasty fig and bacon omelette from Mazandi's kitchen, I headed back to the festival for another tour, this time taking in some exquisite fish soup, lovingly prepared for 8 hours by a local chef. Early afternoon, around 2pm, it was time to head back to London, but not before stopping in at a lovely pub in a toppling Tudor building on George Street, the main street in the old town.

Another thing about Hastings is that the people are great fun and very friendly — so friendly, in fact, that it was almost five by the time I left Ye Olde Pump House and walked quickly through the new town to get to the station, after a wonderfully fishy and fun weekend.

[Cloudsley B&B St Clements restaurant Hastings](#) *Read more from Food Friday*
