FOOD IN ICELAND

LIVESTOCK

When you drive Highway 1, the ring road that hugs the Icelandic coastline, you will notice the small, independent farms that dot the hills and valleys of the lowlands. These lowlands, uneven and marshy, were irrigated and molded to the humble needs of the strong willed settlers who would come to call this land home.

This is where the equally hardy domestic sheep stock are kept during the harsh winter months before being released into the mostly uninhabited highlands. There they live out of sight for four months out of the year behind the natural mountain barrier carved by glaciers pushing their way into the North Atlantic Ocean. These vast landscapes and abundant clean water provide the perfect environment and grazing land during the feral months.

The sheep roam free from late spring, sustained by the Icelandic moss, wild grass and berries that grow on the loose volcanic soil and which lend the meat its unique, almost gamey taste. Come fall, they are rounded up on horseback the way it has been done since the time of the earliest settlers. This centuries old free range tradition explains why the Icelandic lamb tastes so lean and delicate.

Icelandic cattle are another heritage breed that benefit from the clean environment and fragrant pastures. Primarily used in dairy production, resulting in high-quality products such as Skyr – a thick, yogurt-like Icelandic speciality that has rapidly been gaining fans outside of Iceland thanks to its delicate flavour and naturally low fat content.

Other types of livestock in Iceland include poultry, pigs and, of course, the Icelandic horse – a short and hardy breed that has learnt to adapt to the environment with its own unique gait, helping it navigate the endless lava fields.

FISHING AND AQUACULTURE

In Iceland, fish is life. Some of the richest fishing grounds in the North Atlantic can be found around Iceland where a juxtaposition of cool and warm ocean currents meet off the island’s shores, creating ideal conditions for fish stocks to thrive. For centuries fishing has been an essential part of both Icelandic history and culture. It has been the lifeline of the nation, both as a vital part of the diet, and the country’s primary export product. Icelanders understand fish and depend on it, which is why standards for healthy, sustainable fisheries are so rigorous. To ensure the highest possible quality, Icelandic fish is fresh frozen at sea and shipped directly to consumers. Iceland’s coastal waters are protected from pollution by strict laws to guarantee the continued purity of those stocks we rely on.

Before “organic” became associated with quality produce, there was Icelandic farming. Icelanders are not deceived by the harsh surroundings and fickle weather. Icelanders have learnt the hard way just how delicate the nature truly is and how important it is to carefully maintain that ecological balance. Iceland is blessed with untouched terrain and pure, glacial waters. An organic approach to farming, harvesting and catching of produce quickly became the only sensible way of sustaining that environment. These age-old traditions for conservation are enhanced by tight regulation and policies for sustainable management to ensure that the rich, unpolluted landscapes and abundant clean water will remain for generations of Icelanders to come.
Responsible fisheries management is the single most important tool that enables the fishing industry of Iceland to provide its customers with wholesome, sustainably sourced wild seafood products for the foreseeable future.

With optimal treatment of the product, quality and freshness is preserved throughout the process, from the moment the fish is caught and until it arrives in markets. The fishing fleet is equipped with advanced technology and the same holds true for the processing facilities on land.

The main species from wild catch in Icelandic waters are Cod, Haddock, Pollock, Golden redfish, Herring, Greenland halibut, Wolffish and Ling.

Responsible aquaculture has been part of our way of life since the turn of the last century. It still accounts for a small portion of Iceland’s overall export with a little under 50 registered fish farms in operation. The primary species used for production are Atlantic salmon, Arctic char and Atlantic cod.

AGRICULTURE

The loose volcanic soil has made traditional large scale agriculture difficult in Iceland despite its nutrient-rich properties. But this rough and untamed terrain and challenging weather conditions have benefited Icelandic agriculture in interesting ways. The harshness and isolation of the terrain has been instrumental in maintaining the purity of Icelandic nature and its produce. This challenging environment slowed down industrialisation and prevented excessive exploitation of natural resources.

Fickle weather conditions and cold, pristine, glacial rivers have provided a natural way of halting the spread of mold, parasites and other undesirable visitors to our shores. Furthermore, underneath the volcanic soil, lies bountiful geothermal energy – a valued ally to the Icelandic farmer. This cheap, renewable energy, coupled with Iceland’s enormous reserves of water resources have opened up enormous possibilities that are still being explored.

Much of Iceland’s agricultural produce is grown indoors in state of the art, automated greenhouses heated with geothermal energy and supported with electric lights to supplement the low levels of sunlight during the winter months.

The traditional outdoor crops in Iceland are carrots, rhubarb, rutabaga, cabbage, leeks, potatoes, cauliflower and kale but in later years we have seen successful experiments with organic rapeseed and barley. Icelandic producers continue to make forays into new and exciting fields and who knows what the future may hold.

WILD GAME AND ANGLING

Iceland is an angler’s paradise. The glacial rivers are teeming with rainbow trout, arctic char and Atlantic salmon. There are more than 100 self-sustained salmon rivers in Iceland, mostly catch-and-release and attract anglers from all around the world. The arctic char is the most common freshwater fish in Iceland and can be found in rivers and lakes all across the country.

The primary types of wildfowl hunted in Iceland are geese, primarily the Greylag Goose, and ptarmigans, a medium-sized game bird in the grouse family. These are a traditional feature of Iceland’s Christmas celebration. A small number of seabirds are also caught in Iceland, mostly puffin and guillemots, but this has seen a reduction in later years.

The only local breed of venison in Iceland are reindeer that were brought to Iceland from Norway in the 18th century and are mostly to be found in the east of the country. Game hunting is strictly regulated in Iceland and bird and animal populations are closely monitored to ensure their sustainability.
As Icelanders have shaped the land they live in, so the land has shaped the way Icelanders live.

For a long time, Icelandic food culture was driven by necessity. Icelandic food was local because of the country’s isolation, it was organic because large-scale agriculture and factory farming was difficult, it was free range because it seemed the most practical way of using the sparse vegetation spread out over large distances. But the feature that some visitors to Iceland find a little unnerving is the resolute commitment to nose-to-tail eating and of finding ways to make the inedible edible.

“Þorramatur” is often cited in this regard, a selection of traditional Icelandic foods composed of preserved seafood and offal. Some may have already heard horror stories about the rotten shark (actually fermented and considered quite delicious by the more weathered foodies) or the pickled rams’ testicles.

Other traditional foods include:

**HARDFISKUR** - wind-dried cod or haddock naturally high in protein and low in fat best enjoyed with a pinch of Icelandic butter.

**SVID** – singed sheep heads served whole with the tongue and eyes being considered a particular delicacy.

**SLÁTUR AND LIFRARPYLSA** - blood and liver sausages with oatmeal and rye that bear a similarity to the Scottish haggis.

**HANGIKJÓT** - Icelandic smoked lamb, once daily fare now mostly served during Christmas and other holidays, served with potatoes in white sauce with green peas, on rye pancakes or with pickled red cabbage. A must-try for anyone visiting Iceland over Christmas.

Traditional Icelandic food can be quite daunting to the uninitiated but culinary enthusiasts should visit during Thorrablót, a traditional Icelandic feast that takes place each February where the natives celebrate their culinary heritage. The perfect opportunity to try a slice of blood pudding or smoked lamb on rye...or pair of pickled rams’ testicles for the more adventurous.

If there is one food that Icelanders are truly passionate about and everyone seems to agree on it’s the Icelandic hot dog. A lightly-smoked pork and lamb frankfurter with a delightful snap, known locally as pylsa. Pylsur are best served Eina med öllu or with “the works”, served in a steamed bun topped with ketchup, mustard, crunchy fried onions, raw onions and a remoulade spicy sauce. People have been lining up for secret recipe pylsa at Reykjavík’s Bæjarins Bestu or “Town’s Best” hot dog stand for decades.

Icelandic food heritage is a story that’s still being written. The breaking of Iceland’s isolation has opened up a wealth of possibilities and our world class team of Icelandic chefs and humble home cooks are constantly coming up with new and interesting ways of bridging food traditions separated by oceans and time.

For further information, please visit [VisitIceland.com](http://VisitIceland.com), [InspiredbyIceland.com](http://InspiredbyIceland.com), [Islandsstofa.is](http://Islandsstofa.is), or alternatively contact Liney Arnorsdottir, Project Manager, at liney@promoteiceland.com, or +354 511 4000.