



ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW MIDGLEY

# eatlocal



Narrowboating and camping share much in common and now there's even more of a bond, says **ALIRAY**.

This month she meets the foodie entrepreneurs of the waterways, whose commitment to using local ingredients is a never-ending journey

**If** you've ever been lucky enough to travel on a narrowboat around the waterways of Britain you'll know it gives a particularly up-close-and-personal view of the hedgerows and an assortment of fruits, nuts, berries and other produce growing alongside. With a number of Club Sites situated near canals, pitching up close to the towpath can be wonderfully beneficial not only for your wellbeing but your camping larder, too.

It was this particular aspect of narrowboating that is at the heart of Andy and Helen Tidy's Wild Side Preserves ([www.wildsidepreserves.co.uk](http://www.wildsidepreserves.co.uk)), their successful local food business. They use foods foraged from around the canals to make award-winning chutneys, jams, cordials and flavoured vinegars. They sell exclusively from their boat, or to be precise, from The Jam Butty, a small, engineless boat that they tow behind the narrowboat they live on.

Wild Side Preserves evolved from a few things, firstly a love of boating. Helen and Andy have had their 42ft narrowboat, Wand'ring Bark, for 15 years and have travelled all around the canal network in it. Helen discovered a talent and a true passion for making jam and chutney as a way of rehabilitating from an accident and illness in recent years. It turns out she had a natural aptitude for combining flavours, producing jams and chutneys including Lemon and Lavender Marmalade, Lime

Marmalade with Medlar Vodka, Damson Chutney and Medlar Jelly and a Wild Garlic and Carrot Chutney. She said: "I think there's a growing demand for something a little more unusual, especially when the large manufacturers dominate with just a few general flavours."

When she first started production, Helen's output was so prolific she put the excess jars on a table to sell whenever they moored up. They proved so popular the business was the next obvious step.

Five years ago, they commissioned the building of The Jam Butty – a 27ft engineless boat that's towed by their narrowboat – and is effectively their shop. Now when she makes the chutneys and jam, Helen can make up to 50 to 60 jars in a day.

The great thing about the type of preserves that Helen and Andy make are that they change according to where they are in the country, which canal they are on and, obviously, according to the season. Andy said: "We capture the taste of each season and seal it in a jar. We make use of the traditional English 'forgotten' fruits such as medlar, quince, damson and sloe, as well as more common fruits such as apples and plums. Helen continued: "We've been given permission to forage the hedgerows and trees of the towpaths and waterways by the Canal and River Trust, which is very supportive of our business. As a thank you we make a donation each year to its work."

Andy has a mental map of fruit trees around the British waterways – or in his words "certainly a very detailed map within a 21-mile radius of Birmingham".

He said: "Most of the time this fruit would just be left to rot as many people don't know what to do with such an abundance. There are times when we've moored up and a local resident will spot what we're selling and invite us to freely help ourselves to their garden's harvest."

Helen and Andy aim to incorporate something wild into all of their products. When this isn't possible, they keep their ingredients as local as they can, supplementing from gardens and markets.

As far as I'm concerned, the only thing that can improve a chutney is a decent cheese. I was in luck. Just a few miles up the canal network on the Coventry Canal I found The Cheese Boat »



Clockwise from top left: Andy and Helen Tidy aboard the Jam Butty; Geraldine and Michael Prescott of The Cheese Boat; cheese wedge; Wild Side Preserves



([www.thecheeseboat.co.uk](http://www.thecheeseboat.co.uk)). Geraldine and Michael Prescott have been selling Welsh cheese from their

65ft narrowboat for more than ten years. Ensnared in their cosy 'salon', complete with log burner, I scoffed an incredible selection of cheese as Geraldine told me all about life on board.

She said: "I like to be on the move, so we only moor up for a few days at a time but we always seem to get a good trade wherever we are. There are regulars who like me to email them when we're going to be in the area and so once or twice a year they come and buy large quantities of cheese. Michael continued: "We also attend the many boating festivals and gatherings, which is always fantastic for business."

It isn't just the novelty of buying cheese from a boat though, according to Michael: "The cheese we sell is really something special. We only use two suppliers – The Snowdonia Cheese Company and Caws Cenarth."

The Welsh connection comes from Geraldine who spent some of her childhood in Cardiff. On her first taste of Snowdonia Cheese Company's wares she was bowled over and came up with the idea of selling it from the boat. They are sold as miniature, individually wax-wrapped truckles. The mature cheddar comes in a variety of flavours from Green Thunder (one of Geraldine's favourites), which is encased in a dark green wax and flavoured with garlic and herbs. Michael is partial to Ruby Mist – a mature cheddar flavoured with port and brandy wrapped in a dark red wax.

The other supplier they use is Caws Cenarth in Carmarthenshire, which happens to be a favourite of mine. It's a small family enterprise and is the oldest established producer of Welsh Farmhouse Caerffili.

Geraldine and Michael stock the wonderful Golden Cenorath, a honey-golden-coloured, wash-rinded, gooey cheese with a powerful flavour. It quite rightly won Supreme Champion at the British Cheese Awards in 2010.

Mike next introduced me to a cheese I'd never tried, a Caws Cenarth named Cennin Cenarth. Encased in white wax, it is made with leeks and white wine – strong with a hint of sweet flavour and a medium-firm texture.

The Cheese Boat stocks up to 17 different cheeses. The couple point out that demand for certain flavour types change depending on where they travel. Apparently, the further south they go, the more popular the spicier flavours.

The exterior of The Cheese Boat sports a menu and has a 'doorbell' for prospective customers to ring. Even on an ordinary day, they get a decent passing trade. Geraldine laughed: "We've even been eating our Christmas dinner and someone has rung the bell wanting to buy cheese." Like many trade boats, such as Wild Side Preserves with their Jam Butty, the Cheese Boat gets a lot of business at the boat festivals as well as from us campers, who often find ourselves conveniently sited near the waterways.

To find out if The Cheese Boat and Wild Side Preserves are going to be close to your next campsite, check their websites. Otherwise, you might just chance upon them on your travels, ready to introduce you to their latest fare.

■ To find your perfect pitch go to [www.myccc.co.uk/ukcampsites](http://www.myccc.co.uk/ukcampsites) or call 024 7647 5426. For a woodland pitch at a Camping in the Forest site head to [www.campingintheforest.co.uk](http://www.campingintheforest.co.uk) or call 024 7642 3008. 📞

The Club, in collaboration with AA Media, now publishes, **Pitch Up, Eat Local**, a 380-page guide featuring 60 delicious recipes and where to cook them by author Ali Ray, and **Camping With Kids** by our previous Editor-in-Chief Simon McGrath, containing 400 inspirational ideas for getting the most out of family trips. Pitch Up, Eat Local retails at £16.99 but is priced at a special member rate of £12.50. Camping With Kids is priced at £14.99 but can be bought for £11.99. Call **024 7647 5449** to order a copy of either book. Please note, a £3 delivery charge applies to each book.



# Camping & Caravanning

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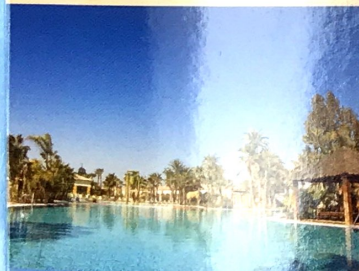
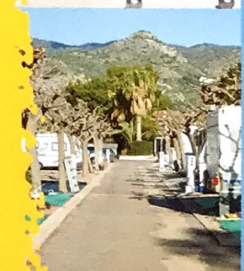
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