Team lovefood is back on the road, hunting for foodie towns worth writing about. This month Charlotte found herself in a place buzzing with independent eateries – Tunbridge Wells.

‘Royal’ Tunbridge Wells: it’s bound to be charming. But given its ‘Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’ reputation, I’d have far sooner expected a high street lined with the likes of Farrow & Ball and Waitrose than one peppered with trendy caffs, restaurants and gastropubs.

How wrong I was. Well, there is a Farrow & Ball in Tunbridge Wells; but there’s also a wide range of quality eateries, most of which are independently run by locals. Here’s my guide for where to eat if you’re ever in the neighbourhood.

Bumper brunch

I ate the best veggie brunch of my life at Juliet’s on the High Street. Run by Juliet, front of house, and chef Simon, the bay-windowed café-come-bakery serves breakfast until 4pm every day (a rarity, even in London), and my mega meal consisted of herby mushrooms, thickly chopped and slathered in flavoured oil; homemade ‘baked beans’ made from butter beans and a rich, creamy tomato sauce; bright yellow scrambled eggs; homemade rye bread toast; basil tomatoes; and a steaming pot of teapigs, served in a beautiful china pot. Meat eaters get locally-sourced bacon rashers, too.

As for lunch, Juliet’s (which has only been around for three years) doesn’t stick to a particular cuisine – the menu is based on the seasonality of ingredients, and what’s available locally. Expect everything from Moroccan tagines to chunky soups, bruschetta and Middle Eastern salad plates, but do leave room for cake: Juliet’s boasts the fattest, creamiest, most generously portioned cakes I’ve seen for a long time (some of which are pictured in the main image, above). The Victoria Sponge, for example, must have had a three inch layer of whipped cream at least, and I saw a family of six share just one Rocky Road bar.

Service is cheery, prices are more than fair, and the atmosphere is cosy and bustling. Good luck with getting a table, though – I’d suggest arriving before the standard breakfast and lunch times. We arrived at midday, and just about got one of three tables outside.

The Black Pig

How about a late lunch at The Black Pig pub and dining room? It’s just a little way up from the High Street on Grove Hill Road, and is another fairly recent project (opened in summer 2007). Its aim is to deliver simple, local, organic food in a smart, relaxed environment.

All the meat served is free-range and/or organic, and the vegetables are ‘biodynamic’. Owner Julian Leefe-Griffiths is very proud of his list of local suppliers, which includes The Rare Breed Pig Company (just a stone’s throw away); Sankey’s Fishmonger (all their fish is sustainably sourced); Chart Farm; and Taywell Farm, famous for its range of delectable ice creams. The seasonal menu often reflects Julian’s passion for locality – Ashdown Forest wild mushroom risotto, for example, is a popular dish in the autumn.

The pub bakes its own bread twice a day, and also makes things like chutney and pickled onions in-house. I liked the look of their seasonal ‘Boards’ for lunch, such as the ‘Game Board’ (homemade scotch egg, venison sausage roll, game terrine and piccalilli); and the ‘Allotment Board’ (hummus, falafel, baba ghanoush, taka dahl, beetroot with feta and dill dressing, and crudités).

There’s also an impressive cheese board with fromages such as Winterdale Shaw, or as it’s known locally, ‘Kentish Cheddar’, and the wine list includes some bottles made in England. There is, of course, a selection of local ales to choose from, too.

Best of the rest
There are plenty of restaurants in Tunbridge Wells that offer a very decent dinner menu. **Signor Franco**, headed by Executive Chef Francesco Furriello (pictured here), excels at beautifully presented modern Italian cuisine, and the restaurant has been a feature of Tunbridge Wells High Street for the best part of two decades.

The Á La Carte menu is, as expected, divided into antipasti, pasta, risotto, and meats and fish, and the flavours used are fresh, bold and ferociously Italian – tube pasta with Luganega sausage, smoked mozzarella cheese and broccoli, for example, or char-grilled calves liver with pancetta and sage sauce.

You’ll also find excellent Thai food at **Kai’s Kitchen** on Mount Pleasant Road; polished menus and fantastic service at **The Wheelwright Arms**, a cosy village pub in nearby Matfield; and, if it’s a good selection of local ales you’re after, a warm welcome and traditional (but well executed) pub grub at **The Dovecote pub** in Capel.

**A bed for the night**

But if you really want your food local, I’d recommend jumping in the car and driving into the thick of the Kent countryside. A mere 30 minutes-or-so away is Wrotham, a quaint village set against a backdrop of Kentish **Oast houses** and pastures green. There are three pubs in Wrotham (probably one per 10 villagers), of which the most outstanding foodie-wise is **The Bull**, owned by Maidstone-born Martin Deadman.

Realising that the pub would flourish on a decent restaurant menu and comfortable lodgings, Martin put all his efforts into renovating the 14th century building, creating 11 modern-equipped bedrooms complete with original oak beams; and a cozy dining room with inglenook fireplace and original war-time victory stamps emblazoned on the ceilings. All rooms are en suite, with brand new bathrooms, chunky radiators and designer furniture.

Breakfast, included with every overnight stay, is made with local produce only, and the dinner menu – primarily modern British cuisine – combines locality (pheasants shot literally just down the road) with delicate presentation and careful cooking. Expect perfectly seasoned soups, cleverly constructed meat dishes (such as the **Chart Farm** venison with Dauphinoise potatoes, poached pear, black cabbage and game jus), and rib-sticking English puds, with a light modern touch – baked rice pudding with honey-roasted figs and pistachio brittle, for example.

There’s also a simple bar menu available (it still sticks to the ‘local is best’ ethos, with dishes such as Hartley Bottom ham with Woods’ Farm eggs and chips) alongside an extensive wine list and local **Dark Star ales** on tap.

**Off to the market**

Wrotham is a good place to make camp if you’re after a foodie break – nearby is **Shipbourne Farmers’ Market**, winner of the ‘Best Farmers’ market in Kent’ award in 2012, and finalist in BBC Radio 4’s Food and Farming programme. It’s on every Thursday and sells everything from cakes to candles, honey, herbs and, of course, homemade jams. There’s also **Harvel House Farm Shop** just down the road, which is the place to go for fresh, local meat - you’ll have to share the car park with a gaggle of local roosters, though.

So whether you’d prefer to stick to the bright lights of Tunbridge Wells, or delve into the surrounding woody countryside, we’re sure you can fill your time – and bellies – round this neck of the woods.

Can you recommend a place for our Food Town Britain series? Perhaps your hometown, or somewhere you went on holiday? Tell us in the comments box below.

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