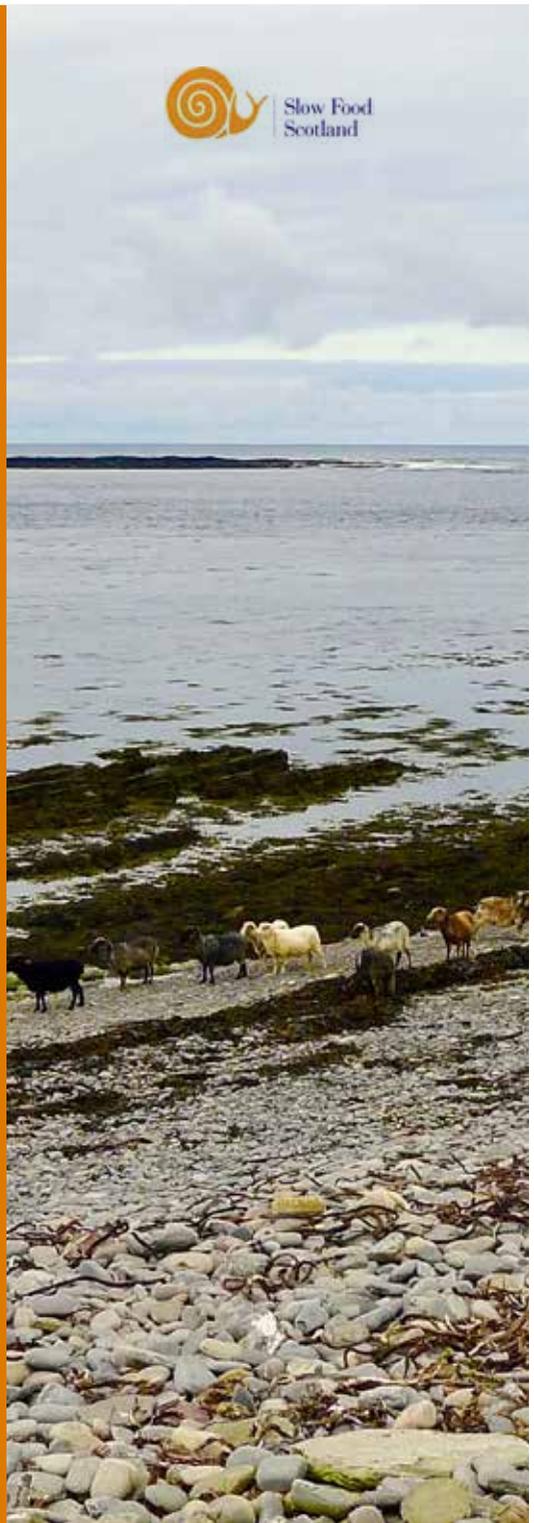




# NORTH RONALDSAY SHEEP

SCOTLAND'S FIRST  
SLOW FOOD PRESIDIUIM



## Credits

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Orkney map: Extract from 'Islands Of Orkney' brochure, Orkney Islands Council

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# INTRODUCTION

**Slow Food** is a global grassroots movement and organization founded by Carlo Petrini in the 1980's as a force to be reckoned with in the defense of regional traditions, good food, and biodiversity. Good, clean and fair food: of high quality, produced without harm to the environment, and with prices that are fair for both producers and “co-producers,” or consumers. Each country has its own network campaigning at a local level, so here we have Slow Food Scotland, which is dedicated to local projects and also linked with international programs.

Food should be a pleasure, not a fuel; friends and family gathered around a big table of local produce lovingly cooked should be one of life's pleasures. Animal welfare, environmental issues, a thriving youth network and food education are high priorities for Slow Food. There are also biodiversity projects, such as the Ark of Taste and Presidia, pivotal foundation stones of Slow Food.

The **Slow Food Ark of Taste** is a virtual vessel with a very real purpose and online port of call. It was created by Slow Food to catalogue the existence of endangered foods and associated food cultures lest they are lost or forgotten forever. Not only is this a valuable register providing fascinating insights, it may also be our saviour – one day, retaining genetic markers that, once gone, you never get back.

As industrial farming methods and food processing diminish our biodiversity, these fragile foods are recognized and boarded on the Ark, a record of our food heritage and a saving of old breeds, varieties, and seeds.

For some Ark of Taste products, it is about creating a demand; for others, in the case of endangered wild species, it might mean refraining from eating them, in order to preserve them and support their environment. All benefit from having their story told and from receiving the respect they deserve.

When a product has very special characteristics and, above all, a link with its community, it can become a **Presidium**.

*This is the story of the North Ronaldsay Sheep, Scotland's First Slow Food Presidium.*

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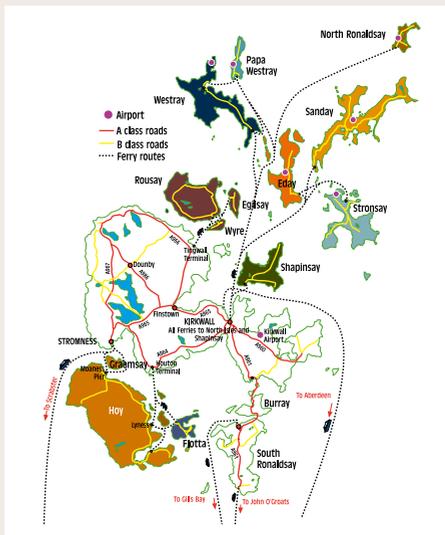


# NORTH RONALDSAY, ORKNEY

North Ronaldsay is the northernmost isle in the Orkney Islands archipelago, a bonnie low-lying isle famous for its lighthouses, birdlife, and seaweed-eating sheep! It has many skerries (small rocky outcrops along the shore) and wide sandy beaches.

North Ronaldsay is 3 miles (4.8 km) long and 1 mile (1.6 km) wide, with its highest point only 65 feet (20 m) above sea level. Its main industries are crofting and tourism, with many visitors coming to see the spectacular birdlife, enjoy wild nature, and take in the panoramic views. Its first lighthouse, the Old Beacon, was built in 1789 but extinguished in 1809. The coast has dangerous shoals and many ships were wrecked so, in 1852, a new lighthouse was commissioned, which remains Britain's tallest land-based lighthouse tower to this day.

North Ronaldsay can be reached by boat or plane. Both depart from Kirkwall, the main settlement on the largest island, known as Orkney Mainland. The ferry takes 2 hours and 40 minutes, whilst the plane takes a mere 18 minutes. For those with a head for heights, the eight-seater plane is well worth experiencing as it flies low over clear waters before landing gently on the runway in the middle of the island.



# ISLAND HISTORY

Orkney is famous for its Neolithic, Iron Age, and Pictish archaeological sites, and North Ronaldsay is no exception. From 875, Orkney was under Norwegian rule, settled by the Norse, and was not restored to the Scottish crown until 1472. These Scottish isles retain a uniquely Scots Nordic feel in their culture, food, and heritage to this day.

In 1832 the North Ronaldsay crofters wanted to rear cattle on their land instead of sheep, as cattle were considered more profitable and the sheep were not wanted. The Laird at that time however had worked in India and had an interest in sheep. He had seen them respected and reared successfully on marginal land and so suggested that if the crofters built a sea dyke they could have both cattle and sheep.



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The 13.5-mile (22-km) Dyke, a dry stone wall, was duly built round the island to keep the sheep on the shore and off the land. This separation resulted in the preservation of the North Ronaldsay breed, preventing cross-breeding, the downfall of many other sheep breeds.



# ISLAND CROFTERS

Crofting is a form of land tenure specific to the Highlands of Scotland. A croft is generally a few acres of arable land used for food production and subsistence farming. Common grazing is another characteristic of crofting where communities have access to common lands for their animals. Crofters generally have another job, for example fishing or, nowadays, working at the airport, the harbor, or in tourism. There are several self-catering cottages and B&B's on the island. The 2003 Land Reform (Scotland) Act allowed crofters to buy their land so many own their crofts.

There are currently 12 North Ronaldsay Sheep Crofters, collaborating on tasks to tackle intense seasonal activities, such as the gathering in of sheep. It is important to support each other – such is the way of island life. Sheep play a major part because it takes the whole island to round them up.

Billy Muir, the Presidium producers coordinator, is a third-generation crofter on his farm. Known as the man with 20 jobs, he was presented Winner of the Pride of Britain Community Award in 2016. Billy's unflinching service to North Ronaldsay includes work as a firefighter, shepherd, light-

house keeper, tour guide, and airport worker. He is a Member and former Chair of the North Ronaldsay Trust and Director at Northern Lighthouse Heritage Trust.

Billy says,

*"I am dedicated to ensuring the North Ronaldsay Sheep remain as closely linked to their natural habitat on the Island as possible. The sheep are governed by the sun and the moon so when tides are low they will go down to feed on the seaweed they thrive on and return to their fringes of turf when high waves crash the shore, creating a unique and natural link between the Island and the sheep."*



# NORTH RONALDSAY SHEEP

Descendants of the Northern European short-tailed sheep, North Ronaldsay Sheep are considerably smaller and lighter than modern breeds, weighing an average of 35 kg (live weight) and evolving in splendid isolation on their special natural maritime diet. Though not certified, they are organic in every way! They are slow growing and so only sold as 3 to 5-year-old mutton when they are fully matured and have a dead weight of 14-21 kg.

The sheep have an attractive, small head and a concave face (also known as “dished”), as opposed to a Roman nose profile. They have a fine-boned skeleton and the rams have horns. Ewes vary between horned, polled, or scurred (partial or undeveloped horns). The sheep have a double-layered fleece with a very coarse outer wool and an extremely fine, soft inner wool in a beautiful range of natural hues. These are the characteristics that define the breed, yet individual sheep exhibit much variation within these parameters, in looks and color. This is consistent with other ancient breeds, which do not all look standardized.

The North Ronaldsay is an iconic sheep – it is the oldest sheep breed in Northern Europe and among the oldest and rarest in the world. According to a Danish investigation of old bones on Orkney, their DNA is 8,000 years old, as old as the origins of island agriculture itself. It is critical that we do not lose this Scottish heritage. North Ronaldsay Sheep are a closed flock and probably the only flock thriving so exclusively on a shoreline, hence their sobriquet “seaweed sheep.”



Visit this beautiful isle and you will see these small sheep foraging contentedly along the shoreline on a diet of kelp and wild herbage as they sure-footedly navigate rocks, sand, and sea. There they thrive through the cool summers and wild winters of this northern isle – they may be dainty in size but they are extremely hardy. Winter storms throw up swathes of



kelp so, unlike most breeds, winter feeding is not an ordeal – indeed, the sheep reach their prime weight in winter.

What started as survival of the fittest resulted in genetic changes that make the foreshore of North Ronaldsay and the ancient breed of sheep inseparable for their very survival. The sheep adapted such that anything other than a primarily seaweed-based diet harms them. They are highly efficient at absorbing nutrients from the kelp and are quite salt tolerant. They have to extract trace elements such as

copper more efficiently than modern breeds as access to copper in their diet is limited. This means that they are vulnerable to copper poisoning if fed on a grass diet for any length of time. They generally chew their cud (the portion of food that returns from a ruminant's stomach to the mouth to be chewed a second time) and sleep when it's high tide, and eat when the tide is ebbing, grazing on the lashings of damp kelp as the water recedes.

This unique, natural link between island and sheep results in an equally unique farming system to manage the flocks. Crofters own their sheep and, similarly to the Sámi and their reindeer, collectively graze them on the foreshore, with communal rights to this marginal land written into their property deeds.





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A few times each year there is the “punding,” when crofters collaborate to gather in the flocks, checking health, clipping wool, and for slaughter. Shearing takes place in the summer and slaughter in the winter and early spring. Lambing is normally from May onwards. Lambs stay with their mothers for 1 year until the ewes are about to lamb again. It is important for lambs to learn from their mothers how to feed on the shore. When the mothers have new lambs, the 1-year-olds are self-sufficient. Sheep are not slaughtered until they are at least 3 years old, and are sold as mutton.

The roofless stone enclosures placed at intervals around the isle for gathering sheep are called “punds.” During storms, the sheep use the ponds for shelter. The size of an owner’s croft governs what proportion of island shoreline grazing rights are in the deeds, and this in turn determines the number of sheep that one can keep. The sheep are championed by North Ronaldsay crofter Billy Muir a lifelong third generation crofter who says, “It’s not an easy task to round up two-and-a-half-thousand sheep on a shoreline. We’re like one big family.”

# NORTH RONALDSAY YARN

The North Ronaldsay breed is also renowned for its wide variety of natural fleece shades: black and white, light and dark grays, and “tanny” brown. Each sheep yields around 1 kg of wool. It is ideal for clothes, rugs, scarves, and outdoor wear, and there is potential to increase demand for these beautiful and varied hues of yarn in the growing craft market.

Each fleece needs to be scoured (cleaned); this is done off island, but then the fleeces are sent back and the rest of the processing is done on North Ronaldsay in a refurbished lighthouse building owned by the North Ronaldsay Trust.

The sheep have an additional, coarse outer layer of fleece as protection from the elements and for extra warmth. It can be scratchy when used for clothing so the islanders installed a “de-hairing” machine that removes the coarser fibers, making the wool a pleasure to work with. The spinning machines and felting press can sort, grade, card, and spin the wool from fleece to yarn or felt.



Leftover coarser fibers could be used for insulation or environmental packaging, but that would require additional equipment, so no further processing takes place at present.

The yarn and crafts are sold as “A Yarn from North Ronaldsay” and are of very high quality. Local knitters also use the yarn to make traditional woollens which are on sale at the Lighthouse.



# NORTH RONALDSAY MUTTON: FLAVORS & RECIPES

North Ronaldsay sheep have genetically adapted over the centuries to thrive on their foraged seaweed diet that results in an exceptional and unique flavour. Their meat is rich in minerals, in particular iodine that likely contributes to its distinctive flavour.

As they grow and mature slowly they are only slaughtered and sold as 3-5yr old mutton and so must be cooked slowly too. The meat is lean, spicy and a little gamey, valued by knowledgeable restaurateurs, chefs and cooks. It is a seasonal product with real terroir and freezes well. The vast majority of Scottish sheep these days are cross-bred so we rely on pure breeds like the North Ronaldsay not only to offer premium products for discerning cooks but also to preserve valuable genebanks for future survival, whilst supporting fragile communities. Pure bred with one feed will always give you a consistent product. Champions of North Ronaldsay mutton hold it in high regard.

14 Billy's favourite recipe is to slow roast a back leg for 3–4 hours. From ribs to roasts, whatever the cut, moist slow cooking for this time is essential. Meat can be seared in a little mutton fat with herb butter before moist casserole cooking. Roots, sea salt and milled pepper can be added later in cooking for a highly successful flavoursome one pot dish. Minted dumplings are a delicious addition but above all do not compromise the natural flavours and deep hue of the mutton with heavy spices that would mask its distinctive characteristics.

North Ronaldsay Mutton must be slow cooked. Once that has been established as a golden rule the rest is easy! If you are short on time, then slow cook it when your oven is on for other foods then it is ready to create a meal the next day - or freeze it.

Your mutton will probably arrive 'bone-in' – bones are included unlike many cuts of meat you buy from a butcher or supermarket. These bones are precious as they add to the rich flavour of your dishes and are also very useful for soups and stocks. You can create slow cooked casseroles, pot roasts and braised dishes. Leftovers are perfect for stovies and soups. Beware of ruining the mutton's unique and aromatic flavour by smothering with strong spices.

Sometimes, when cooking, there can be a layer of fat forming on the surface. This can easily be spooned off, before finishing off the dish, and placed in a bowl. It will set solid and can be stored for several weeks in the fridge. It is perfect for sautéing, adding flavour to dishes and roasting potatoes so nothing is wasted.

*"I believe North Ronaldsay Mutton is of its place. It is from one island in the world and on that northern isle, root vegetables, cabbage and kale, leeks and some herbs thrive. I recommend therefore that North Ronaldsay Mutton should be cooked with the vegetables that it belongs with and styles of cooking that reflect its heritage."*

Wendy Barrie

Many fabulous and frugal dishes can be made from North Ronaldsay Mutton. Due to its wonderful rich taste you do not need large portions of mutton for mouthfuls of flavour. It is environmental and sustainable. You are supporting island life and heritage food culture whilst enjoying a delicious meal.

The flavour of North Ronaldsay Mutton is definitely gamey and nowadays palates have become so used to indifferent cross-bred lamb, it can seem quite strong, and has a distinct aroma. Don't be unsure or discouraged, for this is what real food should taste like.

This taste is due to the combination of 'breed and feed.' This ancient breed has very healthy fat, high quality protein and is rich in minerals and vitamins. As they graze the shoreline the sheep's unique diet also adds to the flavour that defines them. Never underestimate diet – the quality of the food any animal is fed will affect its flavour.

As more farmers turned to larger scale agriculture methods and supermarkets demanded larger cuts of meat for their shelves, traditional breeds become less fashionable but the tide is turning as consumers reflect on animal welfare and climate change. North Ronaldsay Sheep have a good life out in nature all year round and are fully grown when they are taken on the short ferry trip to the abattoir to become meat for our table. It is thanks to these dedicated crofters that North Ronaldsay Mutton is still available and not extinct!

**This is ethical meat.**

# Hot Pot of North Ronaldsay Mutton with Minted Dumplings

*Slow cooked mutton makes sensational casseroles using whatever vegetables are in season.*

## INGREDIENTS

Approx 1kg North Ronaldsay Mutton

A drizzle of Scottish rapeseed oil

Sea salt and freshly milled black pepper to season

Dried or fresh marjoram – a generous pinch\*

A selection of carrots, parsnips and onions, cut in batons and wedges

*For dumplings:*  
175g Flour + pinch of salt + generous handful of garden mint + 3 tps Baking powder + Approx 125mls whole milk

## METHOD

Cut up the mutton into manageable chunks – it need not be neat as when cooked it will fall off the bone into morsels.

Heat oil in a casserole dish and seal the mutton pieces on all sides. This caramelising brings out the flavour and gives a rich brown colour to your finished dish.

Season with sea salt, freshly milled black pepper and a generous pinch of marjoram.

Add onion to sauté, then pour over hot water, sufficient to half fill the dish, and cook for 3+hours in oven at 180 C or simmer on hob. After an hour's cooking add remaining vegetables.

As long as you have a close-fitting lid it should be fine but check from time to time and add a little water if it is getting too dry. It should be simmering gently.

To make herby dumplings: mix dry ingredients in a bowl. Add milk, mixing with a knife until the dough comes cleanly away from the sides of the bowl – similar to a scone dough.

When the mutton is cooked, place spoonfuls of dumpling mix on the surface. Replace lid and steam for 10minutes.

Lift off lid for a final 5minutes of cooking.

If you like your gravy thicker then add a little slaked cornflour at the end of cooking and bring to boil to thicken.

Serves 4-6



# Rack of North Ronaldsay Mutton with Leeks and Carrots

*Slow cooking a larger joint of mutton results in a sensational centrepiece that you can serve 'pulled' or slice later for cold cuts.*

## INGREDIENTS

Approx 1kg rack North Ronaldsay Mutton

A drizzle of Scottish rapeseed oil

Sea salt and freshly milled black pepper to season

50g home made chive butter\*

4 medium carrots, cleaned and cut in chunks

1-2 leeks, depending on size, cleaned and sliced

A small pinch of dried rosemary – or a sprig of fresh to be removed later.

## METHOD

Heat oil in a casserole dish with a wedge of chive butter and seal the mutton piece on all sides. The butter adds flavour and the oil prevents butter from burning. Sealing the meat gives the depth of colour to your finished dish.

Season with sea salt, freshly milled black pepper and add rosemary.

Add leeks to lightly sauté then pour over hot water, sufficient to half fill the dish, and casserole for 3+hours in oven at 180 C or simmer on hob. After an hour of cooking, add carrots. As long as you have a close-fitting lid it should be fine but check from time to time and add a little water if it is getting too dry. It should be simmering gently.

When fully cooked, remove from heat and lift out joint. Set aside in foil to keep warm. Now is the moment to spoon off any excess fat if wished.

If you wish to thicken the leek sauce, add a dessertspoon of cornflour to a small glass of cold water and blend. Add this to the gravy and return to heat for sufficient time to bring the liquid to the boil, stirring all the time, and the gravy will thicken.

Served 4-6

Billy recalls it served at home with Beremeal Bannock, an Orkney specialty, to mop up the juices (see recipe). It is also delicious with buttery mash and boiled greens.



# North Ronaldsay Mutton Stovies

*Stovies are a brilliant and delicious way to use leftovers for a fabulous meal.*

## INGREDIENTS

Leftover cuts of cooked North Ronaldsay Mutton, diced

4 large potatoes, peeled, halved and cut in thick slices

1 large onion/a small leek, cleaned and sliced

Sea salt and freshly milled black pepper

A drizzle of Scottish rapeseed oil & a knob of butter



## METHOD

Heat oil with butter in a large pan and sauté onion or leek.

Add mutton and mix together for a few minutes. The mutton will roast and release wonderful flavours.

Add potatoes and season. Scarcely cover with boiling water. Simmer for 15-20 minutes. Do not let it become too dry.

Check consistency of stovies – the potatoes should be falling apart and the stovies should be moist. If a little dry, add some boiling water from the kettle; if a little wet, boil for a few extra minutes to evaporate some of the water.

Serve in bowls, wonderful as it is or with chutney or pickled beetroot.

Serves 2 hungry folk!

\*Marjoram grows wild naturally in Scotland and dries beautifully if hung in a warm dry place. The leaves can be removed and stored in a jar all year round.

\*Chive Butter – when chives are in season and there is a glut, clean, dry, chop and knead into a pack of butter. Roll to a sausage shape and wrap in clingfilm. Chill in fridge or freeze. Hardened chive butter can be pre-sliced once chilled before it is frozen.

## INGREDIENTS

250g Beremeal  
150g plain flour  
Pinch of Isle of Skye  
Sea Salt  
2tsps baking soda  
1tsp cream of tartar  
25g butter  
1dstsp organic natural  
yoghurt  
200mls whole milk



# Orkney Bere Bannocks

## METHOD

Mix together dry ingredients.

Rub in butter to the dry mix.

Blend in liquids – it should be a soft mix. Add a little extra milk as required. Roll out into bannocks and bake on a hot thick-bottomed frying pan (no oil) for 5minutes per side until risen and toasted. They are best eaten fresh and warm. Eat with North Ronaldsay Mutton or split and serve with butter and jam or cheese.

Makes 8 generously sized bannocks

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For a high quality natural sea salt for these recipes there is Isle of Skye Sea Salt, on Slow Food Ark of Taste. Orkney Beremeal is also on Slow Food Ark of Taste

## INGREDIENTS

A handful of dried  
garden mint  
1 heaped teaspoon of  
muscovado sugar  
Orkney Bere Vinegar

# Homemade Mint Sauce

## METHOD

scrunch mint leaves in a bowl, add sugar and pour over sufficient vinegar to cover the leaves. Mash and blend together with the back of a spoon. It is best left for an hour or so to absorb flavours before using. Taste and balance sweetness as required.

# WHAT SLOW FOOD COOKS' ALLIANCE MEMBERS SAY...



© Fred Berkmiller

*"In the Escargot restaurants, we like to be closely involved with the food we serve and it is important that all our staff understand the importance of provenance. Roaming free grazing on the shore, North Ronaldsay Sheep have a good life. There is nothing intensive or industrial about the way they are reared. We serve North Ronaldsay Mutton because it is a fantastic meat with a unique flavor and texture and is a product with genuine authenticity. Judging from the feedback we get, our customers appreciate it. We are proud to serve this mutton and happy to support the North Ronaldsay crofters and help to preserve a breed that could all to too easily disappear."*

L'escargot bleu & L'escargot blancs chef patron Fred Berkmiller: Finalist 'Chef of the Year' CIS Excellence Awards 2016; 'Food Pioneer,' Scotland Food & Drink Excellence Awards 2016; Scotland Food and Drink Excellence Award 2017 for Scottish Sourcing.

*"This is a totally unique breed and forever linked to its community and place. For a small sheep it has distinctive characteristics. Its strong flavors can be a surprise to the uninitiated as the meat is naturally spiced and gamey. When slow cooked with local vegetables, modest morsels of mutton will deliciously flavor the whole dish. Probably the most environmental ruminant we have in the world! We wish to ensure new and steady markets for North Ronaldsay Mutton and wool thus safeguarding livelihoods and island life for future generations."*

Wendy Barrie, Scottish Thistle Award Regional Ambassador 2018/9 and highly respected campaigner for local sustainable food.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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<https://connectlocal.scot/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ambition-2030.pdf>

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[scottishfoodguide.com/places/united-kingdom/orkney/orkney/producers/north-ronaldsay-sheep/](http://scottishfoodguide.com/places/united-kingdom/orkney/orkney/producers/north-ronaldsay-sheep/)

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[northronaldsaytrust.com](http://northronaldsaytrust.com)

[www.wendybarrie.co.uk](http://www.wendybarrie.co.uk)

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[northronaldsaytrust.com](http://northronaldsaytrust.com)

[www.wendybarrie.co.uk](http://www.wendybarrie.co.uk)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### *Wendy Barrie*

A Scottish Thistle Award Regional Ambassador, professional cook, presenter, food writer, and educator, Wendy created and founded the award-winning quality assured guides ([www.scottishfoodguide.scot](http://www.scottishfoodguide.scot) and [www.scottishcheesetrail.com](http://www.scottishcheesetrail.com)). Dedicated to biodiversity and food heritage, Wendy is Scotland's Leader for the Slow Food Ark of Taste and is a Slow Food Cooks' Alliance member. Her husband, Bosse, is a Swedish expert in heritage farming and breeds. Together they have a depth of knowledge of Scottish and Nordic food



