

# SevenDays



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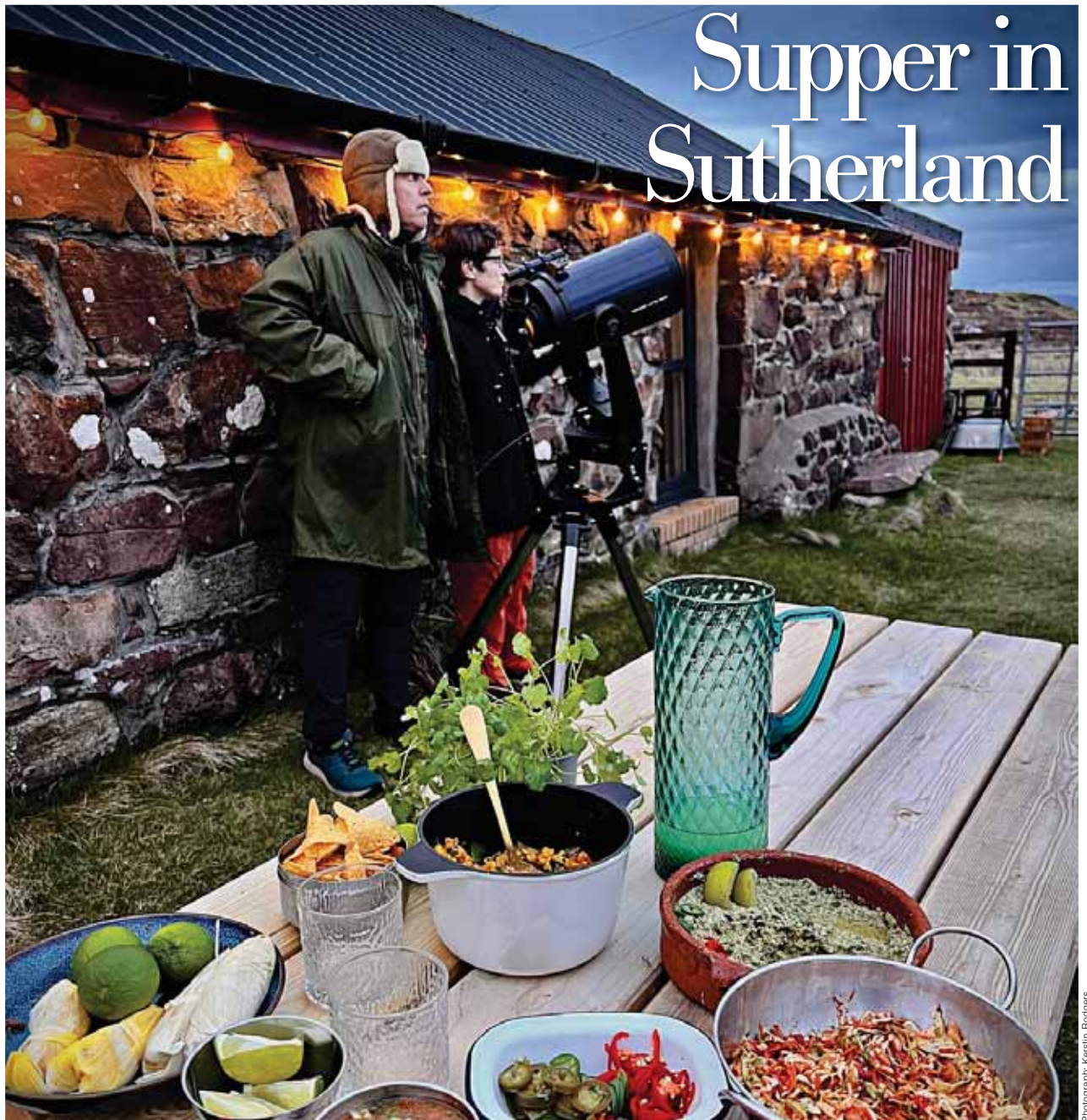
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## Supper in Sutherland

**Kerstin Rodgers takes a trip to the north west Highlands, where she finds beautiful countryside, a phenomenal array of food, and, most importantly, a sense of community**

**A**FRUSTRATED restaurateur, I started a food movement in 2009. I called it the underground restaurant movement after my own supper club. I wanted to cook for people and earn money, but I didn't have the vast sums needed to invest and didn't fancy taking on the risks associated with starting a restaurant. A full one-third of restaurants go bankrupt within 18 months. Also as a single parent with a young daughter, I couldn't – and didn't want to – work full-time outside the home.

Having travelled extensively in Latin America and the Caribbean – notably a trip in 2000 to visit Cuba – I was inspired by the paladares set-up, whereby people opened their homes to strangers, feeding them for a fee. This had the plus side of allowing tourists to

participate in local life, meet local people, and see inside local homes.

"Why not do that here?" I thought. My first supper club was held at the beginning of February 2009, announced on my blog [msmarmite.com](http://msmarmite.com). Word spread quickly and The Guardian came to the first one.

For the next few years, I had to learn a new business – how to run a restaurant with very particular limitations. It was exciting but also a lot of pressure. My first book, *Supper Club: Recipes And Notes From The Underground Restaurant*, came out in 2011. I set up a site to encourage other supper clubs; my intention was to create a food movement that enabled women to earn money from their cooking. I soon realised this was also great for retired chefs who no longer want to submit to the crazy exhausting schedules of a full-time restaurant but still love cooking.

Cooking for money is different from putting on a dinner party. It's way more stressful – you are aware that people are spending their hard-earned money on your food and you cannot half-arse it.

Fast forward to 2020 and the pandemic and suddenly I was out of a job. The government grant was pathetically small – I'd never made much money but at least I made a living. Since then, even when things opened up again, the momentum was gone.

In Scotland, the movement is still going strong. I first visited supper clubs there in 2011, going to a selection in Edinburgh and on the Border. Today it's less of a trend than it was a decade ago, but there are still sporadic supper clubs happening.

I was excited to hear earlier this year about the

# Labour's cracks are already starting to show ...

## Behind the Headlines with Hamish Morrison



**I**T would not be impossible to conclude – after a little more than a week of election campaigning – that Labour just aren't much cop at this politics lark.

Straight out the gate with a soaring poll lead, the party decided to do what they do best – get into a bloody and destructive factional war.

To the uninitiated – meaning most reasonable people who have never been members of Labour's warring tribes – these are incomprehensible.

I am a member of the uninitiated, so I cannot shine any special light on why, just as power is within reach, Labour allowed a blazing row over the fate of Diane Abbott, inset – the first black woman elected to Parliament and one of the country's biggest political names – to overshadow their election campaign.

I also cannot explain why they dumped Faiza Shaheen, a perfectly respectable candidate with a brow CV, just as they began parachuting people like Luke Akehurst – who believes the United Nations is antisemitic – into safe seats.



There is a Twitter/X account I like run by the historian Ewan Gibbs who regularly shares a meme cautioning people against caring about the contemporary Labour Party, saying they should focus on muncing the history of the Labour Party.

It is my sorry lot in life that I am forced to care about the contemporary Labour Party.

And so to Greenock, where the contemporary Labour Party were giving it big licks about their plans for Great British Energy – previously touted as a publicly-owned energy company.

It will, Keir Starmer announced, with all the nous of Rishi Sunak cancelling HS2 in Manchester, not be an energy company.

Instead, it will take public money and inject it into the private sector in the hopes of creating some green jobs.

An investment vehicle, is what Keir Starmer calls it.

Because Labour famously have a great record when it comes to mixing public money and private enterprise.

Please, contain your excitement – we've still got five weeks of this to go ...



Labour leader Keir Starmer is feeling the heat ... one week into campaigning



When on the road to Lochinver in Sutherland, it's always worth grabbing a bite at the Dark Skies Supper Club with Monica and Mark, where their huge telescope is a sight for sore eyes and Mexican food is a feast for the eyes and belly

Photographs: Kerstin Rodgers

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launch of an unusual new dining event, a "dark skies" supper club, taking place on every equinox and solstice. This was far north in Sutherland, not too far from Lairg.

I drove up to attend the first one in mid-March. The supper club is run by a couple, Monica Shaw and Mark Washer, at their house, who moved to the area only six months ago.

"This is actually the 'equinox'," explains Monica, "not the equinox. I know it sounds like a high-end fashion brand but it's when day and night are equal. It occurs a few days before the spring equinox and a few days after the autumn one."

Monica, 44, a writer and mountain guide, hails from Chicago, although she has been living in the UK for over 20 years. After meeting in Inverness two years ago, she got together with Mark, 52, an architect from Somerset. Both of them are interested in the same things – the outdoors, geology and astronomy. For a while, they lived a nomadic life in a van, camping every night, changing location every day.

Finally, they felt they needed to settle down. Originally, they were looking for a forest or woodland retreat, but they came across the Old School Byre near Lochinver, a small fishing port an hour north of Ullapool.

**T**HE drive up was spectacular. The further north I got, the more it looked like somewhere Scandinavian, perhaps Iceland. The Vikings named the area "Southlands", which morphed into the word "Sutherland". The area is undergoing a resurgence of interest: Jamie Dornan – much to the excitement of locals – will be filming a Netflix series there this summer.

But out of season, it was hard to find accommodation. In Lairg, having arrived late at night, I phoned every single lodge

**I followed the glistening thread of coastal road, marvelling at the diamond lochs and tangled trees**

and all of them were closed. They didn't open until April. I parked and gazed at the tiny house lit up in the middle of the loch. What was I going to do?

I dropped in on the local hotel, with a bar full of men watching the darts. "I've got nowhere to stay," I announced, ordering a drink.

Within minutes, I had three offers. One young man who got chatting to me said he was gay and on the autism spectrum. "I got banned from my local Lidl because I organised their untidy shelves," he said. "I rather think they should have hired you," I commiserate.

His parents ran a bed and breakfast, usually closed at this time of year. He called his dad and I ended up staying in a pine-clad attic room in a comfy bed with a home-cooked breakfast the next morning. The next day, I passed through Lochinver and then on to the stone Old

School Byre, standing proud on a hill, surrounded by sheep. Next to the main house is a small lodge, which Mark and Monica rent out as an Airbnb, with the unusual addition of an attached small observatory.

Mark is doing an Open University course in astronomy and planetary science, so the move and the supper club are fantastic opportunities to develop his long-standing interest in the sky.

Northern Scotland has the advantage of long dark nights with no light pollution. The spectacular sky show of the Aurora Borealis is a regular occurrence in this part of the world, but as one supper club guest remarked: "Northern lights go fast, blown by the solar wind."

I looked through one of Mark's powerful telescopes at the moon. I'd never seen it like that before – the level of detail, the craters, the silvery Swiss cheese texture. With the other telescope, housed in the mini observatory, he takes high-quality pictures.

Recently they've been looking at Pons-Brooks, a passing comet visible right now. "I think the Andromeda Galaxy is really cool because it's something you can see both with the naked eye and through that telescope; you can take a really detailed picture," says Monica.

Another reason they moved to Sutherland is that it's a Unesco geology site, an area of Lewisian gneiss rock – the oldest rock in Europe.

On the night of the supper club, there were 12 guests, mostly locals. But when I say locals, I mostly mean the English – only two of the guests were Scottish, from Glasgow.

### Also check out...

**Wild Kabn Kitchen near Cairndow:** High-end food using wild ingredients and cooked on fire, taking place in a vintage greenhouse. Their next date is July 20. **Mark and Monica's next supper clubs are at The Old School Byre on June 22 and August 3. Book via email: monica@eatseepwild.com**

From talking to them, it occurred to me that many of the English "ex-pats" were escaping the Tories – the appeal of moving to a politically progressive nation courtesy of the SNP. Nobody had been there longer than two years, impelled by lockdown.

Jugs of margarita cocktails were served in a salt-rimmed glass and people brought wine, a lot of wine. These guys can drink.

**T**HE meal was Mexican-themed, a cuisine Monica knows well as she used to live in Texas. People should not expect "a multi-course formal dinner", she says, "it's more like a meze". She used local ingredients too, so it became a highland Mexican hybrid, with "chocolomo" venison stew, chilli beef, frijoles negros refritos, butternut squash/feta tomatoes and a salsa bar. I contributed a pumpkin seed mole sauce.

For dessert, Mark made fantastic deep fried churros and a chocolate sorbet – the hot and cold combination worked even better than the traditional hot chocolate.

Both work remotely, which is fortunate, as Mark explains: "There's no work up there – you need a croft, or sheep."

There are some local businesses – a "destination" bookshop in Lochinver with an erudite selection of Scottish literature and local know-how; a renowned pie shop; Flossie's Beach Store at Clacholl Beach which coincidentally specialises in Chicago-style hot dogs.

I drove up to the gate of Helen Lockhart, who has lived here off-grid for 16 years. Her workshop Ripples Crafts is stacked with merino wool skeins dyed in jewel tones that she has mixed, but: "I don't use local sheep because their wool is too rough."

The Assynt Facebook group is lively and a source of connection. The Assynt Crofters' Trust is rightly celebrated for winning a rare fight against private freeholders for common grazing. In March it was the lambing season; it was a pleasure to see sheep roaming freely.

I took a road trip the next day to look at the area, following the glistening snail's thread of the coastal road, marvelling at the diamond lochs and bays, the tangled birch trees, the coconut-yellow gorse. I saw a vintage red telephone box seemingly in the middle of nowhere, like a scene from the film *Local Hero*.

I mounted picturesque stone humpback bridges and gazed at the Air Force Blue sea, ending up at the Kylesku Hotel where seals occasionally bobbed up their heads.

But on my way back to the house, I was stopped by the local policeman. "Do you know why I've stopped you?" I shook my head.

"It's because of your driving – you were crossing the white line in the middle of the road."

I was so busy looking at the scenery I hadn't even noticed a white line down the centre of the empty road.

He wasn't backing down: "Can you step out?"

Suddenly it occurred to me that I'd been drinking. At two o'clock in the afternoon.

"Well, have you?"

"All I've had is a Cullen Skink."

"What's that drink then?" asked the policeman suspiciously.

"It's a soup," I explained patiently, not quite believing that he didn't know the dish.

I passed the breath test. The result was zero.

The policeman asked me several nosy questions about where I was staying and concluded with: "Have a lovely time here."

Up until that point, I was having a lovely time, but now, I felt taken aback and a bit shaken. When I told locals, they were shocked.

"He's new but he won't be popular round here if he carries on like that," grumbled one. "His wife and kids will be shunned at school," predicted another. Now I felt sorry for him. Maybe it was a mix of curiosity and zeal for a new job.

The supper club scene seems to be thriving in Scotland.