

Searching for Faroese Gold

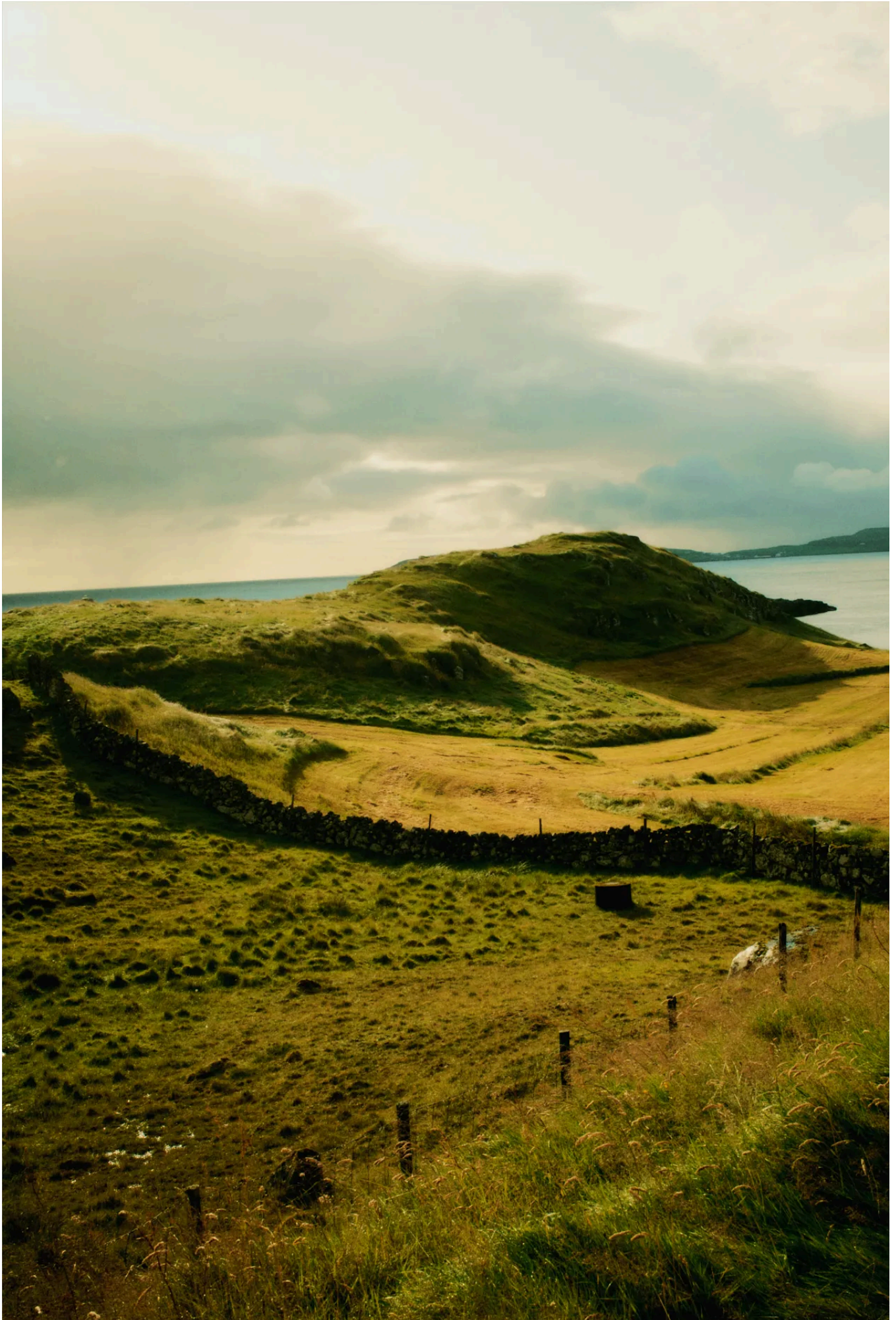
Named after their sheep stock, the Faroe Islands are also home to some of the w best shellfish.



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By Jack Stanley

Photography by [Luke Fullalove](#)

“The first law in the Faroe Islands was for sheep, not people,” says Óli Rubeksen in his farmhouse overlooking the Hestfjørður Horse Fjord. Óli’s wife, Anna, is the ninth generation to farm these lands, and the couple’s herd of sheep is still based in mountains nearby. One day, their son will take over the farm, continuing the Faroese shepherding that is so important to the islands. Rubeksen beams as he considers a tenth generation of farmers tending to their flock.

Óli and Anna Rubeksen are experts on Faroese food. As well as working the land around them, the couple often open their house to visitors in the spirit of Heimablídni, which roughly translates “home hospitality.” They serve Faroese classics, including local salmon and lamb black pudding served with pickled rhubarb. The highlight of the show, however, is the fermented lamb that arrives for the main course.



Lamb is central to the Faroese food and landscape. All around the island are almost vertical cliffs, accessible mainly by the sea and dotted with sheep. Despite their location, these sheep are wild and, when the weather gets even colder, their hardy shepherds will retrieve them from their cliff face perches.

The laws that Rubeksen mentioned were written in the Seyðabrævið, or the Sheep Letter, and laid down in 1298. It's a wide ranging document that covers everything from sheep slaughter and the correct earmarking to property rights, trespassing, and even the correct divisions of whale blubber. Rather than just about sheep, the letter is a sort of constitution for the Faroe Islands, the founding document on which the last 700 years have been built.

Even now, the best part of a millennium later, sheep are fundamentally embedded into Faroese culture. Fermented lamb is national dish, a traditional staple that appears in various guises across the islands. "It's a natural process that happens in wood houses called *hjallur*," says Sebastian Jimenéz, the Mexican-born head chef of Tórshavn restaurant Ræst, pointing to two dishes called *ræstjót* and *skerpikjót*. "Pretty much every family owns a *hjallur*, because every family owns at least one sheep. For them it's natural, it's something they grew up with. In October, the slaughter season starts and families clean the sheep and hang them inside the *hjallur*. At that time, it's already winter in the Faroes, so that lets the meat cure, mature, and ferment, and also get a little bit rotten."



Jiménez admits that both dishes are acquired tastes. “The first time you try it, I don’t think you’re going to love it,” he says. “It’s a very interesting product, I think everyone should try at least once.” The unique flavour is partly down to the Faroese climate, with hjallurs often perched near the ocean and at least partially exposed to the elements. “The wine and the breeze from the ocean comes into the meat,” Jiménez says. “You need to rely on the weather. If it’s too hot, you need to remove the leg, if it’s not cold enough, you need to wait a little bit.” The process of fermenting lamb arose when the islands had no fridges and rarely used salt. The meat is a reminder of their relative isolation; an example of how a practical concern becomes a local, and beloved tradition.

Ræst is one of a group of restaurants that are pushing the boundaries of traditional Faroese cooking and produce. The restaurant’s name is the Faroese word for fermented, and preserved ingredients are a regular feature on the menu, as well as Jiménez’s Mexican influence. “I always sum it up as Faroese cuisine with Mexican influence, even though they’re totally and completely different in terms of culture, ingredients and traditions,” he says, and this outsider’s perspective has other benefits. “Not being Faroese allows me to do whatever I want with traditional food and eating. We don’t want to serve traditional food the traditional way. We want to serve traditional ingredients, respect them, and play with them. We have ræstjót, which is lamb neck fermented for three months, and we serve it with pickled green chillies, some fermented and pickled rhubarb and a thin veil of pasta.” That use of pasta reaffirms the idea of tradition in another way, arriving in the colours of the national dress.



Poul Andrias Ziska is another chef who is hoping to showcase the Faroe Islands' culinary culture in different ways. Born and raised on the islands, Ziska cooked at Geranium in Copenhagen before returning to his homeland and working at the now closed KOKS. In April this year, Ziska opened his new restaurant, PAZ, and immediately received two Michelin stars. "We try to showcase as much as possible of the Faroe Islands," he explains. "What's most important to us is that we stay honest and true to what it is. I don't want to prepare it in such a way that you won't recognise it. It's always a balance between staying true to the flavours so that people from here feel like it's the real thing, whilst still preparing it in a way that they haven't tried before. It can be as simple as pairing it with an ingredient they haven't tried it with before."

That means there's a heavy presence of fermented lamb, the most well known ingredient from the islands, which is used to create pomme anna, brushed with fermented lamb tallow rather than butter. The menu also uses fulmar, a seabird that is native to the North Atlantic and abundant around the Faroese coastline. "It lives and feeds off the sea so it naturally has a fishy flavour," Ziska says. "We take that and we cure it in shio koji, which really balances the flavour beautifully. It's a really simple thing that changes the flavour, the texture and the experience of eating it. There's a lot of difference, but you can clearly taste that it is a seabird."



The Faroe Islands are a place of opposites, soaring cliffs and black sand beaches; emerald green grass and dark, unpredictable oceans. The sheep, and the fermented lamb, represent the scarcity of the islands, how cold winters limit the ability to live off land, and the resilience of the people. There's an old saying wool is Faroese gold ("ull er Føroya gull"), but look the other way, out to sea and across the North Atlantic ocean, and suddenly there is a different abundance. Creeks and coasts filled with shellfish, which also makes up a key part of the Faroese diet, the fish that built the islands' prosperity.

Just outside of Tórshavn, there's a metal jetty that reaches out into a small inlet known as the Kaldbaksfjørður. All along the jetty, there are taugt ropes extending down into the cold, blue sea. Each morning, the diving team employed by Ræst tie these to buckets, nets and cages, all filled with the shellfish that populates the seas around the Faroe Islands. There are horse mussels, big enough for a whole meal, as well as bold purple sea urchins and mahogany clams that may be hundreds of years old. Amongst that morning's catch, one of the net bags is filled with bottles of white wine, chilling in the North Atlantic Ocean before that evening's dinner.

The shellfish gathered on the jetty finds its way to Ræst and its "cousin" restaurant next door. Whereas Ræst incorporates traditional Faroese meat flavours, ROKS showcases the produce that comes from beneath the sea. The menu draws heavily on the water around the Faroe Islands, including langoustine, scallops and horse mussels. Looking further afield, there are even snow crabs from Greenland.



“The approach here is to barely touch the ingredients,” says ROK head chef Carlos Alberto Andrade who, like Jimenéz, has moved from Mexico to these remote and rocky islands. “I think the quality of the produce here is insane, especially the blue mussels and sea urchins. We try not to put a lot of things with each ingredient, keep it simple and let the produce shine. I think it’s some of the best seafood in the world.”

In many ways, the Faroe Islands are perfectly placed for their seafood. The North Atlantic waters are reliably cold and clear meaning that their prized mussels, langoustines and sea urchins are available pretty much year round. It’s these conditions that make the Ræst and ROKS divers can go out every day to collect the scallops and clams that will appear on tables later that day. “Sometimes it’s stressful because the diver arrives quite late,” says Andrade with a smile. “But it’s always worth it in the end.”



While the shellfish and seafood may not be treated with the same reverence as the fermented lamb, steeped in tradition and the Faroese winds, it's becoming an important part of the country's identity. Sea urchins aren't a fixture of traditional family dinners, but they're central to the vanguard of Tórshavn restaurants that are pushing Faroese cooking in new directions. "The produce we get from the ocean is just incredible," says Jimenéz. "It's unique, maybe the best in the world. I have never tasted sea urchin like this, it's so sweet and amazing."

As with any landscape, Faroese food mirrors the area it comes from. The fermented lamb is a symbol of the islands and their perseverance, developed to survive the cold and isolated winters and now a tradition passed down through families and communities. The image of a lamb leg, hanging in the *hjallur*, almost turning blue as the elements preserve and transform it, is a national motif. On the other side of the sea cliffs and black sand beaches, though, is the seafood and shellfish that have made the Faroes wealthy and couldn't exist anywhere other than the icy waters of the North Atlantic. Nowadays, these ingredients are celebrated by chefs and restaurateurs of Tórshavn, keen to showcase the best of these islands, cut off from Europe and in a seemingly perpetual winter, have to offer. It's a reminder of the abundance that lies just beyond these shores.

SLOP NEWS



Todoli Citrus Box from Shrub

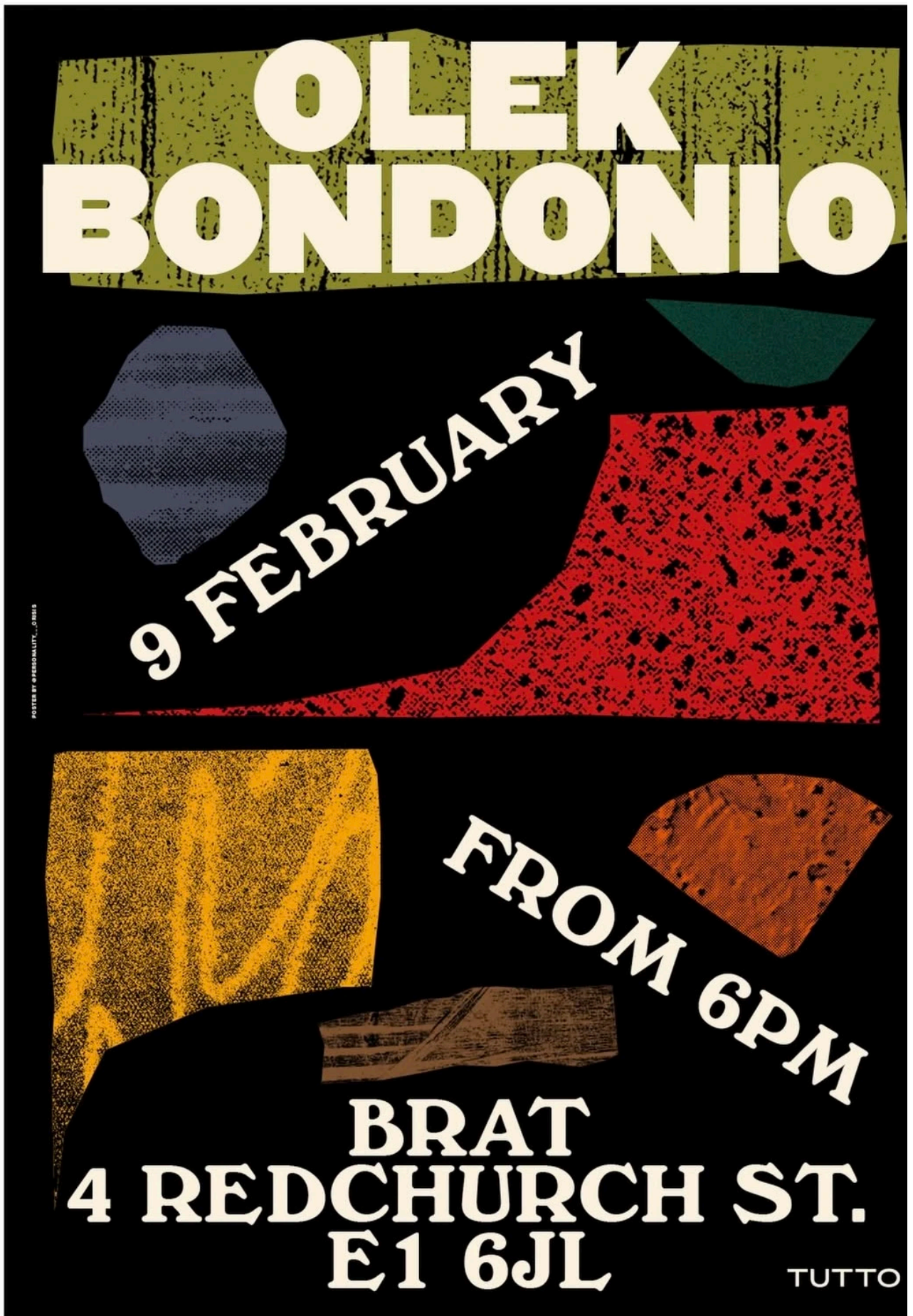
You've probably seen Todoli Citrus pop up on menus, these weird wonderful varieties come from Fundacion Todoli, an orchard near Valencia that is home to over 500 varieties of citrus. These fru are imported by Shrub, who have created a 3kg box of peak citrus the first time it's available outside restaurants.

£47 including shipping. Available via Shrub



Cellar List Mondays at Elliot's

Every Monday, Elliot's are offering bottle shop prices across the cellar list. Often flying under the radar Elliot's was one of London's first major appreciators of natural wine and has built formidable cellar including the likes of Labet, Ganevat and Chatillon. Reservations via Elliot's



Olek Bondonio at Brat

On 9th February Piemontese legend Olek Bondino will be visiting on Redchurch Street for a night exploring his excellent cellar. The former snowboarder is one of the most sought after producers in Barbaresco and a special selection of his wines will be available the night alongside a Piemonte-inspired menu from Tomos Parry and Chef Ellia.

Reservations via Brat.



Banook Bagels' Announce New Shop

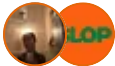
South London's finest bagel makers Banook have announced the opening of a new permanent location in East Dulwich. The former Papa John's site will be home to all of their production as well as hot sandwiches to take away.

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Sara 2 Feb

Fascinating article about a little known part of the world and their local food - and lovely p

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