**Head:** Bread of heaven – why Carmarthenshire is on the rise

**Standfirst:** From beef and beer to engineering solutions and the creative arts; Wales’ largest county is thriving, says Naomi Majid, but poor transport and telecoms links are holding business back

Fancy an ‘uberplatter of Welsh meat’, Nduja toast, poached salmon and wild garlic pesto, or perhaps simply a tartine of wild Towy sewin?

“There’s a hunger for good quality local food, and luxury items,” says Joel Wright, of Wrights Food Emporium, a family-run café and deli around the corner from the National Botanic Gardens in Llanarthne.

And it’s this hunger that is fuelling demand for the beef and bounty of Carmarthenshire – Wales’ agricultural heartland – which appears to still deserve its ancient moniker: ‘the bread basket of Wales’.

With its fertile lush valleys and rolling countryside, Wales’ biggest county is dotted with independent food producers – from homespun to largescale – and boasts a thriving food industry in Cross Hands that has become a regional success story.

Castell Howell, Wales’ largest independent food wholesaler, opened a £4.4m state-of-the-art purpose-built meat processing facility at its Cross Hands Food Park site in February this year.

Further west, Carmarthenshire Cheese Company is relocating to a purpose-built creamery adjacent to the A40 one mile west of Carmarthen in August this year, and plans include a shop and visitor centre on site.

Steve Peace, director of Carmarthenshire Cheese, says that “the highly visible location will raise the firm’s profile and enable them to draw on the visitor traffic heading west, most of which will have by-passed Carmarthen itself.

“The Carmarthen West development provides an exciting opportunity to recruit new members of the team as the business grows,” says Peace, “it wasn’t part of the overall plan but having a bigger pool of people looking for work will help us build on the skills we already have as the business becomes more digital and customer-facing.’

Ironically, the soaring popularity of the county’s produce coincides with a slump in lorry drivers.

Know anyone who’s just left school and wants to earn £30,000 per year? Neil Evans, founder and director of Carmarthenshire-based NR Evans Haulage, says the shortage of drivers is so chronic he has started to put 18-21-year-olds through their £3000 qualifying tests.

“People complain about Europeans taking jobs but if it wasn’t for them, they wouldn’t get their food delivered,” says Evans, who is looking for 120 drivers for Christmas, which, he explains, starts at the end of October.

The shortage has been highlighted by the Road Haulage Association who say that by the end of 2016 the UK could be up to 60,000 drivers short.

Meanwhile, better transport links for the county are on their way, but could take a while. The council say that work on the Carmarthen West Link Road will commence in September, and gives an optimistic completion date of September 2016 for the ambitious Carmarthen West development.

At the Cross Hands East development site, work on the new access road from the A48 to Black Lion Road will not begin till November. The road was part of the first phase of the development and was initially scheduled to be completed by spring or summer this year.

From beef to ballbearings; it’s not just the food industry that’s thriving – Carmarthenshire’s engineering businesses Calsonic and Schaeffler are also evolving and rising stars in the sector include Teddington Engineering Solutions, Amcanu, and Hydro – who are pioneers in water purification technology.

“At Calsonic Kansei, we are definitely seeing signs that the labour market for skilled staff is tightening,” says Mark Evan, vice president HR of Calsonic Kansei Europe.

“Llanelli enjoys strong road transport links due to our proximity to the M4, and it’s possible to attract staff from as far afield as Cardiff.

“Better links from Cardiff Airport to ‘hub’ airports would be beneficial - as currently staff need to travel to Bristol, Birmingham or London Heathrow to get flights to Calsonic Kansei facilities at other European locations, such as Barcelona or Paris,” he explains.

Paul Greenwood, director of Teddington Engineered Solutions (TES) sits on the Swansea Bay City Region Board, and agrees that it is challenging to source engineering staff.

“Engineers are always difficult to recruit down west, but the FE and HE sectors appear to be looking to create more graduates over the next decade with the ultra-modern college facilities at Coleg Sir Gar and new university campus on Fabian Way.

“People here also tend not to move away as readily as in other parts of the country, so when you do recruit a good engineer or for any other skilled position, they're more likely to stay for longer,” he says.

Greenwood points out that although it’s normally easy to find good welders in the area due to its historically strong manufacturing base, there may be a supply and demand issue when large infrastructure projects kick off, such as Tidal Lagoon Swansea Bay.

"I see the developments of the Swansea Bay City Region as being beneficial to all of south west Wales if the transportation links can make all parts more easily accessible” he says.

“Swansea will be the hub and presently it can be a frustrating process getting in and out. As for the farther reaches, westerly and northern districts could do with better links to the centre.

“A far greater problem for my business though is the hopelessly slow internet connections here. We desperately need faster bandwidth to take full advantage of e-commerce and other computer technologies," says Greenwood.

Wayne Reynolds, director of Atriarc Planning and Construction believes skills shortages are over emphasised, pointing to the growing emphasis on work life balance, and the attractiveness of the area as a key factor in staff attraction and retention.

Reynolds also believes that S4C’s recent announcement that it will be relocating its headquarters to Carmarthen has already visibly boosted the creative arts sector across West Wales.

“Whilst many creative professionals are based in west Wales, many export goods and services internationally, which previously only had limited recognition,” he says.

“With S4C relocating, I can see other supporting media companies following suit – or at least opening up regional offices in Carmarthen, Llanelli or Swansea.

“Historically west Wales has been synonymous with tourism but raising the profile of the area has seen a rise in interest in businesses looking to enter the market, many of which are currently based in Cardiff,” says Reynolds.

“I feel - an important factor in the west Wales market is that local businesses will seek to utilise local services and goods where possible. Local procurement is a very important factor for our business.”

With solidarity, solid transport links, and *much* faster broadband connections, Carmarthenshire might just shine up to be the unlikely jewel in Wales’ business crown.

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Panel:

**AT A GLANCE**

* **Carmarthen West**

The council plans to appoint a contractor soon with work commencing “hopefully” in September. Plans include 1,100 new houses, a primary school, employment space and a small retail centre; the new Carmarthen Western link road will link the A40 at Travellers Rest with College Road, providing direct access to the Trunk Road network for St David’s Park and the University of Wales Trinity St David’s Carmarthen campus. The council’s estimated completion date is September 2016.

* **Cross Hands West**

A 56-acre £multi-million development next to the A48. Will include a large Sainsbury’s store, car-park, petrol station and café; council is in negotiations with a national housebuilder for a 250-home residential scheme.

* **Cross Hands East**

A £13.5m employment park – the council will shortly be marketing the five development plots. Work on the new access road from the A48 to Black Lion Road is scheduled to start in November.

**ENDS**