



PUMPKINS *on* PARADE

Every October, locals gather at the wonderful Square & Compass pub in the tiny Dorset village of Worth Matravers for a colourful celebration of spectacular, home-grown squashes

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NEITHER DRIVING RAIN nor bracing wind can dampen the spirits of nine-year-old Izzy Sadler, who is barely able to lift the blazing orange pumpkin that is clearly her pride and joy. "I grew it from a tiny seed I planted on the allotment. Then it just got bigger and bigger." She balances the 30lb trophy carefully on her lap while perching on an enormous olive-green specimen with a girth measuring some 8 feet. This is the one that many of the veterans of the Square & Compass pub's annual Pumpkin & Scarecrow Festival believe will top the scales at the all-important weigh-in. "It's a giant green squash called 'Show King'," says proud owner Jeremy Barber who has nurtured it in his garden for six months. "But mine's nothing compared to some you see these

days," he continues modestly – the winner of 2009's National Vegetable Society's championships was a weighty 670lb.

Since early morning, the pub at Worth Matravers on Dorset's Jurassic Coast has seen much activity as pumpkin growers stagger up the steep incline with their bounty. Fat and round, cottage-loaf or marrow-shaped; silky smooth, deeply ribbed or comically bumpy: hundreds of pumpkins, squashes and gourds in colours ranging from palest yellow to smoky blue are displayed alongside groups of grinning jack-o'-lanterns. They're everywhere – lined up along old stone walls, piled onto weather-beaten wooden benches, or squatting at the feet of the scarecrows who are also enjoying their day of glory: a blue mermaid shares the

limelight with a jolly hay-stuffed fellow, the neck of an empty Champagne bottle peeping from his jacket pocket.

Stallholders call out to one another as they set up trestle tables under huge umbrellas, unload baskets of colourful preserves and crates of seasonal produce; these are local people from nearby farms, allotments and smallholdings, and all have an abiding passion for pumpkins. "There's something oddly compelling about them," says one customer, cradling a couple of bright orange varieties as though they were babes in arms. "You just can't help but reach out and touch them."

The Square & Compass launched its festival 19 years ago, and there could be no better setting. The pub has been in the same family for more than a century ▷





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and remains resolutely unchanged and much loved because of it. In the larger of the two snugs, a fire burns all winter long, casting dancing shadows on the aged walls while dogs sleep by the hearth, oblivious to the comings and goings around them. But today, despite the weather, most of the action is taking place outside where the far-reaching views across green fields to the sea are lost in a grey screen of rain and mist. Even the pub's flock of chickens have called it a day and retired to their henhouse.

Charlie Newman, fourth-generation landlord, resplendent in beret and a rainbow-coloured jersey to rival even the brightest pumpkin, squints up at the dark, bruised sky. "I think we're in for a day of it," he says calmly, but he's not worried – it takes a lot to keep visitors away from the pub that his great grandfather inherited back in 1907. Already the place is brimming with walkers and regulars in wellies and wet-weather gear, and a patient queue is snaking its way down the flagstoned passage to a tiny hatch. From here, award-winning beer or cider is



The weightier entries astonish parents and children alike

dispensed straight from the barrel, along with hot, crumbly homemade pasties.

Amid all the hustle and bustle, the festival's compère, Andy Wells, a vision in full pumpkin costume, leaps up on a bench and announces, "The moment of truth has arrived," as the sound of an engine roars into life, and local farmer Paul Lowden's tractor (used to lift the heaviest of the entries via vintage weighing scales hooked to the front) edges slowly into the square. His own entry, an 'Atlantic Giant', looks to be a

close contender for champion, but everyone recalls that the record weight at the pub several years ago was 800lb. "That really was a whopper," Charlie says. "We had to bring it up here in a horsebox."

Pumpkin after pumpkin is heaved into a vast green net which is then hooked on to the scales. The oohs and aahs become louder as the heavyweights take their turn in the ring, until finally only Jeremy Barber's 'Show King' remains. Everyone holds their breath as it is slowly lifted into the net, all eyes focused on the scales' jittering needle. "It's 265lb!" Andy hollers eventually, as Jeremy, beaming shyly, stands beside his champion.

At the end of the afternoon, some of the most precious pumpkins are ferried home to be shown again at other venues in the coming weeks. Many are left, though, watched over by the scarecrows, while the festival's last few stragglers head inside for an evening of Halloween tales told by the flickering fire in the snug. This year's festival will take place on 2 October at The Square & Compass (01929 439229; www.squareandcompass.co.uk).

