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12 Great British Weekends

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+ 15 PAGES OF QUICK BREAKS: TUSCANY, HAVANA, BRUGES & BARCELONA

The foodie one: Thames Valley

In a nutshell: Being home to the 4WD brigade and assorted footballers isn't *such* a bad thing. It means the Home Counties are fertile ground for show-off, starry restaurants. The patch of commuter belt that straddles Berkshire and Buckinghamshire is also surprisingly pretty, blanketed in bluebells and buttercups in spring, before summer covers the lot in swathes of emerald, scampering rabbits and deer. Bring an appetite and prepare to scoff.

The perfect weekend: Half the fun of eating is anticipation, so indulge your hunter-gatherer instincts with some pre-picnic pick-your-own. In an unlikely setting, between the suburban towns of Wokingham and Bracknell, Grays Farm (0118 978 5386, www.graysfarm.co.uk) grows sprouts, strawberries – the works. Nip over the road to Pedro's Deli (01189 795125, www.holmegrangecraftvillage.co.uk) for cured meats and squidgy cheeses.

It's 20 minutes' drive to the ruins of Donnington Castle, a melancholy pile mostly destroyed by the Roundheads during the Civil War. From here, a bridlepath leads towards the prime picnic territory of Lambourn Country Park.

Back in the car, it's five minutes to the five-star Vineyard at Stockcross Hotel (01635 529770, www.the-vineyard.co.uk), where two Michelin-starred John Campbell creates complex culinary masterpieces (pictured) for dressed-to-the-nines diners. The star turn of the weekend is his tasting menu (£95), a 10-course feast that might include scallop with lemon curd and a modern take on black forest gâteau.

✦ Next morning, head west to Hurley, a tiny village where the Thames splits into a V around a wooded island. It's a great spot for a mooch, before you settle into a cosy booth at gastropub The Olde Bell (01628 825881, www.theoldebell.co.uk). Exemplary roast lunches (from £12) are served until 4pm, so there's enough time to recover your appetite.

Alternatively, try the shepherd's pie (£15) at The Hinds Head (01628 626151, www.thehindsheadhotel.com), Heston

Blumenthal's pub. Or seek out The Pot Kiln (01635 201366, www.potkiln.org), a pub lost between fields and forests, where chef Mike Robinson cooks pork reared over the road and venison he hunts himself.

Where to stay: Real foodies plump for The Vineyard at Stockcross (as before; doubles from £220, B&B), where light lunches are followed by John Campbell's extraordinary dinners. Rooms are spacious and pleasant, if a little bland. Or try Marlow's The Hand & Flowers (01628 482277, www.thehandandflowers.co.uk; doubles from £190, B&B). The unstuffy restaurant is the star of the show and two of the rooms have decked terraces with outdoor spa baths.

Get me there: With only slow, unconnected rail lines in the area, you'll need a car for this break. Hire a motor from National (www.nationalcar.co.uk; from £75 for three days). >

