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Living

YOUR WEEKEND

Some Sunday inspiration
for things to do today and
in the week ahead



TASTE

The Powerscourt Distillery will honour St Brigid's Day with a rich cultural celebration at the distillery in Wicklow next Sunday. With poetry readings, craft and food demonstrations and a series of tastings featuring Fercullen whiskey, wine and beer, the event is inspired by St Brigid's creative ways. The event is free to attend but places are limited, so register at powerscourtdistillery.com



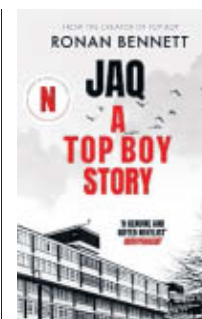
BOOK

To celebrate the lunar new year, the year of the dragon, Dublin's Asia Market is running events from February 10-25. The Culinary Crawl, €80pp, is a tour of Dublin's southeast Asian food scene, stopping at Full Moon in Temple Bar, Nan Chinese on Stephen St Lower and Dalang on Dame Street, on February 10. The next day, enjoy free family entertainment on Drury Street, at the Carnival of Cultures, with a ten-metre Chinese dragon. Check out asiamarket.ie



SEE

Running now at the Gaiety Theatre, John B Keane's *Sive* tells the story of a greedy matchmaker who is trying to force a young girl into a marriage with a much, much older man. It's a battle of generations, at a time when the country is in flux, told with Keane's lyrical dialogue and humour. The cast, pictured above at his pub in Listowel, includes Norma Sheahan, Sade Malone and Steve Wall. Running now until March 16, tickets start at €19; gaietytheatre.ie



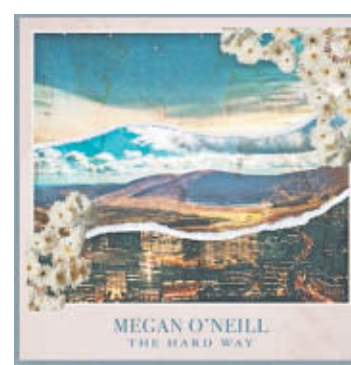
READ

Top Boy creator and co-producer Ronan Bennett's new novel, *Jaq: A Top Boy Story*, is set in the London of his hit Netflix series. This short book follows Jaq, who has worked hard on the road since she was 14 to provide money to keep her family afloat. Now she's near the top of the Summerhouse crew living with her girlfriend Becks. But new messages leave her with a choice — step back from the road and start a life she's never considered, or risk it all for life-changing money. Out now at €14; canongate.co.uk



GO

Explore the art, literature and ideas of the ancient Greeks and Romans, reimagined by artists of today as part of the Classics Now festival. Running from Friday to next Sunday in Dublin, the programme includes performances, readings and a guided tour of the Classical Museum at University College Dublin. The memoirist Seán Hewitt will discuss his anthology of queer love stories mined from classical texts, *300,000 Kisses*, with the author Fiona Benson, at the National Concert Hall on Saturday; classicsnow.ie



LISTEN

The Kildare singer songwriter Megan O'Neill's new single, *The Hard Way*, is a heartbreaking song about grappling with grief and loss. This release follows her 2023 EP titled *Time (Thought You Were on My Side)*. O'Neill plays piano and electric guitar on the track, which was recorded at Meadow Studios in Delgany, with the bassist Joseph Doyle and the drummer Paul Kenny. For more details, visit megan-oneill.com

ECO-WORRIER

@jo_linehan



The social influencer Anna Sacks has helped to turn the tide on wasteful retailer ways, says Jo Linehan

In 2021 Anna Sacks (@thetrashwalker), an Instagram influencer and TikTokker, went viral. Sacks had already become famous for documenting the items she finds in the dumpsters, bins and skips of New York City,

and in particular the items she finds disposed of by retailers. She often recovers unused, unopened products, takes them home and then donates them to charities and food banks.

In this particular video, Sacks starts by showing

followers a selection of what look like pristine Coach leather handbags, before revealing that each has been slashed through the middle.

The video immediately racked up thousands of views. People then began to call on Coach to explain why such expensive goods were being mutilated and thrown away. Some retailers have been reported to be using a "slashing" policy as a way to destroy unsold products to claim them as a tax write-off. Coach denied claiming any tax benefit.

If brands want to keep a continuous stock of new products on shelves and avoid discounting unsold pieces (thereby devaluing the "luxury" reputation),

those pieces have to go somewhere, and that has led to them being destroyed and sent to landfill.

In 2018 Burberry's annual report revealed that £28.6 million (€33.2 million) worth of stock was incinerated, including £10.4 million (€12.1 million) worth of beauty products. From 2016-18, Richemont, the Switzerland-based watchmaker, destroyed nearly €500 million worth of watches.

Three years on since that Sacks video went viral, the European Union is looking to strengthen its legislation. Last year the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation was published and will seek to ban the destruction of unsold or retained products,

including clothing, footwear and accessories.

As for Couch, the brand has launched an initiative called Coachtopia, which uses its leather offcuts and waste materials to create new products. The brand has also launched a web docu-series called *The Road to Circularity*,

Sacks often recovers unused, unopened products and donates them to charities

hosted by Aditi Mayer, a sustainable fashion activist. Mayer says the series "reveals how circularity isn't just a shift in operations; it also demands that brands and storytellers alike champion a new culture: one that rewrites how we view 'waste'."

Some may be cynical of the brand's new circularity focus. Whether you agree with the initiative or not, it proves how powerful social media can be when it comes to highlighting systemic problems, whether that be in fashion or other sectors.

Sacks continues to dumpster-dive across the boroughs of New York City, and her videos continue to inspire thousands of us to re-examine what companies define as trash and treasure.

Close Encounters
Oisín Rogers

‘Running a pub is a vocation’

The renowned publican made his name heading iconic London boozers and his latest venue, the Devonshire, opened to industry-wide acclaim. He tells *Tom Doorley* how he makes it magic

When Oisín Rogers opened the Devonshire within spitting distance of Piccadilly Circus in November the reviews were essentially raves. “What. A. Place,” Giles Coren wrote for our sister paper. “As good as it gets,” declared the Evening Standard. Rogers has been described as “Britain’s most famous publican”, a curious destination for a Belvedere boy who got bored studying engineering at University College Dublin and then abandoned a degree in physics and applied maths at Trinity. As a student he pulled pints in the Stag’s Head off Dame Street in Dublin and went on to make huge successes of several London pubs, before embarking on the Devonshire in partnership with Charlie Carroll, founder of the Flat Iron steak restaurant mini-chain. The pair became friends more than ten years ago when Carroll asked Rogers if he knew of anywhere where he could roast an ox. The answer was the garden of his pub, the Ship in Wandsworth. When I meet Rogers in the downstairs bar of the Devonshire, he and Carroll are trying to decide what shape of glass best suits Murphy’s. This kind of attention to detail is typical: choosing the Jancis Robinson wine glasses; employing George Donnelly, former head butcher at the legendary Ginger Pig, to run the Devonshire’s own butchery; persuading Ashley Palmer-Watts, former head chef of the Fat Duck and Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, to take charge of the kitchen; the quality of the linen; the massive wood-fired grill (not charcoal, actual logs). And more.

At the first lunch service every big name in London food descended en masse: Matthew Fort (of *Great British Menu* fame), the critics Tom Parker-Bowles, Coren and Charlotte Ivers, Sam Hart of Barrafinna, Jeremy Lee of Quo Vadis, to name just a few. As Nick Lander, the former restaurant critic of the Financial Times and husband of Jancis Robinson, says: “Here it is possible to enjoy this fabulous drink as its creators intended: not chilled but poured slowly and served deliciously at room temperature.” (I remember traipsing around Dublin with Lander a few years ago in search of such a pint, but to no avail.) I eventually prise Rogers away from the Devonshire and we adjourn to Richard Corrigan’s Bentley’s, a five-minute walk away. I first met Rogers as a fresh-faced 13-year-old when he played the young David Copperfield in a stage production at my old school in 1981. He retains the luxuriant curls that made him a shoo-in for the part. Born in Sligo – “I was nearly Dutch, my dad was just back from a sabbatical in Holland” – the son of a vet and a teacher, he grew up in Lucan. At Belvedere, he tells me, his physics teacher said: “You’re smart enough to get through any university, a master’s, a PhD. But don’t go to university. It won’t suit you.” “And he was right,” he adds. “Anyway, I went to UCD to study engineering in Earlsfort Terrace. I got immersed in pub culture: Hartigan’s and O’Donoghue’s. You could drink through the afternoon by ordering a plate of beans on toast at exactly the right time.” On a whim he decided to go to London

for the May bank holiday weekend to see a pen pal who was studying in Twickenham. “I turned up at her hall of residence in Teddington,” he recalls, “but she had gone home for the weekend and might not be coming back. So there I was with 22 quid and nowhere to stay, so I asked for a job in a pub called the Anglers and they took me on straight away. It was really busy and I’m good at serving a lot of pints at once – I was called the Octopaddy eventually – and within an hour the landlord said I could have the room upstairs and a couple of weeks’ work. That was Saturday and by Wednesday I was assistant manager.” The following few years were “a bit blurry”, he says, but he met his wife, Tracey, while working at the Railway Hotel in Hornchurch. “The public bar was full of brilliant characters, East End lads who had worked for Ford’s playing rummy all afternoon, buying and selling stuff, real Del Boy territory,” Rogers says. “I got my first pub in 1992, the Maggie in Chelsea, a great old gin palace on the Kings Road, and then I went to Richmond to the Marlborough, a great community pub, and I started having an idea about doing food properly. We made the Evening Standard Pub of the Year shortlist in 1996. I stayed there for seven years and we lived upstairs. All our girls were born there and I have wonderful memories of customers like David Attenborough, Rick Astley, the Oasis boys. We had a lot of fun,” Rogers says. “I realised that if a pub is to be great it has to be represented by the owner or the landlord – the guv’nor as they say here. If you’re only doing 40 hours a week and most of that’s paperwork in the office, the



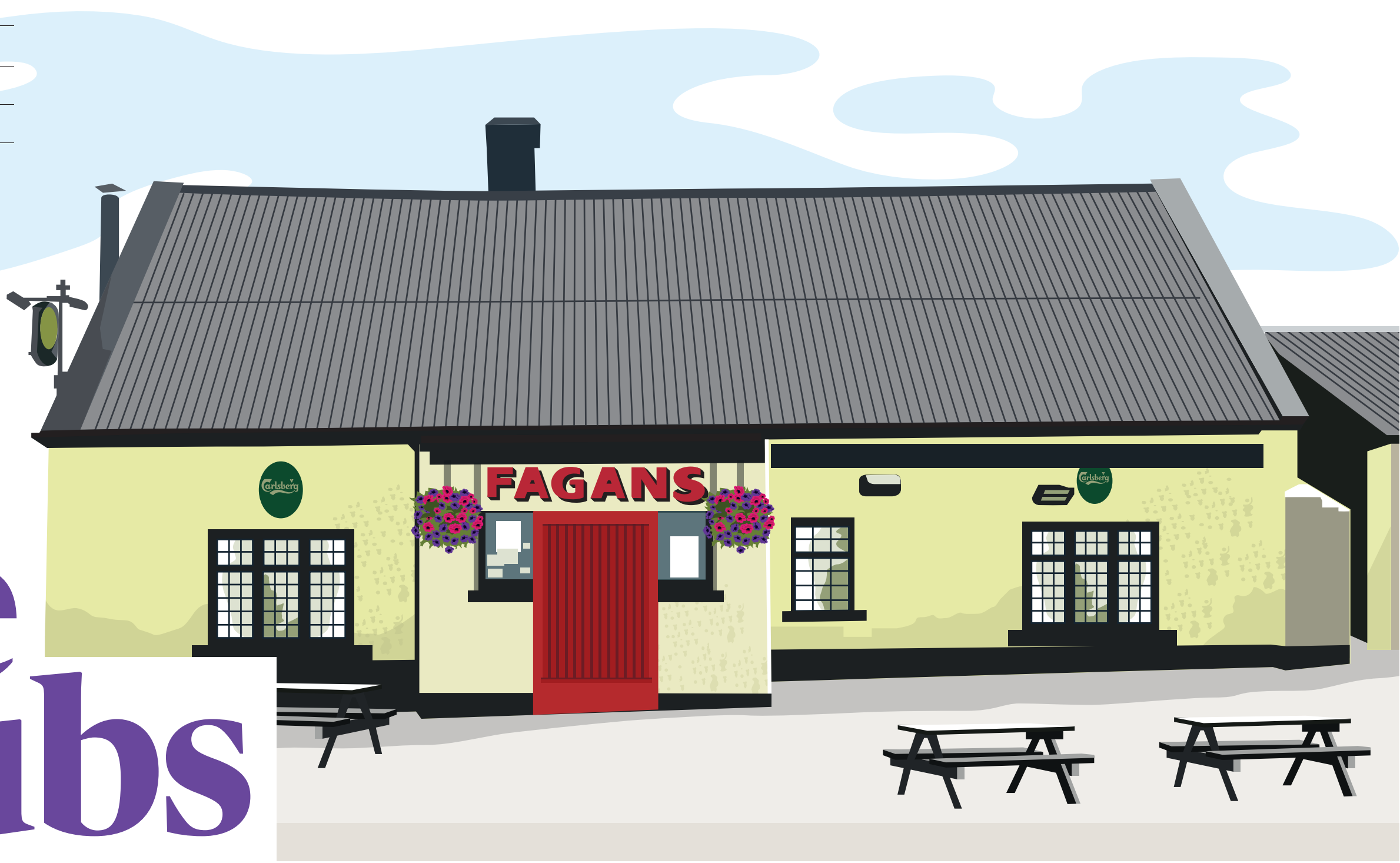
“I realised that if a pub is to be great it has to be represented by the owner or landlord – the guv’nor as they say here

pub is going to be f***ed. It’s a complete vocation and a hard balancing act. I’ve seen people not manage it – alcoholism, away from family, bad food, not looking after the important things.” Next came the upgrade of a pub near Twickenham. “Taylor Walker spent a lot of money and we made good food central – proper fish and chips, really good Sunday roasts. The day we opened it was like the Harrods sale.” Such was its success that John Young, the chairman of Young’s Brewery, booked for lunch and called Rogers over. “There’s only one thing wrong with you. You’re working for the wrong company,” he told him. Soon Rogers was running the Ship for Young’s. “We turned it from being a hugely successful gastropub into a hugely successful gastropub that was outrageously busy. This was 2005 and I managed to get a really great chef. We sold 50,000 proper burgers in one year. Eventually there were lots of celebs and footballers and it got even busier. It was crazy. So I left in 2015. It had stopped being fun.” As he says, he had lots of options but none that he liked. “You have to love the pub,” he says. “Then Young’s offered me the Guinea [Grill], the jewel in the crown, an iconic Mayfair pub. I mean Prince Philip had his stag do there. There’s a photo of the Queen Mum pulling pints behind the bar. “The Guinea is a British institution, timeless. It had to be preserved, it was sacrosanct. I knew we could up the quality of the food and the service and the beer and we did. I just loved it, this beautiful bijou place. It was a great audition for what I’m doing now.” I ask if it’s true that he barred Nigel Farage. “Absolutely not,” he says. “I just asked him to stop using the Guinea for business meetings. And he did. He was always perfectly polite and pleasant.” He was content at the Guinea and well paid by Young’s – “I put my children through private school” – when, in 2021, Carroll said to him: “Why don’t we do a pub? You’ve had a great run but you’re making masses of money for other people.” So Rogers laid down the ground rules. Find him a pub within five minutes’ walk of the Coach and Horses in Soho (his favourite pub when off duty), more than 5,000 sq ft, not a gastropub. “Find that and we’ll talk, I said. It took him less than six weeks.” The premises had been a Jamie’s Italian but was originally a pub called the Devonshire, opened in 1793. They have returned it to the original with a big bar on the ground floor and a grill room restaurant above. It has been a destination since day one. “We’ve had Heston [Blumenthal], Gordon [Ramsay], Lewis Capaldi, Joe Jonas, Jack Whitehall – lovely man. Brian O’Driscoll was in with Jamie Dornan ...” Rogers hates the word “hospitality”. “It’s been misappropriated and abused by all sorts of twats. I’ve banned the word in the Devonshire. We’re just in the business of looking after people. Anyone who goes into this business with the aim of making money has already lost the game. You need to get paid and make a living but some people look at pubs and restaurants as cash cows and they want to extract as much money as possible. That’s always going to impact the staff and the guest. Once accountants have control the magic is f***ing finished.” And the Devonshire has that magic in spades.

Oisín Rogers at the bar of his latest London success story, the Devonshire, which opened in November

Should our traditional boozers be added to Unesco’s cultural heritage list, along with uilleann piping, asks *Ali Dunworth*

Another round? How to save our pubs



The Irish pub – it’s an institution. Not just in Ireland but globally. When people think of Ireland images of green fields are conjured, but you can guarantee a pub won’t be far behind in their minds. Pub culture is such a draw that the Guinness Storehouse is consistently our most visited tourist attraction, and a pub visit is usually top of the list when tourists land on our shores. However, a visitor is easily placated. They just need a pint and a whiff of diddley-eye and they are happy. Irish pubgoers? We are a tad more particular. To us a proper pub, a traditional pub, is much more subjective. In our old man pubs, as we call them, there should be no bells or whistles, no noisy music or fancy food. A no-nonsense pub. A nod as you walk in the door. A well-poured pint. Maybe a few packets of crisps. A fire is a bonus. It’s the kind of pub you can settle into.

These old man pubs are the pubs on which we have built our global pub reputation: pubs that were once guaranteed to be found in every town and village in Ireland; pubs we often take for granted. But we shouldn’t – the most recent official numbers from the Drinks

Industry Group of Ireland tell us that more than 450 pubs have closed since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, which the group said “represented a continued downward trend over decades, with a total decline of almost 2,000 pubs since 2005”.

It’s a worrying time for the rural pub in particular, says Brian Renaghan, who runs a rural pub in Clontibret, Co Monaghan. The recent closures weigh heavily on his and other publicans’ minds. “Rural pubs are under a lot of strain, and they need to be saved because people don’t realise what they have until they are gone,” he says. He cites raised overheads as a main worry, and he is concerned about government plans to abolish the requirement for new pubs to get licences from existing ones. It’s a move that he fears could lead to a wave of closures in rural Ireland.

“Local pubs will close, and these are family businesses. A lot of them have been in families for two, three or four generations who have kept them going through thick and thin.” Renaghan says the loss of rural pubs is not just a blow to the families that run them, but to the local communities and more. “They are too valuable to lose. They are

part of our heritage, and we’re now at risk of killing that.”

These pubs are much more than just boozers, and our love for them is about more than just nostalgia. Róisín Murphy, a conservation architect, believes that in Ireland we are guilty of overlooking “the very vernacular Irish architecture and culture”. Last year she presented a documentary on RTE, *Róisín Murphy’s Big City Plan*, focusing on Ireland’s derelict and vacant buildings in towns and cities, highlighting how we don’t always perceive everyday Ireland and rural Ireland as “heritage” – our pubs

“Rural pubs are under a lot of strain, and they need to be saved because people don’t realise what they have until they are gone



included. “The Irish pub seems like an innocuous, almost quaint thing, but it’s actually a very important piece of cultural reference. As they disappear from the Irish countryside you realise that there is something more that’s going with it; it’s an intangible heritage we are losing.”

Our pubs are full of this “invisible culture”, and it was while talking about it in an interview that Murphy suggested that traditional Irish pubs could be protected as Unesco sites of intangible cultural heritage. This struck a chord with many. The Vintners’ Federation of Ireland (VFI) has since made a submission to the Department of Culture in regard to pubs joining the list of the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ireland. The VFI cites “a sense of community, conviviality and kinship” along the very old origins of the Irish pub as reasons they should be considered. There was even talk from the Oireachtas Tourism Committee that we could perhaps audit rural areas and find potential candidates for a Unesco list. The VFI awaits a response

from Unesco. It’s too early to know if this could be a solution, but it’s certainly getting people talking – and that can only be a good thing.

One of the places we love to talk about pubs these days is on social media, and it’s a promising sign that there’s a new generation who may be just as enamoured with the pub as the ones gone before.

In 2021 there was uproar online when the Cobblestone in Smithfield, Dublin, was under threat. Plans submitted to turn the building into a hotel sparked a huge online campaign to save the pub that resulted in marches, petitions and about 700 objections submitted against the application. Thankfully the pub was saved.

It helps, of course, that pints and old man pubs look good on phone screens – a pint of stout with a nice dome, a cosy fire or a dark wooded corner. They are aesthetically pleasing. They look great on our grids. They can garner likes and comments galore. A look at Cassie Stokes, an Irish content creator, is a testament to that. She has grown her social accounts exponentially recently, helped I’m sure by her coverage of such pubs and simply asking people about their favourite pints and pubs.

A well-poured pint of Guinness, maybe a few packets of crisps, no noisy music or fancy food, and a fire is a bonus — the hallmarks of a traditional Irish pub

Another social account that has blown up because of our love of pubs and pints – although for different reasons – is Shit London Guinness, where Ian Ryan, from Cork, shares photos of, you guessed it, “shit pints” of Guinness. He has close to a quarter of a million followers, and I’d wager a hefty chunk of them are Irish. While he may be sharing bad pints poured in the UK, the fervour around it all is intrinsically Irish. In Ireland the more we give out about something, the more we love it. I’m sure it’s practically a national pastime.

So what’s next for our pubs? The Irish pub has weathered many threats before. The traditional pub was once apparently threatened by women coming in, then there was television, coffee machines and mobile phones. Legislation such as the drink-driving laws and the smoking ban, and the constant rise in the price of drinks. The pandemic. They have all been touted as being the final nail in the coffin for the Irish pub – but look around, the pubs are still here, for now.

If we want to keep it that way, what’s the best thing we can do? Go for a pint, of course (or whatever you’re having). The following list is a good place to start.

PUB LOVERS PICK THE BEST OLD MAN PUBS AROUND IRELAND

CONWAY’S BAR
Castle Street, Ramelton, Co Donegal
Recommended by Cathy Cowan, a travel PR
This thatched pub that dates from the 1800s is a favourite of Cowan, a local. “There are two open fires and it’s full of cosy corners. You’ll always meet someone to chat to. A photo wall in the hallway called Conway’s Characters features locals and customers past and present. There are no fancy gins here; they support some of the local breweries and there are always lots of pints of Guinness, of course. Don’t miss the bluegrass music every Wednesday – it’s great.”

TOT’S PUB (DULLEA’S BAR)
Ballygurteen Cross, Clonakilty, Co Cork
Recommended by Kate Ryan, the founder of flavour.ie
“Dullea’s, also known as Tot’s, has been in the Dullea family since the 1850s. It has character pouring from its walls, which are clad with memorabilia, personal photographs, road signs and tin plates. Even the bar is the original, where many a weary farmer, young beour or feen has supped a pint of the black stuff over its 170-year history. It’s a bit like our version of the famous *Cheers* pub, where everyone knows your name, the pints are creamy, the gin nicely chilled, and there’s a seat with your name on it at the bar.”

THE ENTERPRISE
Grattan Square, Dungarvan, Co Waterford
Recommended by Paul Flynn, a chef
“The Enterprise in Dungarvan is unique. Old school, no music, no telly, no food except for Taytos, and that’s how it should be. Run by the second-generation owner brothers Dennis and John Tynan, it’s resplendent and full of historical portraits taken by John of Dungarvan shop owners through the generations. I love going there for a pint with my Sunday papers.”

FAGAN’S PUB
Moynalvey, Co Meath
Recommended by Shane Murphy from Neighbourhood Wine
To visit Fagan’s, better known as Scuts locally, is to step back in time, Murphy says. “I always feel like I’m drinking in a Flann O’Brien novel when I’m there.” Inside the distinctive white and red exterior, under the galvanised roof, is a proper local pub. Murphy says: “There’s a sense of comfort when you are in the pub and a longing once you leave.” He gives it bonus points for serving Manhattan crisps.

MARCIE REGAN’S PUB
Trim, Co Meath
Recommended by Dee Laffan, a food writer
For Laffan, the quintessential old man pub is her dad’s local in Trim. “I love sitting at the bar with him enjoying a pint and chatting with his friends. But it’s also just a great pub.

It’s in an old house; you’ve to duck your head because of the old ceilings. Once you’re inside it feels quaint but welcoming. The Guinness is always good, and on Friday nights they have a trad sesh.”

NUNAN’S BAR
Dromcolliher, Co Limerick
Recommended by Daniel Sykes, a pub enthusiast
Sykes started an Instagram page called Top Sphots (@top.sphots) in an effort to catalogue rural pubs in his area. One of his favourites is Nunan’s. “Only open Saturday night and Sunday morning, this pub feels untouched and unchanged since day one. Guinness on tap, that’s it. Eugene, who runs it, is a gentleman and a kind soul. For me it ticks all the boxes.”

O’SHAUGHNESSY’S PUB
The Square, Glin, Co Limerick
Recommended by Imen McDonnell, a food writer
“Sixth-generation owner Thomas O’Shaughnessy serves up the smoothest, most creamy pint with a cosy side of local lore and history. If you are a curious sort, and you ask nicely, he’ll proudly guide you through the pub on a historical tour of his rare collected antiquities, such as a penal altar from the 17th century. There’s always a fire burning and often spirited live trad sessions with local musicians.”

THE SEVEN WONDERS BAR
Fore, Co Westmeath
Recommended by Danny Byrne, a pub enthusiast
The village of Fore in Westmeath is said to have Seven Wonders, which include a 7th-century monastery built in the bog and water that flows uphill. It’s home to the aptly named Seven Wonders Bar, a traditional Irish pub-grocer and a one-time petrol station that seems wondrous in itself. Byrne says that behind the eye-catching retro façade you’ll find a cosy, welcoming pub where they serve “the nicest Guinness in the world. And there’s no phone signal. It’s proper old school.”

THE TIN PUB
Ahakista, Co Cork
Recommended by William Barry from Fab Food Trails
The Tin Pub is named after its characteristic corrugated iron roof. According to Barry it is “a pub in its purest form – it’s just pints, maybe crisps and peanuts, and that is it”. The pub opens only in the summer months, which he believes is part of the appeal, and of course, there’s the location. “It runs down to the beach, which means it has the most amazing beer garden.”

VINCY’S BAR
Station Road, Ballina, Co Mayo
Recommended by Lisa Davies, a cookery tutor
“I was there recently, on a Tuesday afternoon, after a long, cold, fascinating day in the Céide Fields, and we had half an hour to spare before catching the train back from Ballina to Dublin. Inside, the low ceiling and whitewashed walls were really cosy. The barman was very friendly and gave us a warm welcome. Had a perfect pint of Guinness there.”





ALISON MILES

Colette Twomey steered the Clonakilty Blackpudding business into new terrain, now including a vegan range and selling across the globe

Recipe secret is *in the mix*

Colette Twomey, the owner of Clonakilty Blackpudding, chats to *Orla Neligan* about the Irish fry-up, its global reach and keeping a formula that’s part of her family history under wraps

My aunt was lauded for her potato salad. It was legendary, everyone in our family loved it and we often begged her for the recipe, which she never divulged. Before she died, my cousin pleaded with her to impart her secret so she could keep the family tradition going. She finally dropped the James Bond act and replied, “It’s on the side of the Hellmann’s mayonnaise jar.” I’m sure it’s a more common phenomenon than we think, but I often wonder what it must be like to sit on a secret so important that the entire success of your business depends on keeping it shtoom, whether pulled from the side of a jar or not. For Colette Twomey, the owner of Clonakilty Blackpudding, it’s a burden she carries alone, and happily. “I have it in my head and the written version is under lock and key with a solicitor, should the 49 bus knock me over some day,” she says matter-of-factly. When she and Eddie, her late husband, bought the butcher’s shop in Clonakilty from Eddie’s uncle in 1976, the recipe for its spicy black pudding was already in situ and had been there since 1880. “If you got the deeds of the shop, you got the recipe,” she adds, albeit on a flimsy bit of paper.

Eddie’s uncle told them to memorise it and rip it up – and so it remains in Twomey’s head. Finding out what her enigmatic touch is will require some *Ocean’s Eleven* precision, so instead I ask if there is anything at all she can tell me about it. “The spice is the secret,” she almost whispers, which she mixes by hand herself. “A lot of people know how to make pudding, but ours is different in that we use beef, not pork, along with pinhead oats, blood, locally grown onions and those special spices.” Coca-Cola is probably the world’s best-kept recipe secret, having been created by a pharmacist in 1892. If you’re Irish, it’s Clonakilty Blackpudding, closely followed by Tayto cheese and onion crisps. We’ve all been that Irish person abroad who “can’t wait to get home for an Irish breakfast with a cup of Barry’s Tea and a packet of Tayto”. For those like Twomey, it’s more than just a set of instructions to be handed down. It’s an inherited fragment of family history that is not only the foundation of her business but one of the reasons for its success. She is self-deprecating about her pivotal role, claiming to be “just a cog in the wheel”, but it’s clear her *métier* requires a certain mettle. When Eddie

died she was at sea without a business rudder, so to speak, facing the decision to sell up or make a go of it. “Eddie was the man out front, so I never thought I had the capability to carry it forward,” she says. “But I made a decision to persevere. I wasn’t afraid to ask people for help or to ask questions and I relied a lot on my gut over the years, which has always proved right.” After Eddie died, a man phoned the office and asked, “Is Clonakilty Blackpudding for sale?” to which Marie, a longstanding staff member, replied, “It is, in shops all over Ireland.” “That was the clincher,” Twomey says. That was then, now its sausages, black pudding, rashers, cheese and vegan products are sold as far away as Australia and Hong Kong, because there’s “always an Irish person somewhere who could do with a fry-up”. The explosion of the Veganuary campaign shows how fast veganism is growing, boosted by tie-ins to climate change and animal farming. The number of vegans in Ireland has quadrupled in the past decade, according to one study. Is it a growing concern for Clonakilty, I wonder. “You have to adapt and we recognise that need in the market and the fact that veganism and vegetarianism is not a trend but a lifestyle choice for people,” she says. “We have subsequently produced a vegan range of sausages and pudding that’s doing very well, made with the same quality and emphasis as our other products.” She is visibly roused at the mention of her global reach, telling me about the time they bought a farm in the outback. Since meat products can’t be shipped to Australia, she exported the secret spice mix, found a local butcher in Melbourne and now sells the product from there. “I get random photos from people holding the product in various parts of the world,” she says. “The fact that an Irish person can get their hands on it means as much to me as volume of sales.”

QUINTESSENTIAL IRISH PRODUCTS WITH AN AIR OF MYSTERY

● **Tayto crisps**

Did they really invent the cheese and onion crisp? They were certainly one of the first to put flavouring on to crisps directly and, I think we’d all agree, no other crisp comes close in comparison.

● **Barry’s Tea**

We are a nation of tea drinkers who cannot get enough of a cup of Barry’s, created partly by chance in 1901 by James Barry, a master tea blender.

All we know is the leaves hail from east Africa, but beyond that it’s down to a Barry family secret.

● **Superquinn sausages**

A sausage so good that even when its namesake retailer sold up it kept its logo. Jimmy Canavan was the butchery manager in the Superquinn store that originated the much vaunted “secret recipe”, where it is the seasoning that differentiates it.

● **Barmbrack**

Best smeared with Kerrygold butter, Ireland’s token of Halloween traditions has a storied history including hiding a ring, a pea, a piece of cloth, a matchstick, a thimble and a button within. Finding any of these items might be the reason you’re not married or why you should stay single, apparently.

● **Kimberley Mikados**

I’ve tried making my own but they’re not a

patch on the Jacob’s classic that manages to balance just the right amount of pillowy marshmallow with jam and coconut... ensuring one is never enough.

● **TK Red Lemonade**

A nostalgic favourite from childhood parties in days gone by, several manufacturers are happy to lay claim to the origin of the nationally loved soft drink. And none of them have the answers as to why it’s red.

SARAH BREEN

@sarahjaybee



Children are exposed to all sorts of negative messaging, much of it rooted in diet culture. But I want mine to grow up having a healthy relationship with food

This week I overheard my preschooler announcing that mango “isn’t healthy”. I had set him and his sister up at the kitchen table with some snacks and retired to the other room in the hope of five minutes’ peace. But there is no peace when you’re parenting. I continued eavesdropping as she asked him why. “It has too much sugar,” he replied matter-of-factly, while rustling in the dregs of a Celebrations box.

You know the way in cartoons when a character moves so fast their feet become a blur? That was me getting up off the couch to interrupt them. I was so annoyed that anyone would suggest eating fruit could be a bad thing. “Who told you that mango has too much sugar?” I asked him. He said it was a classmate, another kid who’d peered into my son’s lunchbox and repeated something they’d obviously heard at home.

Of course I corrected my son and explained that mango is, in fact, very good for us, that it’s full of important nutrients and that sugar gives us energy, but my heart sank. I am determined that my children grow up having a healthy relationship with food. It pains me that I have to send them out into the world every day, where they’re exposed to all sorts of messaging, much of it rooted in diet culture.

“

In our house there are no good foods and no bad foods. We don’t talk about earning meals or dessert being naughty

In our house there are no good foods and no bad foods. We don’t talk about earning meals or dessert being naughty. We are lucky to be able to restock the pantry, fridge and freezer every week and to serve up a decent variety of things to eat. I really do not enjoy cooking but I’m particularly proud of the fruit bowl, which is always heaving after the big shop. The only things standing between my kids and an unlimited supply of mangoes is a) they are eye-wateringly expensive, b) they usually have a terrible carbon footprint and c) they are a pain in the arse to cut up.

I am playing the long game here. Like many of us, I was raised having to sit at the table until I’d cleared my plate. And I understand why, I’m trying to reduce food waste myself, but people are not bins. I dread to think how many hours

of my childhood were spent staring at a mound of lumpy mashed potato growing colder and colder. I grew up continuing to clear my plate even if that meant eating past a feeling of comfortable fullness.

I also came of age when heroin chic was cool and everyone believed Kate Moss when she said nothing tastes as good as skinny feels. You can see the contradiction here. It’s my job to break this cycle. I want my children to enjoy their food and to be allowed to listen to their growing bodies when they want to eat more or less. I don’t want them ever worrying about the sugar content of a mango.

It’s very hard to unlearn things that you’ve been taught your whole life. I couldn’t tell you my husband’s phone number but I know how many WeightWatchers Points are in a Snickers. Useless information that’s taking up valuable space in a part of my brain that should be thinking of ways to stop AI from decimating humanity.

This time of year is particularly hard for those of us trying our best to reject the voices insisting we must atone for enjoying December and all that goes with it. If we want things to change, we have to start with the next generation. And the first step is telling our kids that it’s never cool to comment on what someone else is eating.

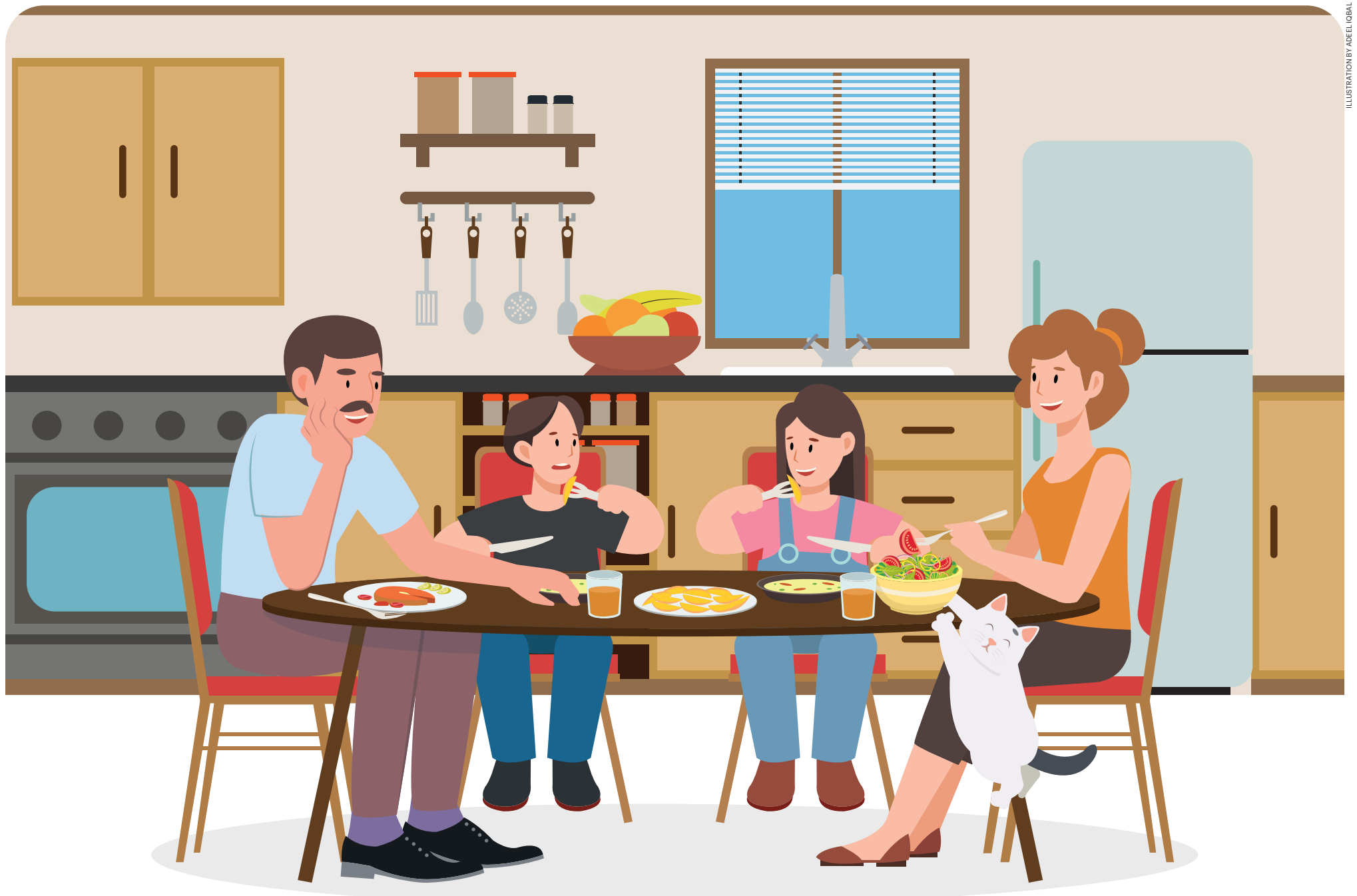


ILLUSTRATION BY ADEEL LOBAL

While there’s not much actual gardening that can be done right now, I’ve been waging a war with the brambles armed with my trusty brush cutter, says *Tom Doorley*

I spent a lot of our recent frosty spell working in our woods and it was heavenly. Bitterly cold, of course, but I wore numerous layers and only occasionally had to thaw my hands in the exhaust flow from the brush cutter – probably not quite kosher in terms of health and safety but needs must. The low winter sun shining through the trees, the fallen leaves crisp and dusted with white, the silence and the birdsong.

And the brambles, of course. You have to admire their tenacity, their ability to multiply, their defence system and, to be fair, their delicious fruit come August. But they are a menace. Any piece of unattended ground around our place is fair game for them and keeping them at bay, or at least under control, is a fairly constant business.

If you’re wondering what a brush cutter is, well, in urban areas a strimmer does the job of keeping things neat, possibly too neat; in the country you need a heavy-duty strimmer in which the nylon cord is replaced by an absolutely lethal disc blade. Brush cutters, like chainsaws and several other essentials of country life, need to be treated with great respect and an expectation that they are conspiring to kill, or least maim, you. Eye protection is essential as brambles fight back and spin out chunks of stem at something like 100km/h and you would be mad not to employ ear defenders, ideally industrial ones.

But it’s satisfying. The brambles in the woods are pretty luxuriant where the leaf canopy is patchy and the paths get invaded. Take your eye off one of the paths for a couple of months and it becomes impassable, hence the battle, the noise and, yes, a sense of satisfaction. I generally manage to go over the paths – more like tracks really – three times a year, and it means that “forest bathing” or, if you prefer, a stroll through the woods and a discreet peek at the badger sett, is a pleasure rather than a struggle requiring stout clothing and secateurs. Actually I’ve come to the point where I always travel with a pair. I found them in my back pocket while I was in the queue in Aldi the other day.

There’s not much that can be done in terms of actual gardening just now, although I’ve prepared the beds in the tunnel for early peas and broad beans. The sowing season will coincide with the end of my dry (most of) January and completely arid February. You may ask

These tenacious foes are no match for my *skills and weaponry*

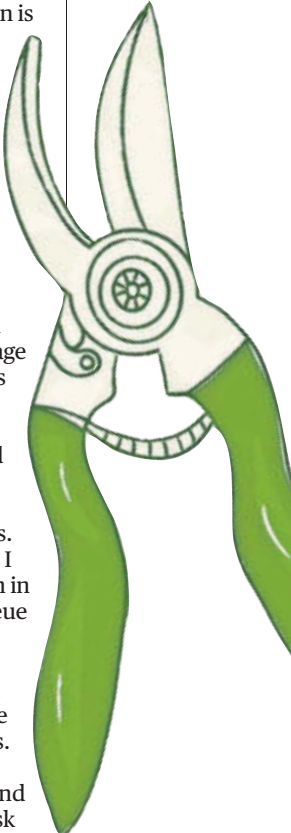
His continuing battle with brambles means Tom Doorley is never without a pair of secateurs. He has now prepared the beds in the tunnel for broad beans



I always casserole them if left to me. I also don’t bother plucking but skin the birds, feathers and all, joint them, toss in seasoned flour and away you go. Oh, you do have to remove the entrails, of course, a rather nifty process if they have hung for long. Certain elements among the stranded gentry like pheasant that has not just gone off but is well into the process of putrefaction. I just don’t get it. We hang ours for a week at most.

Between pheasant and kedgeree it was a week of country house cooking, although the latter had a twist. Instead of using rice we cooked some puy lentils, then softened some chopped onions and garlic in butter and then added – avert your eyes, food snobs – some curry powder and some extra cayenne. These were mixed together with some chunks of smoked haddock and a few quarters of hard-boiled egg. The whole lot was moistened with just a little cream, covered with a butter paper and not so much baked as just thoroughly heated through. We sprinkled with chopped coriander and served it with wedges of lemon and a simple green salad.

The “wine” match was one of my abstemious favourites: sparkling water with a big squeeze of lime. Was it as good as a riesling? Er ... no.



how a wine writer manages this and the answer is very simple: spitting. You can taste perfectly – perhaps even better – without swallowing. And if there’s a hundred or so wines to be “looked at”, as they say in the trade, any other approach would lead to madness or, at the very least, complete incapacitation.

I shall break my fast – or rather abstinence – with a very dry martini on Johann’s birthday in early March and I’ve already decided that it will involve Tanqueray No 10. The rest of the menu is still up in the air.

I have been trying various non-alcoholic wines and so far have not found much pleasure, but the search continues and I’ll be recounting my quest on Substack if you care to dip in. Alcohol-free beers are streets ahead, it would appear, and I have to say the Guinness 0.0 allowed me to enjoy a T-bone steak, hitherto quite unthinkable without something chunky and red and, of course, alcoholic. It’s remarkably convincing and the trick is not to overchill it (the real thing on draught all over Ireland is so cold I can hardly taste it).

“**Brush cutters, like chainsaws and several other essentials of country life, need to be treated with great respect**

Another aspect of country life – I’m talking about using noisy and dangerous equipment, not avoiding booze – is you get to eat game. We’ve had a lot of pheasant lately and even two brace of teal (very cute and beautiful little ducks). The latter, plucked and drawn (by Johann) are now in the freezer pending my return to the dissolute life of the wine drinker. The pheasants have been enjoyed in various forms: roasted with streaky bacon across the breasts, dismembered and slow-cooked with wine and mushrooms, and pot-roasted, a process that ensures the flesh remains moist.

AND TO WASH IT DOWN ...

Claret is an old-fashioned word and a catch-all for the red wines of Bordeaux, whether the basic stuff or a first growth from Pauillac. One of my standby wines is Mitchell’s Claret (€15, Mitchell & Son, IFSC and Glashule, mitchellandson.com), at present in the 2019 vintage and a cracker at the price. Mainly merlot, it’s ripe and round but underpinned by grippy tannins, making it a truly versatile red for food. And it comes from the Sichel family, whose properties include the brilliant cru bourgeois Château d’Angludet and the superstar grand cru Château Palmer, both in Margaux.



Fired up with a slice of style that delivers in spades

Its impeccable pizza tops the bill and Otto's elegant wine bar surroundings set the scene for Sligo's next big hit, say *Russell Alford* and *Patrick Hanlon*

RESTAURANT REVIEW

@gastrogays



OTTO

32 O'Connell Street, Sligo town; ottopizza.ie, @otto_pizzawine

★ RATING 8.5/10

We've taken you to an east Belfast warehouse and a converted horsebox in Kildare for pizza in the past year and are still of the opinion that most of the best slices are found outside Dublin. Contrary to popular belief, perhaps, but we're continuing that trajectory. Sligo town has just welcomed a much-anticipated designer pizzeria and wine bar, which gave us a strong excuse to return to this corner of the northwest.

For seven years half of this space on Sligo's O'Connell Street was Knox, opened by David Dunne in 2015 with Paul Brennan joining later as restaurant manager. Brennan has a fine hospitality pedigree: his parents, Damien and

WHAT WE ATE

SNACKS AND SMALLS

Six Lissadell oysters €12
Crispy squid, Calabrian hot sauce €12
Kuri squash and taleggio croquettes €12
Potato pont neuf, aged parmesan €8

PIZZA

Leek and potato (grana padano, fresh basil, braised leek, baby potato, garlic, fontina, Toonsbridge fior di latte) €17
'Nduja honey (crushed tomato, fresh basil, Toonsbridge fior di latte, 'nduja, grana padano, hot honey) €17

TO DRINK

Malbec (glass) €9
Chablis (2 x glasses) €21

TOTAL: €108

Paula, ran Reveries in Rosses Point in the late 1980s, while his uncles are a pair of well-known hoteliers in Kerry. You may have seen them once or twice on RTE.

Dunne and Brennan solidified their professional partnership by opening the high-quality Irish burger joint Flipside in 2018, which continues to receive acclaim. Having navigated the pandemic, in 2022 the pair decided to close Knox to reimagine and expand the business as they had quietly taken ownership of the adjoining unit a few years previously. A year of renovations later, Otto opened last December and they've been flat out since.

The Dublin-based interior designer Laura Farrell, who redesigned the two-Michelin-star Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud, styled the space elegantly in a dash of modern art deco with luxe finishes, very much more "wine bar/bistro" than "pizza place", with a nod to the sleek 1970s in the styling. It all feels very new and in some areas stark, but allow Otto time and it will luxuriate into "lived-in".

The restaurant design forces your eyes to land on the massive gas-fired pizza oven in the middle of the space when you walk in. The Valoriani oven has come direct from Florence and is decked out in dinky square tiles, like a matt disco ball, with Otto emblazoned into the mosaic.

A plate of oysters kicks us off and, while nicely fresh with a zingy mignonette sauce,

more care is needed with the shucking as bits of shell keep killing the vibe. Forget rotten rubbery rings of squid, here fresh squid is treated delicately, cut into long lengths before being coated and fried. The accompanying Calabrian hot sauce builds from initial sweetness to a nice warm tingle, but we could take more fire.

There's a choice of meat-based or veggie croquettes and we opt for the latter. Four stocky, square croquettes with great colour on the crunchy panko coating arrive, dolloped atop in both the house garlic aioli and the 'nduja aioli. The squash filling is rich and unctuous, melt in the mouth, and if we lived in Sligo you'd find us propping up the bar seats down the back regularly enjoying a glass or two of wine while happily munching on a plate or two (or three) of these alone.

The potato pont neuf is a curious snack or starter, more often seen as a side. Two long bricks of about 20 layers of confited or stock-enriched potato slices are cooled, compressed, cut, fried and dressed in aged parmesan and aioli. Mark our words: what the cod chip is to Mamó in Howth will be the pont neuf to Otto. A must-order.

With this selection of Italian-influenced smaller plates you almost forget pizza is the main point here. But both the menu and space balance the two sides (wine bar, pizzeria) – as good for families and young groups digging into pizzas and gelato as it is for grown-up catch-ups and date nights sharing a bottle and small plates.

Speaking of pizza, we have to ask: is Reggie White Ireland's premier pizzaiolo? Probably. As a freelance dough cognoscente White saddles up and gallops across the country slinging his pizza powers. Otto is no exception – White guided the kitchen on perfecting the dough, toppings and training the staff.

The plan was always Neapolitan-style pizza and here the base isn't sourdough, rather yeasted, but it benefits from a long, slow, 48-hour cold prove to develop flavour, texture and digestibility. Theirs is a pleasingly bouncy and spongy dough with just a hint of tang while nicely

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Theirs is a pleasingly bouncy and spongy dough with just a hint of tang while nicely leopard-spotted from the ferocious oven

leopard-spotted from the ferocious oven.

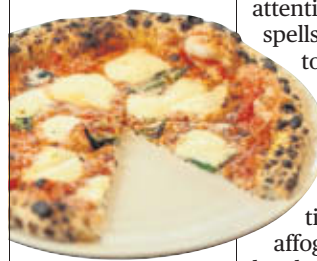
We try two different pizzas, one tomato-based and another bianca (white) style. The latter is leek and potato, a familiar flavour pairing but elevated brilliantly here with an intense vegetal hum, sweet intensity from braised leek and baby potato plus a dimensional combination of mozzarella, fontina and grana padano. The 'nduja honey is a more classic, margherita style, spiked tinglingly by the spicy Calabrian spreadable sausage and a drizzling of hot honey.

We've all become particular about provenance where pizza is concerned, as its very nature leaves little room to hide. The provenance at Otto is good, with farmhouse cheeses from Toonsbridge, St Tola and Gubbeen, while local suppliers include pork from Clarke's Butchers, designer leaves and seasonal organic vegetables from Carrowgarry Farm and local shellfish from Lissadell.

A word on wine, the list is a fine curation, mostly old world, with many options by the glass (from €7). There's a smart mix of grapes and styles, with a crowd-pleasing selection of bottles sitting around the €40 mark.

The downside to this opening being so popular is that, as the room swells, attention wanes and there are spells of waiting. Dishes take too long to clear while a glass of wine ordered never arrives yet ends up on the bill. We skip dessert (all Italian classics such as tiramisu, gelato and affogato) and coffee (using local Carrow roasters) for fear the wait may be too long.

The food at Otto is right on the money, the design slick and cosmopolitan and the service personable and professional, and Sligo continues its ascent with the exciting addition of Otto to its beating heart.



IF THAT, THEN THESE

Pizza and wine in a designer setting, what could be better? Take three more similar spots
Cirillo's, Dublin 2
A similarly designed pizzeria with smaller plates and boutique wine producers that flies under the

radar on Baggot Street; cirillos.ie
Orto, Belfast
With three locations in the city, you're spoilt for choice at Orto, which offers viennoiserie and coffee by morning and pizza all day,

every day; ortopizza.com
One Society, Dublin 1
In the evenings One Society on Lower Gardiner Street turns all Italian with tapas, pizza and wine till 9pm or so; onesociety.ie

Home

Rats!” was not the four-letter word I uttered when I saw the oily rodent scuttle across the kitchen floor and disappear into a hole the size of a champagne cork under the fridge. For the first time since moving to London in 1980 I had encountered a sewer rat – perhaps surprising, given the estimated UK rat population of anything up to 150 million. I have drawn many cartoons about the adage that “you’re never more than six feet away from a rat” – but now the cliché had become a grisly reality. And the distance was considerably less than six feet.

Once my wife had bravely blocked the hole (with a champagne cork) and I had climbed down from the kitchen chair, we of course called in the experts. Where had Ratty come from? Why now, after 43 years of rodent-free London living? And how could he afford to live in Wandsworth?

The first pest control firm we contacted would surely have the answers, promising “100 per cent success”, which more than justified the £350 fee for three visits. Step one was to tackle the “ingress points” – blocking off obvious holes by stuffing them with wire wool, which disagrees with Ratty’s digestive system. Step two was laying down poison. If our visitor negotiated the wire wool, the poison would finish him off.

This might take several days. He might return to wherever he had come from to end his days or expire somewhere in the kitchen. The smell would tell us he’d snuffed it, followed by the flies. We had much to look forward to.

Any hopes that this might resolve the matter were quickly shattered when we found that the next morning our visitor had pushed the wire wool out of the hole and spent the night exploring the kitchen. Rat poison was scattered everywhere, along with droppings and

“Rats can chew through metal, concrete and brick, I learnt

After 40 years in London, cartoonist *Nick Newman* finally meets his first rat – and it’s in his kitchen

Oh no!

Rats!



a puddle of urine in a saucepan.

The rat-catcher returned the next day, replaced the poison and shoved more wire wool into the tiny hole. Two days later my daughter and granddaughter were more than surprised by another rat sauntering across the kitchen floor.

With the rat-catchers came lurid tales of rodent encounters – like the rat in the care home bathroom, “stabbed to death” with a screwdriver by the pest controller, only to be found sitting happily on the side of the bath moments later. Or the lady who complained of a rat in her loo. It had negotiated the U-bend (rats can tread water for 72 hours) and emerged in the lavatory bowl. Then there are the millions of “super rats”, which have developed a resistance to anticoagulant rodenticides and actually thrive on poison pellets.

We were advised to have our drains inspected for cracks. Construction work had begun on a site nearby and may have disturbed a nest. Our neighbours, too, had had problems. A drain video camera would cost £200 – worth it if it established



where the rats were coming from. It didn’t.

A month of quiet ensued, before foetid whiffs began to emanate from behind the skirting board. Our “guarantee period” had expired, so another visit cost another £60, plus VAT. The pest controller removed a large decomposing rat, groaning: “Have you got a carrier bag? God, I hate having to remove these things!” We rather hated the bluebottles that buzzed around our kitchen for the next week.

Happy months passed until late summer, when the sound of more scratching announced that the “100 per cent success” promise was more of a government-style pledge.

A new pest company (“eradication guaranteed”) removed a 45cm-long dead rat from behind the plinth under the kitchen units. This and two rat traps cost a further £300. This rat-catcher managed to photograph a larger hole behind the fridge – progress at last! Said hole also contained

another (live) rat, beady eyes twinkling in the gloom. We were reassured that this chap was unlikely to hang around as rats are neophobic – disliking anything new. The site had been disturbed, and this would scare him off. For now.

Reluctant to investigate the hole further, the company advised us to employ their drainage team to excavate 3m down outside our kitchen wall, accompanied by a structural engineer to ensure that the house’s foundations

were not compromised. Estimated cost? Upwards of £1,000 plus VAT. In desperation we asked our own builders to remove our integrated fridge-freezer. This revealed a football-sized hole leading who knows where.

The drain team was unwilling to investigate the hole from inside the house, so our builders returned and bricked it up. Since then, no more rats (touch wood).

We feel somewhat sceptical about pest-control companies (UK market: about £1 billion annually). They put down poison and traps, and insert wire wool into visible orifices, but in our experience are reluctant to get their hands too dirty. However, we have learnt many interesting rat facts. The collective noun for rats is a “mischief”, they can chew through metal, concrete and brick – and just one pair of brown rats can produce as many as 2,000 descendants in a year. We have also developed a sneaking admiration for these clever survival experts, which invaded our lives and caused much merry ratty mayhem.

This article first appeared in the February issue of the Oldie magazine

How to prevent rodents from invading your home

- Maintain your drains: rats can come up through them. A dip in the flagstones in your garden could indicate collapsing drains.
- Keep your garden tidy and be aware of anywhere that rats could burrow under or through.
- Make sure your bins are not overflowing and food caddies are locked tight. And be careful where you store pet food, particularly bird food – keep it off the ground and in a sealed container.
- Be aware of the signs of an infestation: scurrying noises in cavity walls, droppings and the smell of urine.

If you have rats in your home, Blackhurst warns that it can take weeks to evict them.






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MOVE



Louise McGuane at home near Cooraclare, where vast picture windows look out on to the Co Clare countryside, below

When Louise McGuane describes her reimagined west Clare cottage as “a nod to heritage but embracing modernity”, she could as easily be talking about her whiskey bonding business or the kind of food that’s typically served up to a seemingly endless stream of visitors to the Cooraclare home she shares with her husband, Dominic McCarthy, the co-founder of a London PR company.

Whether they’re hosting business events for customers, journalists and VIPs or entertaining friends and family, McGuane says her signature dish is bacon – which is done in a slow cooker – and cabbage. “I do that quite often because we have a lot of international guests and friends from all over the world,” she says. “That’s always a crowd-pleaser because it’s very specifically Irish.”

The modern twist involves spicing up the cabbage with a bit of Asian influence – and a “less is more” approach to the cooking time. “When I was younger everything was boiled to within an inch of its life. We don’t practise that here. It’s never going to be bland. It’s the memories from your childhood brought a little bit up to date.”

Whatever’s on the menu it’s unlikely to have travelled too far. “We’re fortunate in Co Clare that the food scene is phenomenal now,” she says. “In the last decade or so we’ve had a lot of really interesting producers and facilitators move into the county to showcase the great food we have. Any time we serve anything here to guests it’s 100 per cent sourced in Co Clare at this point.”

Having grown up in Cooraclare, McGuane is now back there almost full time after a break of more than 20 years. She left Ireland in the mid-1990s for university in the UK, moved to the US shortly after graduating and was soon working in the drinks industry. “If you’re in your early twenties living in New York City and you’re asked to work for a champagne company, the answer’s going to be yes,” she says.

She moved on from champagne to high-end spirits and from New York to London, Paris and Singapore, working for drinks giants such as Diageo, LVMH and Pernod Ricard.

After more than 15 years working in large corporations it was time for a change and going into Irish whiskey made the most sense, she says.

Continued on page 14 →

Getting the mix *just right*

The whiskey bonder Louise McGuane talks to *Grainne Rothery* about establishing her drinks brand, JJ Corry, and renovating a cottage that blends old and new on the family farm in Co Clare



15

SOFT TOUCH
STRIKING CUSHIONS
FOR YOUR HOME



Move

“In the extension you’re very much exposed to nature. There are no neighbours, there are no curtains. There’s just fields and sky and you really feel you’re in the elements

→ Continued from page 13

“Three companies in the world were making Irish whiskey when I started. Now there are 42 or 43. The entire industry was being rebirthed and I felt that was a unique opportunity and would be a good second act to my career.”

Basing the business where she grew up was a natural choice. It helped that her father has a dairy farm and neither she nor her brother planned to go into farming. “I wanted to ensure there was an alternative use for the land and for the farm. We’ve pretty much secured the future of the farm by basing ourselves here.”

The business, JJ Corry, is focused on the old art of bonding whiskey, which involves blending and ageing rather than distilling. “It was a very common way of making whiskey in Ireland up to about the 1930s,” says McGuane, who named the business after a local 19th-century bonder. “Every little town in Ireland would have had a whiskey bonder. Then all the distilleries closed down so there was no variety.”

McGuane, who says she has created a subcategory in the industry, buys whiskey from distilleries across Ireland and casks from cooperages all over the world and mixes the distillates together to create the new blends.

“It’s like being a chef – the more flavours and spices you have the more interesting the output is going to be. There’s just a multitude of possibilities when you’re working with lots of flavours that you don’t have if you’re working with one particular distillate all the time.”



Above: the dining room is lit by an east-facing wall of glass. Left: the original kitchen is now a reception/reading room with a small bar. Below: with a custom-made island with a stainless steel countertop, the compact kitchen is modern and functional



After setting up in 2016 and building a warehouse to store the whiskey, the company brought its first product to market two years later. A range is now available off the shelf in 17 countries and the company produces individual blends for customers such as hotels and pubs.

The house may be an integral part of the business, but McGuane had already started work on bringing it back to life when she was living in Singapore and before any thoughts of whiskey bonding in Co Clare.

There’s plenty of heritage attached: her grandmother was born in the house and it’s right next to the family farm. Believed to have been built in the late 1800s or early 1900s, it had been derelict for 15 or 20 years before McGuane took it on.

She was clear that she wanted to keep the original character and that any new additions would not be visible from the road. In coming up with the design, she worked with Jean-Claude Girard, a Swiss architect and a friend. “And he brought a very different viewpoint to the renovation. His thinking was that we’d retain the character of the cottage as much as we could but for the extension we’d really bring the outdoors inside, and that’s what we ended up doing.”

“In the extension you’re very much exposed to nature. There are no

neighbours, there are no curtains. There’s just fields and sky and you really feel you’re in the elements when you’re in those rooms.”

The dimensions, windows and doors and even the flagstone flooring have stayed as they were in the old cottage. “I collected a lot of antique furniture from all over the world, so there’s a heritage feeling, not only in the layout but also in the furnishings.”

What was the original kitchen is now a reception room that’s also used as a reading room and has a small bar. Two bedrooms with en suites are also in this part of the house.

The extension has replaced a barn next to the house and extends out at the back with a huge sheet of glass facing east and another large picture window and bifolding doors facing north. Contemporary with polished concrete floors, high ceilings and mainly white walls, it’s divided into three distinct zones – kitchen, dining and living areas.

From the dining room, which has that enormous picture window overlooking the countryside, a cantilevered stairway rises to two more bedrooms with their own en suites. The dining and living spaces are separated by a chimney breast. With stainless steel units and a custom-made island with a stainless steel countertop, the kitchen is modern and functional. It’s also very compact.

“That is by design. I think the more space you have in the kitchen, the more stuff you accumulate. You have to edit what comes in – and I do this with the house as well. Sometimes there’s a one-in, one-out policy.”

As to the kit that has to be in there, McGuane is a big believer in long-lasting saucepans and loves the slow cooker, which gets a lot of use. Other must-haves include a cook’s measure, a Magic Bullet, an Aarke carbonator and “extremely sharp” Japanese knives. “We won’t compromise on that – they have to be Japanese.”

Entertaining has always been something McGuane enjoys, although it has changed over the years. “The older you get the more focused it is around food. I think when I was younger it was focused around cocktails. Now we do a bit of both. And the older you get the more interesting it is to sit around and discuss what’s on your plate or what’s gone into your cocktail.”

Incidentally, the signature cocktail chez McGuane is a Manhattan. “We always have a barrel-aged Manhattan on the go. We have tiny sherry barrels and we always have one with Manhattan that you can just pour from the five-litre barrel. It’s premixed and it’s always topped up. It gets better over time and you just keep refilling it.”

Until 2020 McGuane divided her time between Cooraclare and London. “During Covid we decamped here,” she says. “Now I tend to be here or travelling for business in the US and spending a little bit of time in London. We’ve really bedded in and made this home since Covid.”

“There are times when I’ll come back from a business trip and I’ll walk in the door and I’ll just sigh. It’s a wonderful place to come home to. It has delivered on everything we needed it to deliver on. I will attribute that very squarely down to good architecture.” And having business events in their own home doesn’t feel strange, she says. “It is a very personal business to me and very homegrown, so welcoming people in our home feels natural. It feels pretty normal.”

When a Louth-based Irish designer and a Naples-based Gambian craftsman met on social media, it inspired a long-distance collaboration – and a pair of homeware must-haves, says *Sarah Macken*

Hands up who loves a good cushion? “We are both obsessed,” Niamh Gillespie says of herself and her new collaborator, Paboy Bojang. The reason is clear, according to the Irish textile designer who founded the luxury fashion and home accessories brand Tidings in 2020 (before that she worked at Alexander McQueen, Liberty and Topshop): “You can tell so much about someone’s personality by looking at what cushion they put on a chair,” she says.

While statement scatter cushions have always been in vogue, in the past two years they have gained a new verve thanks to outré iterations with stylish upgrades such as thick ruffles, wide stripes and summery gingham – appealing to ardent and reluctant maximalists alike.

Gillespie’s venture with Bojang, a Naples-based social entrepreneur who founded the homeware brand In Casa by Paboy during the lockdown of spring 2020, encapsulates the appetite for wow cushions. Bojang, a craftsman and designer, credits his eye for colour to the dresses his grandmother would wear in his home in Serrekunda in the Gambia, which he fled more than a decade ago. After a harrowing two-year journey across the desert and the Mediterranean Sea, he landed in Naples in 2015. His studio, where he employs fellow migrants, is in the city’s historic centre, which he cites as a constant source of inspiration, from the ornate buildings to the colour-pop graffiti that coats the walls of the city.

The duo’s collaboration began like all contemporary ones do: on Instagram, when they connected early last year. What followed was a meticulous process of trial and error: discussions about colours, rounds of sampling, with Bojang sending swatches from Naples and Gillespie developing the prints from her home in Co Louth, before deciding on the final prototypes. “The collection came from love,” Bojang says. “A love of what we are both doing,” Gillespie adds.

The finished products – two cushions that launch on February 2, just in time for Valentine’s Day – continue the sentiment. The first, a deep velvet red with a mustard trim and a bold animal print, has “love” inscribed on the front; the second, a brighter combination of mustard and pink with a floral pattern, has “roses”. Either would make a striking addition to a sofa, chair or bed. Plus, they have been designed with a pinstripe emblazoned on the back. “We wanted it to be like you were getting two cushions for the price of one,” Gillespie says.

The pieces speak to a vibrant sense of luxury. Gillespie insists on painting her graphic prints by hand, whereas Bojang spends a lot of time sewing the ruffles that give the cushions their immaculate construction. He sources the 100 per cent cotton fabric in Naples and has an unwavering eye for detail, as denoted by each cushion’s signature red zip. Is the act of creation a form of therapy, I ask. “It gives me joy making things with my hands. You don’t think about anything else other than what’s in front of you,” Bojang says. Love, with a dash of therapy? Sounds like a winning combination to me.

The one thing: *decadent cushions to love*



▲ Paboy Bojang of In Casa by Paboy and Niamh Gillespie of Tidings pictured in Naples. They bonded over a love of graphic prints and bold colours, as well as a passion for craftsmanship. The Roses and Love cushions feature hand-painted prints with velvet fabric and ruffles crafted in 100 per cent Italian cotton, €180 each or €350 a pair, tidings.ie and incasabypaboy.com



◀ Frustrated with losing his job at the majolica workshop Antica Manifattura Ceramica Fratelli Stingo due to a hold up in the immigration system with his asylum papers, Bojang began making cushion covers during lockdown on a borrowed sewing machine. Shortly after, they shot to popularity on Instagram

THREE MORE TO TRY



▲ Crafted by the artisan label Amuse La Bouche, the sage and blush tones of this cushion are perfect for a sedate interiors scheme that craves a shot of colour, €88.50, available from February 1, amberandwillow.com



▲ The Antoinette cushion cover is a blend of cotton and linen and features a scallop trim finished with satin stitching, €16.99, laredoute.com



▲ Turn heads with the combination of bold blue and candy pink in this pure cotton striped cushion cover, €27 (with pad), marksandspencer.com

New to the market

Grainne Rothery's pick of the properties available to buy in Ireland this week

CORK

Built in 2005, No 49 Ardkeale in Mount Oval Village is an extended and recently renovated four-bedroom detached house located less than 7km from the centre of Cork.

Downstairs accommodation in this 191 sq m B3 energy-rated home consists of an entrance hallway, a living room, an open-plan kitchen/living/dining area, a utility room, a cloakroom and a guest WC. Two bedrooms are on the first floor; both have en suite shower rooms and one has a walk-in wardrobe. Two more double bedrooms and the family bathroom are on the second floor.

There's a cobblelock driveway at the front, while the back garden has a patio and raised beds with shrubs and trees.

What we love The soothing decor.

Good to know A walk-through shed at the side of the property can be accessed from the back garden and the front.

Agent eracork.ie

€745,000



KILKENNY

City living is on offer at No 2 Common Hall Lane, a three-bedroom mid-terrace townhouse located next to St Canice's Cathedral and just a street or two from Kilkenny's main drag.

The house has been upgraded and has sash windows, oak flooring running through the ground floor, a contemporary kitchen, a solid-fuel stove in the living room and pull-out storage under the stairs.

Downstairs accommodation comprises an entrance hall, living room and an L-shaped kitchen/diner with French doors to the decked and paved outdoor space.

Upstairs are two double bedrooms — one with a fitted wardrobe — and a single and the bathroom.

What we love The seating nook in what was an open fireplace in the dining area.

Good to know The property comes with private parking for two cars.

Agent dng.ie

€265,000



CO KERRY

Set on an elevated site just 1.7km from Kenmare, this natural stone-clad bungalow in Kilmurry has views of the town and the bay beyond it.

The 119 sq m of living accommodation includes three double bedrooms, one of which has an en suite shower room and double doors to a south-facing patio. There's also an open-plan kitchen/dining/sunroom, a living room, a utility room and a family bathroom.

The house, which has a C2 energy rating, has gas-fired central heating, as well as a wood-burning stove in the sunroom and an open fire in the living room.

The site is two thirds of an acre and the outside space includes a private driveway, a parking area and lots of lawn.

What we love The bright but cosy sunroom.

Good to know The property is being sold fully furnished.

Agent sherryfitz.ie

€475,000



CO DUBLIN

COTTAGE WITH ALL THE HOME COMFORTS

The bedrooms and bathrooms in the original part of No 4 Streamstown Cottages may be smart, but it's the open-plan kitchen/living room extension at the rear that sets this 74 sq m semi-detached home apart.

The work — a full refurbishment and an extension that replicates the existing cottage in size and shape — was carried out about 12 years ago.

As part of the project the main entrance was moved to the side of the house and now opens into the living area. With porcelain tiles running from the glazed front door to the floor-to-ceiling window opposite and lower ceiling height there is a sense that the "entrance hallway" is its own space.

On the right, the living room has engineered oak flooring, a fireplace with an electric insert fire and sliding doors to the garden, as well as a pitched ceiling with Velux rooflights and white painted beams that continues to the kitchen at the other end of this space.

A door leads to an inner hall and the old part of the house, which has two double bedrooms, both with fitted wardrobes and one with an en suite shower room, a small nursery/office and the family bathroom.

The house has a C2 energy rating.

Most of the outside space is set behind a sliding electric gate at the side, including a gravelled parking area, lawn and west-facing decking and patio next to the sliding doors in the living room.

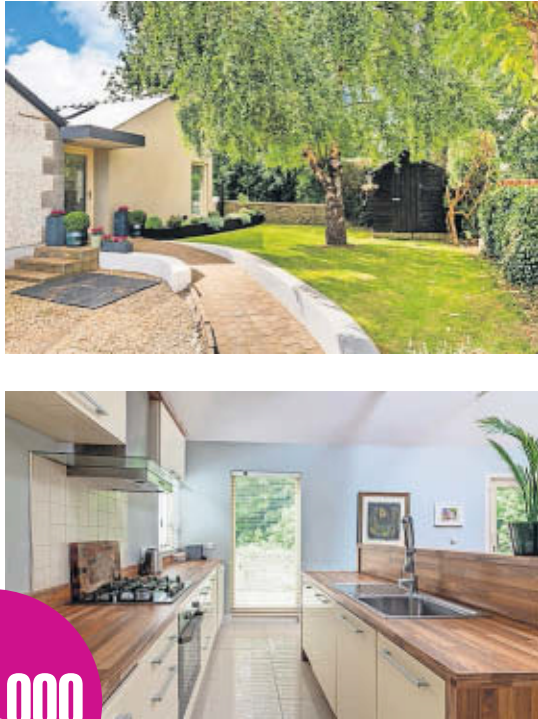
Streamstown Cottages is a collection of five houses on Malahide Road close to the junction with Feltrim Road. The property is 750m from the Malahide Castle demesne and a further 2km from Malahide Dart station.

What we love The full-length picture windows in the open-plan space with their views of the garden's lush greenery.

Good to know The electric gate has an internal intercom system and mobile phone connectivity.

Agent ofarrellcleere.ie

€580,000



DUBLIN 18

DRAMATIC VIEWS OF DUBLIN MOUNTAINS

When No 63 St Patrick's Park last changed hands, in 2016, it sold for €535,000, a price that wasn't exceeded in the Stepside cul-de-sac estate until last August. It's not hard to see why — plenty of money had already been put into upgrading and extending the end-of-terrace four-bedder, which also happens to have a large garden and up-close views of the Dublin mountains.

The extension has brought the total accommodation up to 120 sq m and created an L-shaped kitchen/dining room at the back, with bifolding doors at right angles to each other that open to an outside deck. This room also has apex and Velux rooflights, as well as a floor-to-ceiling picture window with dramatic mountain views. The kitchen is modern and has an island with a breakfast bar.

The living room can be accessed from the hall and via sliding doors from the dining area and has original floorboards, a cast-iron fireplace and a built-in entertainment unit with shelving.

Also at this level are a bedroom and a shower room. Three more bedrooms — two doubles and a single — are upstairs. The two larger rooms have built-in wardrobes. The family bathroom has a bath with a rainfall shower overhead.

As well as gas heating, the kitchen/dining area has underfloor heating. The windows are double-glazed and the energy rating is C3.

The front garden is mainly gravelled, allowing for off-street parking. There's pedestrian access and space to the side of the house, which the agent says could offer potential for another extension.

The 43m-long back garden faces west and is mainly laid out in lawn. There is a large wooden summer house.

What we love The mountain views.

Good to know St Patrick's Park is in the heart of Stepside village; a convenience store, pharmacy, pub and food options are within a 200m walk of the property.

Agent lisneysir.com

€650,000





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Travel

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The Six Nations cities, sorted

As well as Dublin, seven other European cities are hosting the tournament this year. *Huw Oliver* has guides to them all

MARSEILLES

Aperitifs and pétanque

The tournament kicks off on Friday against the sparkling backdrop of the Med. The bookies' favourites, France, play Ireland at Marseille's Orange Vélodrome, a ten-minute metro ride from the centre, on February 2. Embrace the city's edgier side with a mooch around the graffiti-splashed Cours Julien area, then discover archaeological treasures at the waterfront Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations – Mucem (€11; mucem.org). Temperatures can reach the twenties in February, so join the locals for a sunset aperitif at Café de l'Abbaye in the St Victor area (@le_cafe_de_labbaye) or at Friche la Belle de Mai, northeast of St Charles train station (lafriche.org). Hôtel Maison Montgrand is a chic option in the Vieux Port with its own pétanque court – from here it's a short metro journey from Estrangin to the stadium.

Details Room-only doubles from €104 (hotel-maison-montgrand.com)

ROME

Late-night bars and poetic graves

England's first game is against Italy at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome on February 3, with Scotland travelling over on March 9. The San Lorenzo neighbourhood is where to head for good times after the match: the restaurant and cocktail bar Officine Beat does some of the city's finest cacio e pepe (mains from €9; officinebeat.it), while the studenty Bar dei Brutti is reliably packed out until 2am (@bar-dei-brutti). Make a more highbrow weekend of it and visit the graves of John Keats and Percy Shelley at the Non-Catholic Cemetery, before checking out the Borghese Gallery (€15; galleriaborghese.beniculturali.it). Stay at the Hoxton Rome, beautifully done out in local marble, which is a 40-minute bus ride from the ground.

Details Room-only doubles from €191 (thehoxton.com)

CARDIFF

Craft beer and a spa

No city does match day better than the 'Diff (sorry, Dublin), where Wales play Scotland on February 3, France on March 10 and Italy on March 16. But avoid Caroline Street, nicknamed Chip Alley for its profusion of takeaway shops, and instead hit up Tiny Rebel, a buzzing craft-beer bar opposite the **Continued on page 20 →**

**Above: the old port in
Marseilles. Below: dine
on oysters in Lyons**



23
KEEPING
IT RIALTO
THE INSIDER'S
GUIDE TO
VENICE



Travel

“Catching the train with the fans is all part of the fun

→ Continued from page 19

Principality Stadium (tinyrebel.co.uk). If the weather's fine pop down to Cardiff Bay, picking up a coffee from the bright-white Norwegian Church Arts Centre (norwegianchurchcardiff.com). The Parkgate Hotel, next to the stadium, is the best place to stay. Be sure to book a spa package – an infinity pool awaits. **Details** Room-only doubles from €106 (theparkgatehotel.wales)

LILLE

Beef stew and an art deco gallery

For their second home game France play Italy in this undervisited northern city on February 25. The best place to linger before the action is on the Grand Place, at any of the buzzy café terraces. Contemplate the extravagant Vieille Bourse, a former stock exchange building, before heading southeast for the Stade Pierre Mauroy – it's half an hour via metro line 1. Or on a non-rugby day take the metro to Roubaix, where an art deco pool complex has been reimagined as the art gallery La Piscine (€9; roubaix-lapiscine.com). Chez la Vieille, in the old town, is where to go for a hearty meal of traditional beef stew (mains from €12; estaminetlille.fr), and you should stay at the vibrant, budget-friendly Mama Shelter Lille, near the centre and 30 minutes by metro from the stadium.

Details Room-only doubles from €106 (mamashelter.com)

LONDON

Riverside pubs and digital blooms

Twickenham's pubs will be full from



opening for England v Wales on February 10 and the Ireland game on March 9. One spot unlikely to have a sticky floor by noon – and only a ten-minute walk from Twickenham station – is the White Swan, a 17th-century pub with a garden on the Thames (white swantwickenham.co.uk). If you're starting at Waterloo, just as atmospheric is the King's Arms, tucked between cottages on Roupell Street (thekingsarms london.co.uk). For some non-rugby entertainment before the 4.45pm kick-offs, stop at Richmond, four minutes by train from Twickenham, and take a three-minute overground to Kew Gardens to see Mat Collishaw's latest exhibition of artworks created using AI and 3D printing – it's enough to get anyone interested in botany (from €23; kew.org). There is a Marriott hotel in the stadium, but if you're here for

more than the game you're better off somewhere central, such as the boutique Ruby Lucy Hotel in Waterloo. Catching the train out with the fans is all part of the fun, anyway.

Details Room-only doubles from €157 (ruby-hotels.com)

EDINBURGH

Epic views and second-hand books

France and England fans will be heading up to Murrayfield on February 10 and 24 respectively. The ground is easily accessible from central Edinburgh, so first-timers should make sure to tick off the sights. If the sun's out – not a given – stroll around the Meadows and climb Calton Hill, both a short walk from the centre. Not so lucky? Tills, off the Meadows, is a very browsable shop for second-hand books. Thomson's Bar in Haymarket – with its solid selection of real ales and whiskies – is a fun spot to drink before the game (thomsonsbare dinburgh.co.uk). For a civilised evening, start at Paradise Palms, a colourful cocktail bar with a meat-free menu (mains from €11; theparadisepalms.com), and finish up at Sneaky Pete's, a live-music bar open until 3am (sneaky petes.co.uk). A good-value place to kip is Eden Locke, an aparthotel with pastel-coloured interiors about 20 minutes by tram from the stadium.

Details Studios from €104 (lockeliving.com)

LYONS

Paris atmos and better food

Perhaps the most Parisian of all the French host cities is Lyons, where France v England takes place on March 16. The Groupama Stadium is slightly out of the way, with few food and drink options, so stick to the centre before and after the match. Higgledy-piggledy Croix-Rousse has Montmartre's villagey feel, while the Notre-Dame de Fourvière basilica, on a hill on the right bank of the Saône, is almost as spectacular as its namesake in Paris. One thing Lyons has that the capital doesn't is a market with the city's best charcutiers, fromagers and wine specialists (halles-de-lyon-paulbocuse.com). Try the oysters au gratin at Chez Léon (from €10.50; chez-leon.com). The adults-only Le Gourguillon, a short metro and tram ride from the stadium, has a secret garden.

Details Room-only doubles from €256 (legourguillon.fr)

Clockwise from left: inside the Hoxton Rome; La Piscine in Lille; Edinburgh at sunset; a France supporter



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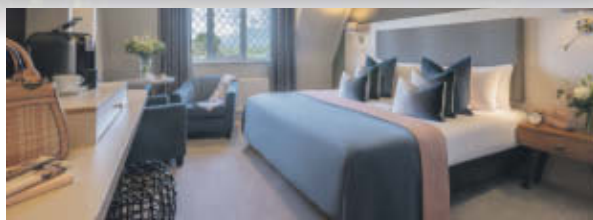
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A secluded, luxurious hideaway, fine-dining meals, wine tasting, long talks on winter woodland walks – a weekend away in the most romantic place in Ireland, complete with fireworks, is a healing experience for couples.

The architect and I are not really Valentine’s Day people. Sure, there could well be a homemade card, and possibly a bunch of flowers, but spending quality, child-free time together, in peace and quiet, is truly the greatest gift of all these days.

Tucked away within the walls of the award-winning, five-star Ashford Castle in Co Mayo lies a secret haven for those seeking an intimate escape that caters to all one’s needs.

Once used to store Italian Riva boats by the previous owners, the Guinness family, in 2016 the Boathouse was transformed into an exclusive, secret, sanctuary-like suite for two.

Perched on the edge of Lough Corrib, with 180-degree lakefront views, screened by a security gate – this is a VIP experience that is nothing short of extraordinary.

Settling in, we pop the Lanson champagne and dive into the welcome basket of luxurious, specially created plant-based treats. This includes an exclusive Ashford Castle chocolate Irish wolfhound, which has been created especially for us “using the finest Valrhona chocolate, and his base filled with plant-based hazelnut praline”. “Stanley the Wolfhound” is one tasty dog.

As I eye up the fully stocked bar, and the Voya products in the massive, marble-lined bathroom, the architect gushes about the handmade timber parquet floors, original art and plush fabrics. It’s an impeccable blend of tradition and modernity.

The careful attention to detail extends to the bed, which is king-sized and laid with the finest Egyptian cotton linens, with a bespoke Murano glass chandelier hanging above it, naturally.

A wild and windy night in the west adds to the poetic backdrop. Ashford Castle is of course for ever associated with the John Wayne-John Ford classic *The Quiet Man*.

To much amusement we try to recreate the famous windswept cottage scene kiss between Wayne and Maureen O’Hara.

Negotiating a bicycle in heels and a fur coat also proves a comedy of errors. We abandon the mission and call reception for a two-minute drive to the castle for our dinner booking.

Built in 1228, Ashford Castle is a medieval masterpiece draped in majestic turrets and surrounded by 350 acres of gardens that could rival the most enchanting storybook settings.

The Guinness family purchased the castle – a former residence of the High King of Ireland – in 1852. It underwent a \$100 million upgrade after being acquired by the Tollman family for its Red Carnation collection in 2013.

Waltzing into the lobby is like stepping into a time capsule of antiques: think antique furnishings and tasteful artwork. And foodies, take note: wining and dining in Ashford Castle is the stuff of dreams – from a glorious breakfast to a fine-dining dinner and everything in between.

The castle, which has 83 rooms, has been hosting distinguished guests for almost 800 years – one of the most prominent being the Prince of Wales, who became George V of England.

In honour of his visit, in 1905, the Guinness family built a special dining

HELENA CATHCART



John Wayne starred here, a future king of England stayed here. *Demelza de Burca* lives like royalty (Hollywood or otherwise) at this matchless estate

room that still bears his name. George V Dining Room is not just an eatery, it’s a stage for culinary theatrics. A fine-dining extravaganza reflecting the chef Liam Finnegan’s flair for excellent produce and perfectly executed plates.

We opt for the eight-course tasting menu; mine is a specially crafted vegan one, while the architect feasts on organic salmon, seared scallop, turbot Thornhill duck, Michael Twomey’s truffle beef. A 72 per cent chocolate bavarois delivers “one of the happiest moments” of his life.

This is accompanied by wines, thoughtfully curated by the sommelier Nicolas Henagan, from Bouchard Finlayson, the Tollman family’s winery in South Africa.

The world-class service at Ashford Castle would make you proud to be Irish. It’s clearly one of the reasons it’s so popular with US tourists, who make up about 70 per cent of guests during the summer.

The restaurant manager Robert Bowe is the star of the show. The conductor of this finely tuned orchestra has been working in Ashford Castle “going on 37 years”. Brimming with entertaining stories about the castle and its famous guests over the years, Bowe has a wit and charm that take the stuffiness out of the grand room.

He’s there again at breakfast, carving ham under twinkling Waterford Crystal chandeliers and sharing tales of tying James Bond’s (Pierce Brosnan) bow tie on the morning of his 2001 wedding.

The indulgence continues with a trip to the cellar for a must-do wine tasting with Paul Fogerty, the head sommelier.

Sampling wines in a candlelit cellar in the bowels of a castle is a splendid way to spend an afternoon. Fogerty, who has encyclopaedic knowledge of wine, explains: “The most important thing about choosing a wine isn’t really the price, the complexity or even the grape – it’s the enjoyment you’ll get from it.”

The wellness centre. Below: the Boathouse



“It is a medieval masterpiece draped in majestic turrets and surrounded by 350 acres of gardens that could rival the most enchanting storybook settings

We stick to the brief of thoroughly enjoying ourselves. A private tour of Lough Corrib by third-generation professional ghillie Frank Costello in a traditional handcrafted clinker boat is an unexpected delight.

Costello gives us a history of the castle before mooring at Chief’s Island, setting up a campfire and unpacking more glorious food in the form of a freshly prepared picnic hamper.

Our perfect day also includes a dreamy woodland walk, a screening of *The Quiet Man* (of course) in the cinema and a laid-back but delicious dinner of traditional Irish fare at the thatched Cullen’s at the Cottage restaurant.

Ashford Castle stands as a jewel in the crown of luxury hotels in Ireland. Its evocative charm and breathtaking surroundings make it a destination that transcends the ordinary.

Whether you are seeking a romantic retreat, a celebratory escape or simply a respite from the everyday, Ashford Castle offers an experience that is matchless.

What truly sets the castle apart, however, is the exceptional service at every level. From the gracious doorman to the attentive concierge, every interaction exudes warmth and friendliness.

The sheer dedication to guest satisfaction is evident in the personalised recommendations – from vegan meals to a stunning fireworks display for one guest’s birthday – and the seamless execution of every request.

Loved up after the most incredible weekend, the architect and I felt not just welcomed, but truly cared for.

Ashford Castle is offering an Exclusive Winter Experience from €473 per night in a Corrib room within the castle itself. It includes full Irish breakfasts and complimentary access to Ealu, the health and fitness centre; the cinema; and green fees on the nine-hole golf course. Pricing for the Boathouse starts from €3,025 a night

I know the perfect place: Venice, Italy

From the coolest places to stay, drink and dine in, to the top art experiences, the wine specialist and native Venetian *Enrico Fantasia* reveals where to go to get a taste of the city's real magic

Enrico Fantasia is a specialist wine importer, distributor and supplier based in Dublin. His company, GrapeCircus, has been championing and showcasing lesser-known winemaking areas and indigenous grape varieties in Ireland since 2005. Fantasia is a cognoscente of classic Italian wine regions, and being a native of Venice has a particular love of Friuli. His portfolio homes in on organic, biodynamic and low-intervention wines that showcase a sense of origin and terroir. grapecircus.ie; @grapecircus

“I don't think Venice needs any introduction. I'm a Venetian, born and bred, and despite my family being a bit “nomadic” – which is a tale to tell over a couple of glasses of wine – I spent most of my life in Venice before moving to Ireland more than 20 years ago.

For sure over the past couple of decades Venice has been transformed more and more into a touristic destination. But even for me, after half a century of a love-hate relationship, it is still breathtakingly beautiful. If you are ready to put some effort into it you can still grasp Venice's magic.

GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus and Ryanair fly direct to Venice Marco Polo airport several times a week from Dublin and Cork. If you find yourself visiting other parts of Italy you can take the train to Venice – it's easy to book online. Italo Treno (italotreno.it) is my preferred operator: a fast and comfortable service that connects pretty much all the big cities.

WHEN TO VISIT

Don't visit in summer – it's very overcrowded and very hot and humid. I mean it, the kind of Vietnam War movie humid. Squeezing my way through thousands of sweaty tourists on a hot day in Venice is not my idea of fun. Spring and autumn are my favourite seasons in the city – particularly autumn because it's cheaper, quieter and hosts the Venice International Film Festival (labiennale.org/cinema).

BEST PLACE TO BASE YOURSELF

The Santa Croce-San Polo area is great, and it is where you will find my favourite hotel in Venice, Hotel Aquarius (hotel.aquariusvenice.com). It is on Campo San Giacomo dall'Orto, one of the city's most beautiful squares with one of the oldest churches, still central but slightly off the beaten track. The owner of the four-star, 27-room boutique hotel has used only Venetian artists and artisans to decorate the space.

I love Castello, especially the Via Garibaldi area – it's one of the last traditionally Venetian areas of the city. I was born there, so I may be a bit biased, but it is a really lively neighbourhood full of shops, bars and restaurants. If you want to rent a full apartment there the Design House Alla Biennale (airbnb.ie/rooms/38432009), a few minutes' walk from the Biennale cultural exhibition, would be my choice.

For something more budget, a great option is Hinc Domus (en.hincdomus.com), a very nice B&B that is a vaporetto stop from the railway station and in a quiet neighbourhood.

IS THERE A PARTICULAR FOOD CULTURE?

We had a tradition of cicchetti – pronounced “chick-etty” – which is similar to pintxos in the Basque country, but it has been a little lost

The Grand Canal, Venice's main waterway, at sunset

over the years. You can still find cicchetti around the Rialto market at lunchtime at All'Arco and Ai do Mori, while Trattoria Al Bomba (trattoriaalbomba.com) in Strada Nuova has a good selection alongside some great natural wines.

WHERE TO GET COFFEE

As with everywhere else in Italy, coffee is a big thing in Venice, but is more a quick espresso – called caffè – enjoyed standing at the bar. In the morning this is generally accompanied by a pastry, and there are plenty of good pasticcerie – pastry shops – in Venice. Marchini Time, Tonolo and Rosa Salva are historic names still delivering quality, while more recently Majer (majer.it) has opened a few shops, and everything it does is top.

One thing you must try is kiefer, a sort of almond croissant of Austrian origin, which is typical of Venice at breakfast time.

A COUPLE OF GREAT RESTAURANTS TO TRY

I have lots of restaurants in Venice that I love deeply, but at the moment my favourite is Estro (estrovenezia.com/en). The brothers Dario and Alberto Spezzamonte run this small place – one front of house, the other the chef – where the food is amazing, the wine selection is absolutely perfect (especially for low-intervention wine styles) and the service is relaxed and professional. Every time I'm back I have at least one meal there, and I ask them to pick for me, food and wine.

I have had plenty of great meals at Al Covo (ristorantealcovo.com), where they have an amazingly fresh daily selection of raw fish, and [the co-owner] Diane's panna cotta semifreddo alla grappa to finish is a good enough reason to visit Venice.

If you manage to book one of the five tables at tiny Alle Testiere (osteriale.testiere.it) it's another great experience, while Vini da Gigio (vinidagigio.it/en) is a homely Venetian-style spot not to be missed.

A GREAT PLACE FOR A DRINK

Avoid the Irish pubs – do you really miss Guinness that much on a short trip? – and try a wine bar such as Vini Vero (vinovero.wine), La Sete (lasetevenezia.com) or La Bottiglia (@labottigliavenezia on Instagram).

It's expensive and outdated, but a visit to the one and only Harry's Bar is strongly recommended – gents, avoid wearing shorts: they will refuse admission. One of the liveliest areas in town for a night-time drink is around Fondamenta della Misericordia.

THINGS YOU MUST SEE OR DO

Save your money: skip the gondola tour and invest it in a great dinner instead.

Don't miss Museo Correr (correr.visitmuve.it/en/home) and Palazzo Grassi (pinaultcollection.com/palazzograssi/en). Three more unmissable art experiences: Gallerie dell'Accademia – *Tempesta* by Giorgione is breathtaking (gallerieaccademia.it/en); the Peggy Guggenheim museum – Brancusi's *Maiistra* is spectacular (guggenheim-venice.it/en); and the “secret itineraries” at Palazzo Ducale (palazzoducale.visitmuve.it/en).

VENICE SUMMED UP IN ONE SENTENCE?

Put on some comfortable shoes and walk, walk, walk to truly discover Venice.

Interview by
Patrick Hanlon





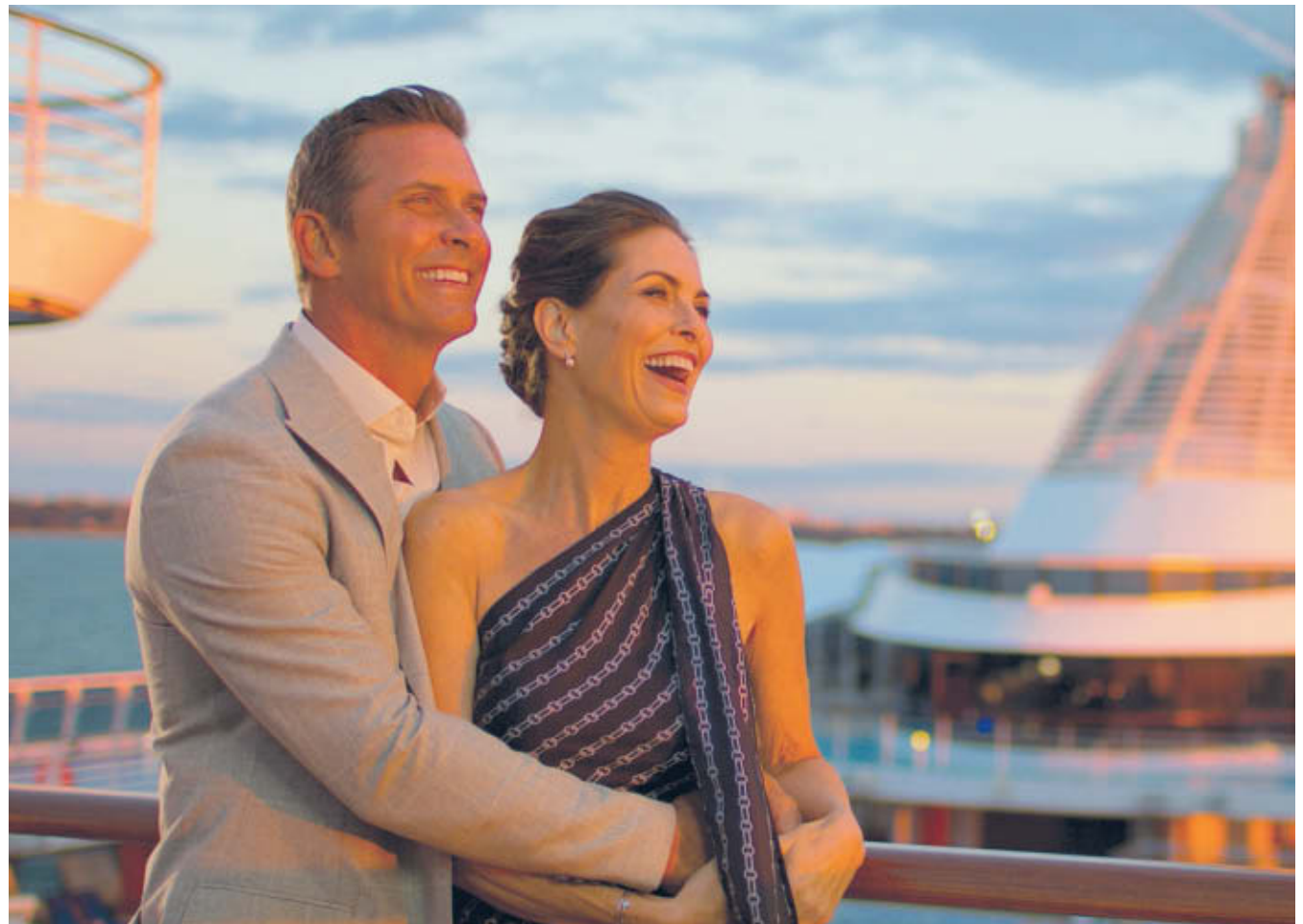
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