

Corking cuisine

25 Oct 2008 by Nick Lander/ FT

The pleasure of being back in Ballymaloe House, 30 miles south-east of Cork in southern Ireland, after 27 years was accentuated when Darina Allen pointed to my place at the dinner table and said, "You're here, Nick, between myself and Myrtle."

I was in exalted company. It was Myrtle Allen who opened Ballymaloe in 1964 and has subsequently set standards for Irish chefs to follow. Her daughter-in-law Darina has had the same profound effect on teaching amateur chefs via her cookery school and her many books as well as supporting the emerging number of top quality Irish farmers and producers. (Myrtle's granddaughter-in-law Rachel Allen continues the line.) I knew I had to be on my best behaviour.

Myrtle made the initial 30 minutes easy for me because, despite the fact that she is now in her mid-80s, she was still in the kitchen, ensuring that the current brigade matched her demanding criteria as they served over 130 customers spread across the hotel's seven intimate dining rooms.

Darina's chat was, as usual, wide-ranging and passionate. She began by saying how impressed she had been by her recent visit to San Francisco to participate in 'Slow Food Nation', the Slow Food movement's most recent demonstration of the importance of holding on to our food heritage. She added however that she believed the biggest current threat to Irish chefs, farmers and producers was the over-zealous attitude being taken by the local environmental health officers.

Myrtle's arrival brought a respectful moment's silence round the table during which she politely ordered her meal. I could not help but notice that the determined note in her quiet voice was matched by the clear sparkle in her eyes and the singular directness of her questions.

She explained that when the hotel closed for its annual break in January she was taking a small team from her kitchen to Paris. The main objective was to explore the city's patisseries and brasseries to come back with new ideas and recipes. My help in steering them in the right direction would be warmly welcomed, she politely added. I left the table feeling honour-bound to oblige.

That was after an excellent dinner that started with a seafood buffet that is a particular tradition here on a Friday night; a choice of three soups, an old Irish tradition; a fillet of turbot landed at Ballycotton, the fishing port 10 miles away, with runner beans; and impeccable trolleys of cheese and then dessert.

If I stress how good the runner beans were it is only because I helped to pick them. As I walked out in the late afternoon sunshine to see just how little Ballymaloe had changed, I put my head round the gate of the walled garden when a voice from behind me said, "Do go in if you like."

The voice belonged to Head Chef, Jason Fahey, who was carrying two large plastic tubs, a cigarette and a lighter. He had walked the few yards from the kitchen to pick the beans, rosemary, thyme and parsley for that night's service. Hiding any disappointment that his prospective tranquility had just been disturbed by an inquisitive journalist, he handed me an empty bucket and we set off.

Born in Ballycotton, Fahey, now 29, has been cooking since he was 17 and while he acknowledged that the hotel's location could hardly be bettered for produce, its isolation can make recruitment difficult. But as a graduate of the Allen culinary philosophy, Fahey has his own direct approach. "In the interview I always ask any prospective chef whether they love cooking. Too often I get the response that they like it. But that's not enough, I say, cooking is tough and if you don't love it, it'll break you." By this time, my stint as a chef's assistant was over and we carried both tubs, now very full, back to the kitchen.

The following lunchtime I found myself in a similar role, but in a very different location as I had followed Frank Hederman back to the kitchen in his house next to his Belvelly Smoke House near Cobh, the last port of call for the *Titanic*.

Having spent the entire wet Saturday morning at Midleton Farmers' Market, Hederman was hungry and thirsty so as I made the tea he cut thick slices of sourdough bread from the Arbutus Bakery and equally generous chunks of a Cheddar made by local farmer Dan Hegarty. As he assembled lunch, he explained how he sees his role.

"Obviously, chefs see me as a smoker because they buy my smoked salmon, smoked eel and smoked haddock and put it on their menus. But I like to think of myself as a flavour-enhancer. That's what we get up to in the smoke house, whether it's with mussels, garlic, cheese or even the porridge oats we smoke for oatcakes that are so popular in the North."

After a quick tour of the smoke house, Hederman showed me the packs of smoked salmon he is selling to chefs as 'recession packs', with instructions on how to get the best yield from them. These are tranches of smoked farmed salmon (Hederman has not been offered a wild salmon all season, but he is optimistic for the future), which he tells the chefs to prepare by cutting downwards into slices rather than horizontally as has been the norm. "Preparing the salmon this way means that each slice has more of the flavours from the smoking and there is less waste. That's how Richard Corrigan is telling his chefs to serve it at Bentley's in London and Dublin." And then speaking as a chef, he added, "and if you serve the slices standing up, it plates very well."

Our final stop was at the recently re-opened Cliff House Hotel at Ardmore. The views across to the crescent beach, the sea below and the cliffs beyond are naturally magnificent. But these have been considerably enhanced for anyone sitting in the bar or restaurant by the fact that the old, rather inconsequential 80-year-old hotel has now been completely replaced by a modern structure that would certainly not look out of place in California or Australia.

Nor would the freshness of the cooking. Local deep-fried Helvick Point oysters with hollandaise, a luscious seafood chowder, a fillet of hake with an apple and celeriac remoulade, and half a dozen plump scallops from West Cork with spinach and a saffron sauce were all first class.

They were only very slightly less exciting than the unforgettable dark brown bread which had a richness of flavour that could not have come from even the best commercial bakery. When I asked the manager who was ultimately responsible, he replied that it was the sous-chef using his grandmother's recipe. It may be late in the day, but she deserves to get rich on the proceeds.

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