

Charmingly Irish

12 Jun 2010 by Nick Lander/ FT

The O'Brien Chop House, which opened last summer, must now be added to the list of the charms of Lismore in County Waterford, Ireland, two hours' drive south of Dublin.

This historic town is home to several long established attractions. The tiny St Carthage's Cathedral. An imposing castle that once housed the adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh and the dancer Adele Astaire and now belongs to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. Lismore was also the birthplace of Richard Boyle, the father of modern chemistry.

Main Street today houses several independent businesses run by Messrs O'Gorman, Greehy, McCarthy and McGrath, the latter an excellent butcher, with several bars and cafés interspersed.

The exterior of the Chop House is distinguished by a wooden board displaying a pink lamb chop. Its dark wooden tables are laid with good-quality Sheffield cutlery and blue and white plates. The soda bread arrives sliced on simple wooden boards with more than enough local butter. The Black Rock stout, brewed nearby at Dungarvan Brewery, is served in silver tankards, and fiddles play quietly in the background. One wall is given over to wine behind an ornate iron grill.

Our first courses, a Caesar salad, crab claws with wild garlic and lemon butter, and lambs' kidneys, cooked with just the right amount of tangy Worcester sauce, were excellent but promptly outshone by what followed.

Two large oval platters bore a John Dory, the whole fish cooked in the oven, with a lip-smacking black butter sauce, and a giant rib of beef complete with its own carving knife and fork, each more than enough for the two they were intended for. Both were stunning in their sourcing, the precision with which they had been cooked and the simplicity of their presentation alongside creamed spinach and wild garlic mash. The lemon tart, rhubarb mess, chocolate mousse cake and brown-bread ice cream were almost as good. Such a good lunch for six came to 205 euros without service.

The three individuals who have brought all this together and transformed what was a failed location a year ago into this polished but relaxed restaurant include its owner Justin Green (left), an Anglo-Irishman; Richard Reeve (right), an Englishman as its ultra-professional manager; and Eddie Baguio (centre), its talented Filipino chef. Although as Green modestly admitted 'neither the restaurant nor his chef would have been on the market but for the current recession'.



Green grew up in Ballyvolane House, a 25-minute drive east of Lismore, which his parents transformed into an hotel in 1985. He took over the running of it in 2004 after a stint as general manager of Babington House, the relaxed country house hotel in Somerset. Green's laidback approach to looking after his customers is reflected in a rather crumpled combination of shirt, jacket and unkempt hair but his eye for what will make for an exceptional restaurant cannot be faulted.

When Green first spotted that Lismore's former Barca tapas bar had finally closed its doors he could hardly have believed his luck. Here was a traditional Irish pub, complete with many of its original Victorian wooden features in the front part of the building, but also with room for enough tables in the rear room that leads out into an attractive garden, home to more tables and chairs and mint plants for the fresh mint tea.

While it was simple enough to restore the restaurant to its original name of O'Brien, it was a much more imaginative step on Green's behalf to transform the business into a chop house, the kind of eating house that used to flourish in London. But this title clearly and cleverly embodies everything that is on the menu.

'I could sense there was a fantastic atmosphere in the building so I decided to take a punt,' Green explained. But because so much of the original design was already in place, his total investment has been no more than 30,000 euros as he rents it from the former owners. The Victorian bar was lovingly cleaned; the restaurant fitted out; and the kitchen brought up to date.

Green's initiative was rewarded by a phone call from a friend asking him whether he was looking for a chef. Glin Castle, another country house hotel nearby, had just closed its doors and its chef, Eddie Baguio, was on the market.

Green admitted that he was originally somewhat sceptical as to whether a Filipino chef could deliver what he was looking for: simple, robust Irish food using seasonal ingredients. But Baguio has proved him wrong and in turn left many customers very happy. 'We have a tasting every week and he is getting 99.9% of the dishes bang on,' Green explained. 'He really does understand wild Irish ingredients.'

As we stood at the bar, Baguio called goodbye to us and climbed the stairs to his family flat above, and Green revealed another side to this unexpected partnership. 'He's a born-again Christian so he won't tolerate any swearing in his kitchen. It's the most serene place I've ever worked in,' he added with a smile.

But if this chef's particular approach makes life easy for Green, then the walled gardens of Ballyvolane House make life very exciting for Baguio and his colleagues. From here come potatoes, cabbages, wild garlic and salad leaves as well as the soft fruit for the desserts and for the jams that are sold behind the bar. It is a symbiotic relationship many, many chefs will envy.

The final figure in this unlikely triumvirate is Richard Reeve, whom I first encountered 15 years ago when he was working at Le Caprice in London. The love of a good Irish woman brought him to Dublin a decade ago and then, when a family ensued, to the quieter environs of Dungarvan, where he first heard about Green's plans for the chop house. 'I love it here,' he said, 'It feels like a different universe from London but we still want it to be just as professional.'

The O'Brien Chop House may not survive quite as long as the cathedral or castle but it will give any visitor to this engaging town a great deal of pleasure.

The O'Brien Chop House www.obrienchophouse.ie