Nicholas Lander eats out in Dublin

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Dublin may have lost some of its old fashioned charm - sadly Grafton Street now looks like any other high street thanks to globalisation and, equally regrettably, Guinness is poured too cool as the company pursues the younger lager-drinking brigade - but as a city for *craic* it is hard to beat.

Craic is Gaelic for fun or good times and for anyone in search of the gastronomic equivalent there is no better place to start than St Stephen's Green, the large, leafy outpost at the top of Grafton Street. Walking straight out of the still atmospheric Shelbourne Hotel you turn left for the Ely Wine Bar or head straight across the green for The Commons restaurant.

Walking into the Ely is temporarily disconcerting as the wine bar shares the ground floor with another company, Ely Business Offices, but do not let that stand in your way of a fantastic wine list, gutsy Irish cooking and a great atmosphere. Just turn left and keep on walking.

As you continue downstairs you become aware of owner Eric Robson's passions. There are copies of the *Wine Spectator* and wine books in every available nook and cranny; a well stocked cigar humidor on the wall and a bar bulging with bottles of various shapes and provenance. Within minutes of talking to Robson an obvious love for food and O'Hara's, the particular Irish stout he sells, becomes equally apparent.

Intrigued by O'Hara's, a drink I had never tried before, my order was met with the comment that I would have to wait a minute or two. As this was a Monday, Robson explained, the bottles in the fridge (which had not been opened since Saturday night) were too cold to be served but he would happily go down to the cellar and bring a few bottles up at the correct temperature. I can now report that O'Hara's is definitely 'craic' and at 4.3 per cent alc not too heady.

Whilst Robson's passion for wine, obvious in the 200 different bottles on offer with 70 by the highly generous 18.75cl glass, is personal his interest in good food is inherited from his father, an organic farmer in County Clare. As a result the menu reads as well as it tastes: oysters from Kilkee on Ireland's Atlantic coast; traditional Irish stew made with organic Burren lamb and organic *coq au vin* using chickens bred on the family farm. And as Robson senior is a keen shot, Monday's menu invariably includes at least one dish from the weekend's shooting party which when I was there was a lip-smacking casserole of woodcock.

It is less than a kilometre from Ely to The Commons but, gastronomically and atmospherically, they are worlds apart. Whilst the former is relaxed and rather womblike in its embracing comfort, The Commons is more formal, a determined attempt to reproduce a classic French restaurant across the Irish Sea. As a result, according to my Irish 'deep throat', the Ely is the hangout of politicians, lawyers and journalists whilst The Commons is the current favourite of the city's business community who enjoy the space and quiet the restaurant offers between the tables both in its restaurant and bar.

This longstanding restaurant is currently undergoing a renaissance since the arrival of Aiden Byrne in the kitchen 18 months ago, an appointment which culminated in the regaining of its Michelin star earlier this year.

Despite his Irish-sounding name, Byrne is from Liverpool and learnt his craft at several of England's top restaurants, most notably under the gentle instruction of David Adlard, chef/proprietor of Adlards in Norwich (tel +44 (0)1603 633522). He left England for what he thought were the slightly quieter streets of Dublin but judging by the jam-packed restaurant when I was there life in The Commons' kitchens cannot be much quieter than any London restaurant.

Byrne is a modest, unassuming and obviously talented chef but I came away from my meal with the distinct impression that if he, his brigade and the waiting staff would just relax a little bit, introduce a bit of 'craic' into their rather formal approach, The Commons would be a better place.

There was nothing intrinsically wrong in anything we ate, just an over-emphasis on the irrelevant. So much time had been spent placing three grilled langoustines precisely in the middle of my bowl of fennel soup that the soup itself was tepid. Life, as Shirley Conran exclaimed almost a generation ago, is too short to stuff a mushroom so why spend time turning carrots into pretty shapes or tie sautéed leeks into knots beneath some flavourful beef, particularly as the vegetable chef

had in this time-consuming process left the leeks drastically undercooked? And if rosti, those rounds of wonderfully crisp potato, are to stay crisp surely there is no point in serving them on top of a sauce which immediately turns them soggy even if the rump of lamb has been well prepared.

By not focusing on the simple and obvious, Byrne's brigade let themselves down. But I do look forward to a return to The Commons, the Ely and far more opportunities for 'craic' in Dublin.

The Ely Wine Bar, 22 Ely Place, Dublin 2 (tel 1 676 8986)

The Commons, Newman House, 85-86 St Stephens Green, Dublin (tel 1 478 0530). Closed Saturday lunch and Sunday.