

Eating well in Dublin

2 Jan 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

The animated streets of Dublin have been so evocatively brought to life by authors, song writers and Dubliners themselves that when the taxi dropped us in the area known as the North Quays it seemed thoroughly familiar.

The rain was falling, gently of course. The Halfpenny Bridge was straddling the river Liffey as elegantly as it has done since it was first built in 1816 when it cost a half penny to cross and there was the sound of someone singing in the distance. The only modern intrusion seemed to be the smokers huddled together under whatever awnings they could find.

Most excitingly, our restaurant had an enticing name, **The Winding Stair**, although as we scurried in my rather literal companion (who later kept miscalling the restaurant The Twisted Stair - JR) complained that the first steps of its entrance were in fact straight! But then the staircase did wind and lead quite steeply upwards to a light blue door with the single word 'Push' on it.

What lay on the other side was an abrupt introduction to this city's bustling restaurant life. Instead of opening on to a tranquil reception area there were just banks of tables full of happy diners through which a waitress gallantly fought her way to welcome us, take our coats and lead us to a table by the window that looked down on to the river below. En route she explained that in 2006 the restaurant had taken over the first floor of what had been a popular meeting place and bookshop that once served coffee, chunky soups and stronger liquor to those that had used to gather there. With the advent of the internet the bookshop was now confined to the ground floor.

The Winding Stair's straightforward menu, attached to a clipboard, acts as a window on to modern Irish cooking as on this one single piece of paper every appetising Irish ingredient seems to be there. There's Fingal Ferguson's bacon and treacle bread; Frank Hederman's smoked fish; Jane Russell's bratwurst; boiled bacon collar; a plate of Irish charcuterie and a Ryefield goat's cheese toastie.

Having completed what appeared to be a culinary tour of the six counties on paper we settled on a potato cake with apple compote and fried Clonakilty black pudding; baked mushroom with Cashel blue cheese; potted Kerry crab, haddock poached in milk; pork belly with champ and, with barely room to spare, a slab of a stunning sticky pear and ginger cake. It was all well cooked and served in generous portions. Alongside such good food, which served to confirm one maxim of the restaurant trade that the best food comes from the most compact of kitchens (and the one here is minuscule) the restaurant boasts a well-chosen, well-priced wine list and a team of smiling waitresses.

It's only disadvantage is that it is extremely noisy but that has proved no disincentive to the son of friends of ours currently at Trinity College who, over a pint of Guinness in The Stag's Head, explained that The Winding Stair is top of his list whenever his parents came over to ensure that he has at least one good meal. It is followed, he promptly added, by a trip to Fallon & Byrne which for many has transformed food shopping and eating in the centre of Dublin.

Set over 4,500 sq ft on four floors of what was built in the 1920s as the city's central telephone exchange, **Fallon & Byrne** boasts a wine bar and shop, food hall, restaurant and event space, for which its creator, Paul Byrne, openly acknowledges his debt to New York. "I was living and working there as a carpenter and I couldn't help but be impressed

by what I saw at Dean & DeLuca or the Gourmet Garage. When I came back here with my wife, Alison, and we decided to try and do something similar our overriding priority was to remove the snobbery that then seemed to envelop shopping for really good ingredients.”

As a result of what Byrne described as a huge risk, two million euros and many sleepless nights, Fallon & Byrne now seems to be firing on all cylinders partly due to the building itself which ensures that no single aspect looks too daunting. Its inherent warmth and friendliness have already drawn a large female following, many of whom were eating together on the night I was there while their menfolk stayed in the pub watching the Irish football. They have also introduced clever cross-marketing such as a one euro corkage fee from the wine store on Monday nights, known as Happy Mondays.

Byrne openly acknowledged his debt to New York’s hugely popular Balthazar in creating their own restaurant, a debt that is obvious in the simplicity of the design, the waiting staff in long white aprons, the bentwood chairs and the fact that as a result so many people seem to be having such a good time. It is just the place for a plateful of Carlingford Lough oysters, excellent steaks and the odd glass of good wine.

That Dublin now has such an excellent range of wines by the glass is the result of a romantic holiday Erik Robson took with his wife, Michelle, a decade ago to Seville in southern Spain. Impressed by what that city’s tapas bars were offering but fully aware that Dublin’s customers would require more substantial food, they set up the original **Ely Wine Bar**, off St Stephen’s Green, in 1999 to fulfil his ambition with the wines but without obliging his customers to have a three course meal.

I have been heartily recommending the original Ely – as much for its wine as its authentic Irish food - since I first ate there ago but in the interim the Robsons have opened two new and far more modern branches, Ely HQ on Hanover Quay, and Ely CHQ on Customs House Quay in the rapidly developing docklands area now known as the Irish Financial Services Centre.

I wandered round Ely CHQ stunned by the audacity of the Robson’s expansion. While sticking true to the roots of Irish food, with Erik’s father still supplying them with organic meat from his farm in County Clare and Molloy’s the fishmongers still providing the increasingly rare wild smoked salmon, they have transformed an 1820s tobacco and wine warehouse into the most elegant wine bar and restaurant. The former arched cellars, once damp and devoid of human voices, now resound with Irish laughter and fulfil perhaps the one role left to them today as the provider of good times. In such a setting, at a cost of over two million euros, the food and wine seem remarkably good value.

The Winding Stair, www.winding-stair.com,

Fallon & Byrne, www.fallonandbyrne.com,

Ely Wine Bars, www.elywinebar.ie