

Irish food in cosmopolitan Dublin

19 Dec 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

Dublin's compact city centre readily reveals its charms and its less salubrious side. But on a recent visit it was the origins of the hands serving in its restaurants that acted as a mirror to this charming city.

This phenomenon began at breakfast in the Dylan hotel. When our waiter, revealing a strong eastern European accent, asked for my breakfast order, I responded with a request for soda bread, butter and a cup of the strong Barry's tea that is blended in Cork. He returned smiling with the first two items, a pot of hot water and a sachet of wild berry tea.

Over the next 36 hours I began to appreciate a major hangover from the city's once-strong economy. As the hospitality business boomed, it attracted many young workers from the rest of Europe. They have stayed on, having fallen for the city's relaxed way of life.

Over the same period, Irish restaurateurs and chefs have written their menus to reflect the growing quality of their country's increasingly excellent produce.

The result today is great Irish food but transformed and served by a wide range of individuals whose own origins range from Finland to Hungary.

Certainly, when we climbed the steep stairs to the first-floor restaurant of The Pig's Ear, we expected to be served charmingly but not perhaps by a very welcoming combination of a Sardinian waiter and a Polish waitress.

Everything else about this excellent restaurant is quintessentially Irish: its name; those of its chef, Stephen McAllister, and its happy manageress, Katrina Murphy (who revealed she had just got married); the two white Aran sweaters hanging by the door; and, above all, the view from the windows which overlook the sports grounds of Trinity College.

The Pig's Ear's lunch menu is short and well priced at 19.95 euros for three courses that were packed full of flavour with all ingredients given an engaging twist. Cured salmon, a staple starter on so many fixed-price menus, came here in two thick slices, placed vertically and surrounded by buttermilk curd, with thin slices of crisp apple and beetroot. It was delicious.

So too were our very different main courses. A duck pie revealed not just how intelligently to deal with duck thigh meat but also, by giving credit to its author the Victorian cookery writer Mrs Beeton, how much oomph the combination of Worcestershire sauce and anchovy contributed to its overall flavour. By contrast, a fillet of hake was light and charming, the fish rendered moist and elegant by the adjuncts of samphire, capers and an almond butter.

Our Italian waiter, reacting to my enjoyment of Irish food, asked me where else I was eating. When I replied that I was planning lunch the following day at The Greenhouse (many of the city's best restaurants are closed on Monday nights) his response was enthusiastic. 'That's where Mickael Viljanen, the Finnish chef, is cooking. I had a great meal there last week.'

Viljanen made his name in Ireland at Gregans Castle in the Burren, a three and a half hour drive west of Dublin, before he was lured to the capital six months ago by restaurateur Eamonn O'Reilly. O'Reilly obviously has the requisite professional eye for a good location because The Greenhouse now thrives on a corner site once home to a bistro and, memorably, very close to the Lord Mayor's residence and opposite the Celtic Whiskey Shop.

My female guest described the interior as 'swanky by Dublin standards' although we were both somewhat disconcerted by the amount of net curtain that now hangs between the two sections of the dining room. I, however, could not have been happier with the fact that we were subsequently led to table 14, which offers a direct view into the kitchen. Sam Smyth, the highly regarded Irish journalist, then joined us so the craic flowed as I watched the chefs.

As our Hungarian waiter served the Italian ciabatta and I took in a wine list that sensitively offers six red and six whites by the glass, we ordered from the lunch menu that offers a choice of two options at each course.

From the deftness of the two starters and the promptness with which they were served, the menu seemed initially to offer great value at 30 euros for three courses. Slow-cooked eggs with potatoes and trompette mushrooms were particularly appealing to those who live in a city where culinary foams are still a novelty while a terrine of chicken, foie gras and ham was first class with a small knob of cep butter to spread on the brioche as a thoughtful addition.

Then the meal began to slow down. There was far too long before our next courses: cod with a pumpkin glaze and a cleverly worked half of a roast partridge with Jerusalem artichokes, given a lift by the addition of peppery nasturtium leaves, a touch I will use at home. But while we waited, I could not help noticing a chef on the pass calmly preparing scallops for that night's service.

This delay, followed by an even longer one before our desserts, meant we had to leave before the latter arrived. This Finnish chef is talented but he needs his Irish restaurateur to ensure his customers get to the finishing line faster.

The Pig's Ear 4 Nassau Street; tel 00 353 1.670 3865

www.thepigsear.ie

The Greenhouse Dawson Street; tel 00 353 1.676 7015

www.thegreenhouserestaurant.ie