



Written by
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On Ireland's west coast



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The city of Galway on the west coast of Ireland could be the most attractive city in the world in which to be either a restaurant customer or a restaurateur.

From St Patrick's Day, which falls conveniently in March after the quiet months of January and February, when, as our very Irish bus driver said, 'everyone is spent up after Christmas', the city acts as a magnet for Americans.

There follows a succession of literary and arts festivals that fill the summer months. All these have culminated in the city's successful nomination as European City of Culture 2020, which presumably explains why so many hotels are currently being renovated.

The autumn is replete with graduation dinners connected to the university and the two IT

colleges before the run up to Christmas and the New Year.

The students, between 20,000 and 30,000, provide not just custom but also part-time staff. As do the many workers attracted to this part of the world from Eastern Europe.

The waitress who took our wine order at the **Brasserie on the Corner** was from Poland – and confirmed that there are now four Polish food shops in this city – but it was her Irish counterpart who did the arithmetic. 'Now let me see', she replied in answer to my question about the ratio of Irish to Polish waitresses. 'There are three of us from Ireland and four from Poland.' And in the kitchen?, I asked. 'Oh, they are all from Poland', she added.

The setting, however, could not have been more American. With its dark interior and wooden booths this restaurant could have been in New York, Chicago or Boston.

There seemed to be Americans at every table, some of them clearly meeting distant Irish relatives, sometimes spanning three generations. And everybody seemed to be having a good time.

The menu is comprehensive and it fashionably gives credit where credit is due – to their suppliers. The two central pages list the names of all those who have reared or caught the main courses and supplied them with all the necessary to create good dishes.

This is an approach that almost works. There was a definite edge to our first two courses, as though there is someone in the kitchen who has the requisite talent but lacks just a little guidance. A crab salad with lemon and a won ton was fresh and lively but spoilt by just one too many ingredients. The lobster in my ravioli was excellent but the dish was let down by an over-heavy sauce.

So too were our main courses. Scallops with chorizo was well sauced but the quality of the scallops let down an original dish. An enormous serving of lamb rack was slow cooked and oozed generosity but lacked finesse. Our dessert, a lemon tart, was the same – an excellent filling inside an insipid pastry case. With a bottle of Soalheiro Alvarinho 2016, my bill came to €143.

An excursion for this restaurant's kitchen staff to **Kai** nearby, run by David and Jessica Murphy, would pay huge dividends.

We had time only for a quick lunch, when Kai operates as a café with a blackboard menu, walls lined with former packing cases and a large skylight that lets in so much sunshine that the whole interior could have been anywhere on the West Coast.

Here we ate very well. Bowls of harissa chicken salad with sweet potatoes, nectarines and chickpeas and another of West Coast crab and miso broccoli were washed down with a glass of Waipara Pinot Gris and a superior Puglian red. Paying the cashier my bill of €40 brought me face to face with their plethora of home-made desserts as well as their own bread, a loaf of which, fortunately, fitted into our suitcase.

The culinary high spot of our brief Irish trip was, however, two meals cooked by Ruairi de Blacam at **Inis Meáin Restaurant & Suites** on the quietest middle one of the Aran Islands a short hop on the plane from Connemara airport. This is the restaurant with five bedrooms that he built with his wife, Marie-Thérèse, 11 years ago. See [my account](#) of a visit there seven years ago when it was still establishing its formidable reputation.

In the seven years since I first ate here, a great deal has changed. The owners have grown in confidence. Their profits have been ploughed back into co-opting their neighbours to grow more fruit, vegetables and salad for the kitchen (such as the mouth-watering beets shown above); and their wine list has been enormously strengthened. The Polish staff remain but are supplemented today by several Brazilians (there is even a Brazilian food shop in Galway!).

Instead of an à la carte menu, the kitchen now offers only a four-course dinner menu that focuses exclusively on fish and vegetables. Ruairi explained, 'As the amount of produce grown for us increased then this forced us to reconsider while our guests immediately welcomed the lack of choice, overriding our innate nervousness.'

The two dinner menus we enjoyed were most impressive, including a crab salad with finely diced apple; the flattened leaf of what must have been an enormous cabbage on top of which came a thick chunk of lobster; turbot with a perfect sauce grenobloise (ie plenty of capers); and an apricot tart with lemon verbena ice cream.



The views from the dining room are stunning. Above are just two of the island's many natural attributes. This was, unquestionably, one of my meals of 2018 - and I hope one of yours in the future.

Brasserie on the Corner Eglinton Street, Galway; tel +353 (0)91 530 333

Kai 22 Sea Road, Galway; tel +353 (0)91 526 003

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