



Written by
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RIP Myrtle Allen of Ballymaloe



Myrtle Allen, who died yesterday at the age of 94 in the Cork University Hospital surrounded by her family, was an extraordinary woman whose spirit will live on, not just at [Ballymaloe House](#) but in every corner of Ireland that aims to serve excellent, honest Irish food and to do so with heartfelt Irish hospitality. (She is pictured here on the [Ballymaloe website](#) with the award she won when inducted in April into the Good Food Ireland TouRRoir Hall of Fame for her outstanding contribution to modern Irish cuisine.)

She, and her late husband Ivan whom she married in 1943, moved into Ballymaloe, then a large family farmhouse, in 1947. They opened a restaurant there in 1964 before expanding it into a hotel. It was to be the first restaurant in Ireland to be awarded a Michelin star.

Since then, primarily thanks to the energy and drive of two of her daughters-in-law, Darina and Hazel, Ballymaloe has gone on to establish an international name for itself as a cookery school,

based in Shanagarry, a few kilometres away from the hotel, and as one of the very best places to experience Irish hospitality. This was very much Myrtle's legacy.

A petite woman with a shock of grey hair by the time I met her, Myrtle's softly spoken, lilting, gentle Irish accent belied a very tough interior. As well as running the hotel and restaurant, she was also responsible for founding Euro-Toques Ireland, an organisation that has done a great deal to preserve that country's culinary heritage. At one stage she was commuting between Cork and Paris, where she had set up a restaurant, La Ferme Irlandaise, an outpost for the best Irish produce.

Hazel recalls watching in admiration as her mother-in-law set off once to catch the night ferry with a suitcase full of Irish porridge oats, flour, potatoes and lobsters. On our penultimate visit to Ballymaloe a couple of years ago, Hazel suggested we visited Myrtle in her quarters in Ballymaloe's courtyard. It was teatime. Myrtle was in a wheelchair. But she had to be physically restrained from getting up to make us a cup of tea to go with the delicious homemade shortbread she offered us. Hospitality ran through her veins.

As well as being responsible for rescuing a nation's food that was at the time, to put it bluntly, in danger of disappearing into a culture of fast food, Myrtle was also responsible for initiating one of the finest private collections of art in Ireland.

This began with the visits of her husband to the Dublin Agricultural Show, where the London gallery Waddingtons had a stand, principally aimed at the cash-rich farmers. Over the years the collection the Allens put together included at one stage about 10 paintings by Jack Yeats, the younger brother of the poet W B Yeats. At one time most of these were on the walls of the hotel's primary dining room, which came to be known as the Eats Room, before their value rose to such a level that most of them have now been sold.

As Joanna Hughes, the Irish manageress at our son's Quality Chop Shop, put it to me after breaking the news of Myrtle's sad passing today, 'Well, I don't suppose she will be wanting for a good send-off'.

This is a sentiment that I can echo. Anyone who has eaten well in Ireland since Myrtle Allen took to the stoves, anyone who intends to visit Ireland in the future, and particularly anyone who has the great good fortune to eat and stay at Ballymaloe, and to her family and colleagues, I can only say thank you very much indeed. From all of us.