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Galloping Gourmets

Richard West, knife in hand, as he prises open the crenellated shell of another plump and sweet Pacific for an eager taker. 'Oysters are like wine; the terroir is important – they get their taste from the waters in which they grow' he explains. We are gathered at his oyster beds in Aughrus Bay in Claddaghduff outside Clifden on the last of a weekend food trail in Galway getting an introduction to the riveting history of oysters beside their bag and trestle homes. The shucked oysters slip easily down our throats, their tangy seawater taste unmistakably Atlantic. You could eat the landscape, too, on this balmy summer Sunday morning in Connemara.

The three day trail has us hotfoot from encounters with food producers of the raw materials, to venues savouring the culinary excellence of talented young chefs and overnight stays in well chosen surroundings like John Huston's former home, St Clerans in Craughwell and The Quay House in Clifden, Paddy & Julia Foyle's award winning guest house at the harbour. A weekend full of good tastes.

A new departure in Irish tourism, the trails were dreamed up by Dublin cousins Eveleen and Pamela Coyle. Both are mothers with a flair for hospitality and a longstanding tradition of big family meals, indoors and outdoors, prepared with fresh, seasonal ingredients. Eveleen has a background in publishing and editing and is the author of *The Irish Potato Cookbook*. Together, the pair make fun seem easy.

Like everybody we met on the packed trip, Richard West works hard and is passionate about what he does. Having spent time in the shellfish industry in Brittany, he returned home six years ago to set up Omeys Oysters. He now exports 100 tonnes annually to France and the Netherlands. Ireland has a long history of producing quality oysters, he tells us.

'Virginia oysters used to come from the US to Ireland to be fattened then sold on to England. Even today when you see an oyster, it may have been born in Arcachon in France, then moved for fattening to Normandy, then Ireland, then back to Marenne near Bordeaux before ending up in Paris. Oysters travel an awful lot'. He bemoans the fact that the 'phenomenal' riches of the Irish coast have never been fully exploited.

In the bustling Saturday morning market in Galway, however, we marvel at the produce on sale and the harvest from the seas. Stefan Gannet's fish stall offered surf clams, palourdes, mussels, oysters not to speak of monkfish (21 euros a kilo), brill, sea bass (wild, from Brittany), swordfish, turbot and silver hake, all mostly landed at Rossaveal harbour. Nearby, 'freshly caught fairies' (little dolls with herbs) drew smiles from young and old alike.

There are occasional surprises. The previous day chef Enda McEvoy at Sheridans Cheesemongers who provided our seafood lunch while Seamus Sheridan expounded on Irish farmhouse cheeses, showed us a forkbeard, a deep water fish landed at Rossaveal, which he'd never seen before.

Keen chefs keep an eye on the market. On Saturday evening at a chic private house on the seashore outside Clifden, the award-winning Clíodhna Prendergast prepared halibut for us fresh from the market, her menu for the dinner determined by seasonal offerings. She's the daughter of the owners of the Zetland Hotel in Connemara so catering is in her blood and her style is fresh, light and spicy. Currently Head Chef at Delphi Lodge in Leenane, she won Food & Wine's Best Chef of the Year award last year. Her pannecotta dessert made with yoghurt and cardamom with a necklace of strawberries, wobbled like a blancmange and tasted sublime. 'Women love cardamom', she says. One of our group compared it to kulfi, an Indian ice cream.

Multicultural influences are everywhere in Galway. There's a Japanese chef, Hisashi Kumagai, at St Clerans (a Japanese breakfast is included on the morning menu) and one from New Zealand, Jessica Murphy (formerly of Thorn-ton) in the lovely, intimate Ard Bia restaurant on Quay Street in Galway. Ard Bia's 'modern Irish' menu features seasonal produce like Connemara smoked lamb with pecorino or seared tuna with marinated feta amongst other cross culinary pollinations. The bread comes to the table in the small terracotta flower pots in which it is baked, a cute touch. Aoibheann MacNamara, the restaurant's zany and stylish owner also runs an avant garde art space on William Street, the location for our lesson in chocolate making from French pastry chef and chocolatier Benoit Lorge.

Winner of six medals at the Great Taste Awards in Dublin including two golds, he told us all about cocoa while swirling away at a glistening puddle of liquid chocolate on a polished marble slab, brandishing what looked like a paint scraper in his hand. For those with a weakness for dark chocolate it was startling to discover that it isn't percentage cocoa content that counts, but the quality of the bean and for gastronomic excellence, nothing beats the criollo, the Rolls Royce of them all. We tried our hand at filling the emulsion into little chocolate moulds, not as easy as it looks. Handling ganache requires panache.

Lorge was in Sheen Falls for five years and has now set up his own chocolate shop in Bonane between Kenmare and Glengarrif producing 50 kilos of hand-made chocolates a week. The Irish, he said, are the third highest consumers of

chocolate in the world, but of poor quality. He's setting standards and educating local palates.

Saturday's riverside picnic was another mouthwatering experience. En route there from Galway, we stopped at Oughterard to check out a little village bakery called The Yew Tree. Elizabeth Falden, a tall, handsome Norwegian, came to Ireland twelve years ago to learn Irish, a love of the country inherited from her seaman father. In 2003 she set up her artisanal bakery with partner Teresa Tierney and now bakes fifteen different types of bread daily from traditional brown sodas to ciabattas and poppy seed plaits using Irish and French flours, free range eggs and pure Irish butter.

Around the corner we met prize-winning master butcher James McGeogh the first Irish butcher to train in Germany (in German) and the only one in the country airdrying meat. This is a time-consuming process involving handling the product some 50-60 times. So superb is his airdried beef, lamb and pork that he has just won the contract to supply 25,000 slices for the Ryder Cup and a new factory to cater for increasing demands from Ireland and the UK is nearly up and running.

After sampling his delicious meats and salamis, we set off for the picnic driving through the heart of Connemara with the majestic Maamturks and the Twelve Bens rising in the distance. On the banks of the Owenriff River, Eveleen and her niece Jessica, a designer, had set up a gazebo framing a linen-clad table richly spread with an assembly of the best of Irish food products; meat, fish, vegetables, salads, chutneys, mayonnaise, cheeses, country butters, fresh fruits and chocolates alongside fruit juices and wines. As a picnic spread it was a class act.

On a small barbecue, James McGeogh's award winning sausages were sizzling away. Each item had a story behind it; the salami studded with pistachio that melted in the mouth was made by Fingal Ferguson, son of the Fergusons of Gubbeen cheese carrying on the family's gastronomic tradition. We were encouraged to taste Janet's Fayre beetroot chutney and learned that when it comes to country butter, the fresher the cream, the lighter the taste. Fly fisherman casting along the bank looked on with curiosity, but, like the midges, kept their distance.

The whole weekend which ended with a pub lunch of fresh crab in Guys in Clifden proved that standards of Irish food are rising everywhere and that culinary tourism, a growing international trend, is a new way of enticing the epicurean traveller with a spirit of adventure. Food is human communication. 'It's not golf and it's not spa, but it shows another side of the country', says Eveleen. 'Food and nourishment, after all, are an elemental part of our lives. We try to show how much is going on, to showcase the quality of what Ireland has to offer and at the same time to make it fun.'

Fabulous Food Trails cover all regions of Ireland and vary in length from one to five days, though the most popular is the three day trail. Trips can be tailored on request. www.fabulousfoodtrails.ie.

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