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Aer Lingus

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Fabulous Food Trails.

When you are running a Fabulous Food trail you have to be resourceful. So what do you do when your world famous Chocolatier Benoit Lorge needs a work surface of just a particular temperature... (so as to avoid the melting of the vital ingredient in the nice white Galway art gallery, where the chocolate making is to take place.)

For crafty cousins Pamela and Eveleen Coyle these things are no problem. You simply hop off your trusty Fabmobile in the middle of Connemara, make a pitstop at a marble quarry, wedge an enormous slab of the stuff into the back of the van to deliver it back to the gallery in Galway City. Hey presto, you now have one immaculate worktop suitable for chocolate making. The guests are gathered, fortified from their scrumcious lunch courtesy of Sheridans Cheeses and the artistry can begin. Mind the installation!

An hour or two later, the scene and the little gourmet troupe shifted to the Ard Bia restaurant in Galway's Shop Street where Eveleen and Pamela relayed the marble story to the guests, all eagerly listening mopping up olive oil and local butter with freshly baked herb bread and sloshing it all down with some great wine. (Imported from Venice by the restaurant host and a man called Enrico Fantasia,) But that's another story. This the kind of weekend this is.. Now stick with me.

Hovering around us, Aoibheann the proprietor of Ard Bia explains the menu, and opens the window; 'there we go darling, mind yourself pet' as the throngs gather below enjoying the heat of a Galway June. It's almost too hot for risotto with local Killeen Cheese but not actually. We are greeted by Ard Bia's new head chef Jessica Murphy, a New Zealander who has recently left Thornton's of Stephens Green to sample the joys of Galway City. So far so good and Jessica is obviously relishing using the great local produce; fresh vegetables and fish from the food market including Aran Islands' smoked salmon, local cheeses and smoked lamb from a very special Oughterard butcher who was soon to become our new best friend.

Safely delivered by Eveleen in the Fabmobile, we retired for a luxurious overnight in the eighteenth century splendour of St. Cleren's Manor House in Craughwell. Made infamous as the home of Hollywood director John Huston and his daughter Angelica, St. Cleren's is these days a gorgeous 12 room country guesthouse. In the morning our group of seven gourmet guzzlers enjoyed

breakfast prepared by Japanese Chef Hisashi Kumagai as we played 'Guess who' with the caricatures hanging on the wall. You may opt for a super healthy Japanese option which is a big hit with American visitors, but me, well I am a poached egg girl, and trust me, they were fabulous.

By now it was really time we did a bit of work so off to Galway market to buy fresh yummy things for the picnic that afternoon. As one of our party phoned in her new weight to her editor, I purchased peat smoked salmon from Micheál de Brun of Aran Salmon, whose family have been at this lark for twenty five years. Most of it goes straight to Paris so consider yourself lucky to have it. The Galway market itself is just the right size, situated on a T junction in front of St Nicholas Church. Great samples of cheeses, hummus, oysters and seaweed abound and some of the freshest and quarest looking fresh atlantic fish. After a reasonable amount of loitering, tasting and peering at the Lynching memorial, Oughterard beckoned and off into the Fabmobile again.

Grinning butcher James McGeough greeted us in his shop, McGeough's Butchers where he proudly presented his magnificently cured meats. Parchment like slithers of beef, pork and unusually lamb are smoked to perfection right there behind the shop. But this is some operation. James is Ireland's only German Trained Master Butcher and he spent six years in the Black Forest honing his trade. His good mood was tempered somewhat a by a bit of a problem. The man from the Ryder Cup had been on saying he needed a few slices of beef. Okay so, how many? 25,000 slices! But all is in good hand. James is extending as we speak, but in a good way. He is extending out the back with the coolest, cleanest plant you ever did see, and nothing that will upset the calm demeanour of the chewing cattle next door. Now that is how it should be done. Next we pop around the corner to Icelandic Elizabeth's artisan bakery and we get the fresh crusty bread for the picnic. Elizabeth and her French pastry chef has been up all night at the oven but even at this early stage their shelves sport more crumbs than loaves. Popular stuff in these parts.

Pamela steered the Fabmobile towards Ballinahinch Castle and we sighed, tucking in our expanding tummies and taking in the scenery. And what awaited us... This was no picnic, this was a feast. Down by the river, Eveleen was brewing up a barbecue and a storm, beside a table groaning with the best artisan food; fresh salads, cheeses, smoked salmons, pistachio salami and fillet of pink beef rolled in peppercorns. A to be eaten off fine china, with a full silver service, under the canopy beside the swirling turf brown river. We sipped prosecco, ate the food and admired the swishing casting of the mayfly fishermen. By now weighed down with superlatives we were almost (only almost) pleading that we couldn't possible eat again that evening. 'Not a bit of it', cajoled Eveleen, 'it's only a light supper'.

Even so, naps are called for in the wonderfully quirky Quay House where the richly coloured rooms are decorated with tiger skins, fine antiques, hot pink sofas, gilded portraits of Napoleon awards for Guesthouse of the Year. Ebullient owners Paddy and Julia, delight in introducing you to their dotey pug

dogs to all the guests.

Later, we headed off to the gorgeous Streamstown Bay, still thankfully lacking in colonisation and we decamp to one of the few private houses. Here we lucky seven bonded over private dinner cooked by Cliodhna Prendergast Head Chef in Delphi Lodge Connemara. Voted best Chef by Food and Wine Magazine in 2005, Cliodhna produced without any apparent fuss the most delicate halibut to swim in these shores, followed by a yoghurt panacotta style desert. Sublime food in a stunning setting with the darkening water and landscape framed in each window of the house.

Sunday morning brought a Quay house breakfast with fresh fruit and molasses brown bread before we headed back towards Claddaghduff, this time to splash around in the oyster beds of Omev Island. Richard West greeted us, all action hero and oilskins with his partner Paschal and her dog Sasha. There we sloshed around ankle deep in sea and knocked back a few oysters; mouthfuls of the Atlantic. The crustaceans showed little sign of jet lag considering their international travels. Born in the USA, raised through teen traumas in France and fattened up in Clifden, to be finally sent to Paris for consumption at the optimum weight. Now that's class.

It was finally time to head off after perfect salmon and crab sandwiches in Guys pub in Clifden. But listen, there was so much more, the chat and the company and then there was the pub the night before, oh and the sniff of romance, but that's all another days work. And yes, it is nice if you can get it.

The US food magazine Saveur recently focused on the burgeoning Irish artisan food market. It's a pity they didn't get to go on a Fabulous Food Trails with Eveleen and Pamela, they would have had a cracking weekend and a superb showcase of the most delicious Irish food, locally produced and fresh as daisies.

Fabulous Food*trails

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