

The Guardian
Saturday April 14 2007

Owen Sheers

Slow boat to Shannon.

Owen Sheers wanted to do a Rick Stein-style food cruise - in Ireland. Cue laughter from Irish friends. But he discovers there's more to it than oysters and Guinness

Culinary cruise ... Moor your boat and walk to your table.

'Food?' Seamus, our taxi driver, raises his eyebrows in the rear view mirror as we pass through the night-quiet streets of Jamestown and out into the darkness of the County Leitrim countryside. "Ah, well, food's bigger than drink in Ireland now."

A week earlier and such a claim might have seen us raising our eyebrows in response, but now, halfway through a food cruise up the Shannon, we nod in solemn agreement instead.

On Day three

Most of the food we eat along the river is prepared in the "slow food" tradition. Travelling by boat up the Shannon, it turns out, is a perfect "slow travel" companion. The gradual glide along canals and narrow channels; the steady ploughing across wide lakes; even the stately, communal progress through the rising and falling locks, all of it is remarkably calming. The river provides a method of travel that slows, rather than quickens the pulse.

The countryside we pass isn't dramatic, but it is varied and often beautiful. From the hedged and tended fields, pinned in place by low-lying stone cottages and farmhouses, to the tall tree-tunnels of the canals and the mini-seas of the lochs. Our slow speed also means we inhabit these views, rather than simply pass them. I find myself with the time to look deeper and I soon become a connoisseur of the various shades of green in the passing reed beds.

"This was made by a shy man in Wicklow," says Eveleen (from Fabulous Food Trails) as she passes me a slab of milk white cheese. We're sitting at a gourmet feast disguised as a picnic on the banks of the river at Balleyleague. As we tuck in to smoked ham, sausages and feather light slices of salmon Eveleen and Pamela of Fabulous Food Trails provide an intimate commentary of the food in front of us.

Each serving comes with a history of location, producer's methodology and, in the case of the cheese, even their character traits. This, Pamela explains,

is what Fabulous Food Trails does best; taking guests on three- and five-day artisan food trips around Ireland to bring them so close to the specific foods of a region that each bite is deepened, not just in terms of taste, but in terms of knowledge too.

Fabulous Food Trails
44 Oakley Road
Ranelagh
Dublin 6
Ireland

T: +353(0)1 497 1245

E: info@fabfoodtrails.com

Fabulous **food***trails