



[Print](#) [Close](#)



Chef à l'orange

by Lowell Courtney, Lynchpin Tours

The late, great O. Henry once coined one of the finest opening lines in history:
"This story is intended as a cross between a temperance lecture and a bartender's guide."

I wouldn't even attempt to top that but this piece is a genetically modified cross breed: the forelegs are a commentary on modern Irish cuisine; the hindquarters are a couple of wonderful restaurants and the rump is some sage advice on telling one from the other. So let us begin.

Madame and I have just spent two weeks in provincial France where, much to my pleasure – and hers at being proved absolutely and unequivocally right which, as all male readers will know, is infinitely more important to Herself than actually getting fed or looking good – we re-discovered the inexhaustible delights of a three hour lunch at a far from exorbitant rate: good ingredients, well cooked and carefully presented with none of the pretentious flourishes of over-priced "maisons des gourmets".

So why can the Irish restaurant business not travel, eat and learn? Well they do, but all parties – the restaurateur, the client and we, the tour operator – have to appreciate that it is a cultural affair, and cultures, like good vintages - but unlike great golfers - rarely travel well. The best of continental Europe – non-metropolitan France, Germany (as the World Cup proved to a lot of surprised Englishmen), Spain and Italy have a culture of good food and the enjoyment of a shared experience. (We'll leave Paris out of this for now, OK? There's Manhattan and then there's the United States, right?) Why does this so rarely translate to Ireland?

It seems inexplicable that many of our best chefs have trained and worked in France but somehow, somewhere, it seems to fall apart when they come home and try to apply their lessons to you, the customer. My own theory is that they may be superb chefs, working with some top-quality produce, but they seem to make the same mistake as Megacorp Inc makes in its dealing with the public, day in and day out.

It is the first point of contact with you, the paying customer, which lets the side down, and it is a double-edged reflection on Ireland's new found prosperity that most Irish kids would rather be financial kingpins (if not lynchpins) than actually take the time and trouble to be the kind of waiter or waitress whose unobtrusive but invaluable advice and encouraging attitude brings you back time and time again to your favourite restaurant like a helpless addict.

The result is that you are likely to be served (in Dublin, at least) by a recent Eastern European arrival who, despite their best efforts and work ethic, have as much knowledge of the menu and how to handle you, the guest, as the average Somali taxi driver has of the Upper East Side i.e. we'll get you there via every pothole in the street.

I apologise for the rant (see below) but it frustrates us, as the link between you, our guest, and what we hope is a wonderful vacation experience, to have our best efforts sabotaged from time to time by establishments whose devotion to quality has the same consistency as the Dow Jones.

We are delighted to welcome you, our American guests – and by the time you read this, you may well have gained revenge in the Ryder Cup. But it saddens us that many Americans still arrive with quaint, pre-cooked and jet-lagged notions of Irish food as consisting of boiled beef and cabbage. We want you to be amazed by the quality of the best of modern Irish

cooking. That is, if you can get away from the Dublin area and some of the standard fare which masquerades as good food. For recommendations, please see below.

On the other hand, you'd be amazed at the number of Europeans who look down their noses at American cuisine and who think that America consists of roadside eateries and nothing else. Both parties would do well to research their itineraries more carefully, even if they don't search their consciences.

Sadly, despite the great strides that have been made in Ireland in the past decade – and it's true that affluence does bring some quality, along with the dross – there are still many establishments where quantity literally outweighs quality. The “good feed” (as in “feeding lots”) syndrome is alive and well and spreading like salmonella. In our travels round the island, my family and I (and my business partner) still meet many establishments where the same tired old variations on “how many ways can you dress up a frozen chicken” are ever-present. And chips (“fries” to you) cover more cracks than Spackle.

The obvious caveat - check the menu at the door – does not always work, because often there is no menu at the door. Do the proprietors of these establishments imagine that there are gangs of roaming brigands roving the countryside, stealing the cartes du jour for subsequent bargaining tools in hostage negotiations. Is it a case of “send us your entrées, if you ever want to see your menus again?” Or are they concerned that John and Jane Dough (yes, I know...) might look at the offerings and decide that \$20 for what amounts to chicken and fries does not perhaps represent particularly good value for money?

So it well behoves you to look at the website of any particularly appetising establishment. But is that enough? Well, clearly not, because every blog on the planet – and some which clearly come from somewhere out of the intergalactic left field – are full of rants about how deceptive this or that site turned out to be.

For God's sake, what do you expect? Do you really think that Paddy's TickMick Bistro and Fajita Bar is going to really show you the sort of *dégoulash* which the chef produces on a series of off-nights where his cooking is more influenced by his poker debts than by his *petits pois*? Of course not.

So you must seek other sources – but are you going to trust the anecdotal experiences of those bloggers who jam cyberspace with excruciatingly detailed accounts of their night out in The Blarney Bar? No, no, CT readers are much too well-read and well-travelled for that. So whom do you trust – and indeed, should you trust anyone else's judgement?

At this point, I declare my hand. Of course I am putting a word in for local operators such as ourselves, who work on the island and who travel around for 6 months of the year. But more importantly, I am trying to encourage you to take special care when you are planning your tour because we believe that dining is as far removed from refuelling as Maine is from Mexico.

Let me suggest a couple of places to you – and let me tell you why they are so good.

And let me add a caveat: many of the foodie articles in the Irish press and restaurant guides (with honourable exceptions) treat the north of the country as a gastronomic Chernobyl. To read the food critics, one would assume (with some justification) that West Cork is as close to paradise as any gourmet could aspire. To wit: “The aroma of a thousand home-produced, organic and ethnically (sorry, “ethnically” pure cheeses) soars above your head like a well struck hurling puck and the green, green grass of fields unsullied by the merest hint of mechanisation produces the most succulent lambs this side of Mongolia.”

OK, so I made that up – but not by much.

It gets even better as you approach the capital, where stars abound in profusion and creativity reaches ethereal heights, suffused by a spiritual devotion to the gods of the kitchen and their

attendant vestal extra-virgins. A concept worth relishing, I think you'll agree.

[All of which was ne'er more neatly bottled (sorry, *mis en chateau*) by a Thurber cartoon which my late and revered father produced when criticised for choosing red with fish, much to my mother's disdain. The cartoon shows an überconfident host announcing to his startled guests: "It's a naïve little burgundy without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by it's presumption." (Chateau Dierisis, 1999) Now that's education.]

So let me take you out into the real Ireland, far, far away from the bright city lights and the purveyors of pleasurable, if illicit substances, who ply their trade on the Liffey boardwalk and come with me, if you please, to a village on the border of Irelands north and south. On the shores of a quiet lake, closer to Enniskillen in the north than Sligo in the south (although it's actually west, but what's detail between friends?), you will strike gold, not the iron pyrites of the pretentious.

The MacNean House and Bistro in Blacklion, Co Cavan is not quite the creation of Neven Maguire but it's near as dammit. Thanks to his mother Vera, he learnt the basic principles of cooking good food and he has never veered from the straight and narrow. Book well in advance for his restaurant and you will be met by quality food, much of it organic and locally sourced, cooked with flair and imagination.

It is to his eternal credit that, despite the TV and the books and all the razzamatazz that goes with being a prince of the gastronomic church, Neven and his family and fiancée Imelda keep their feet firmly on the ground. There are never more than 48 diners and the line up of cars from all the surrounding counties (plus Belfast and Dublin) are a testimony to the fact that if you are good enough, the world will beat a path to your door.

Search in vain for his website – he doesn't want one and he doesn't need one. Your search engine will produce a squad of "where to eat in Ireland guides" who will rave about this place. For once, they are not exaggerating. The most accurate contemporary review is to be found at Ireland-guide.com and I commend it to you. Georgina Campbell describes the menu accurately and elegantly.

North of the border, I have to confess that the cult of the celebrity chef is regarded with the same suspicion as you would accord to reports of Tiger Woods failing to break 100. And maybe no bad thing at that, because you, as a discriminating traveller, are as fed up with OTT (Over The Top) purple prose which leads you to expect great things of any supplier, and you are equally tired of being disappointed. And I suspect even more weary – as we are – of excuses that "it must have been an off night." My riposte is one which will be familiar to hoofers the world over: you are only as good as your last show. And I apply it to no-one more strictly than myself.

However, we do have two establishments with a Michelin star, but one of the hidden gems requires no stars. Ardtara House is a former linen mill owner's house tucked away, deep in the County Derry countryside. It only has 8 guest rooms but the restaurant, capably led by an eccentric Frenchman with frizzed orange hair, is a wonder. No, it's not ginger, it's orange – hence the title.

Olivier Bourdon trained in France and has cooked in France, Poland, Ukraine and Ireland – and God knows where else besides. His current abode is a wonderful Victorian mansion and he presides over a dining room which is blessedly free of infernal muzak, shrieking waiters, and the sort of patron who recognises you at 50 paces and must inform the entire world accordingly. Here you will hear nothing but quiet conversation, occasionally augmented by the pianist, and the satisfied digestions of clients – mostly regulars – who have found nirvana. The dining room at Ardtara – and Valerie's welcome – embody the true meaning of "restaurant". It is a place where civilisation reigns and you are genuinely restored to sanity.

So we wish you well in your travels. Wherever you go, please remember that local knowledge – in proven hands – is worth a trunk full of guidebooks and a boxcar of websites. Experience does count, you know, even if the chef does resemble a deranged goblin!

Bon voyage et bon appetit!