

FROM POTATO FAMINE to Michelin Stars

THE RISING FOODIE SCENE IN IRELAND

story and photos by Carolyn Kasser-Abbott

It's official – the grass is definitively greener in Ireland than it is in Calgary. The Emerald Isle has long attracted golfers and garden lovers yearning to walk on her lush shores. Only recently has Ireland's terroir hooked the attention of astute global foodies.



Ed Cooney, executive chef of the Merrion Hotel

The Irish potato famine struck in the summer of 1845, triggered by a fungus that had travelled from Mexico to Ireland. As farmers turned over their fields of Ireland's primary food staple, they and their countrymen shed tears at the devastating sight of slimy rotting potatoes. This was both a natural and a human disaster in a country where at least half the population's diet was largely dependent on those starchy spuds.

Ireland was under British colonial rule, and Irish Catholics had no land ownership rights. They could only rent small plots of five acres or less from Protestant landlords. A painted acre of potatoes could feed a family for a year, making the choice of cultivating potatoes over grain a natural one. Starvation and disease took a toll on the Irish, leading to an estimated 1 million deaths and 1 million emigrants, mostly to the United States and other countries around the globe. It was a dark decade in Irish history.

Even today, it would be difficult to find a family in Ireland untouched in some manner by the potato famine. That may be the reason that the country is only now on the cusp of a food revolution. According to Margaret Jeffries, founder and visionary behind Good Food Ireland, people inside and outside the country are finally making the connection that good, innovative food helps to attract tourists.

"In the 15 years, small artisan producers have blossomed, and innovation in the food production sector has increased," says Jeffries.

Ed Cooney, executive chef at Dublin's five-star Merrion Hotel, noted that these days, products at the hotel must be of the highest quality – "local is simply not good enough." Guests are discerning, and the food must meet their critical expectations. Today's travellers have much greater food awareness than they did in the past, more dietary choices, and they're quite nutrition-conscious.

Cooney's first goal, once he returned from working in the U.K., was to investigate which foods were actually produced in Ireland. In his kitchen, he now purchases only a few imported specialty products, like foie gras. He's passionate about Irish artisanal products such as the hotel's balsamic apple cider vinegar produced by Llewellyn's Orchard. According to Chef Cooney, the vinegar is comparable to Italian products he has sampled. He says that finding this vinegar in Ireland was one of his biggest "Aha!" moments. Excellent primary food products, including dairy, beef, lamb and seafood, have always existed in Ireland. Over 10 percent of these goods are exported annually to the United Kingdom and other destinations. According to the European Commission website, 4.5 million hectares, or roughly two-thirds of Ireland's land mass, is dedicated to agriculture.

Michelin-starred chef Ross Lewis, the owner of **Chapter One Restaurant** in Dublin, says there was always a strong agricultural and industrial food scene in the country. However, there was no awareness of how to make use of it. Lewis says he was inspired by the food scene in his native California and the rest of Ireland's culinary traditions. With a main course plate always including a protein, vegetables and starch. That regime began to change in the 1970s, a turning point that Lewis attributes to a handful of innovative producers. He gives high marks to Norman and Veronica Steele, who re-introduced washed-rind Milleens cheese on the Beara Peninsula in West Cork in 1976.



Merrion Cellar Restaurant's 'Rust' dish with Wagyu beef, asparagus and mushrooms. Photos



Photo: Alister



P. & D. Photo: Alister



Photo: Alister

As recently as the 1980s, aspiring chefs still had to leave Ireland to acquire the kitchen and business skills they needed to run a restaurant. Chef, TV personality, author and food writer Paul Flynn runs **The Tannery** restaurant with his wife Marie in Dunganen. He trained in London from 1983 to 1993 at a Michelin-starred restaurant. He says at that time London seemed a million miles away from Ireland; you had to make the trip by boat and it took a day to get there. According to Flynn, "Good food was not part of Irish culture."

Chef Cooney says that he left Ireland because he wanted to work with established chefs in upscale restaurants and hotels. At the time, the Irish economy was in poor shape and the opportunities to cook in five-star restaurants in Ireland did not exist for a young chef. He spent 15 years away working in England and Scotland with employers that included Four Seasons Hotels. Cooney was recruited back to Dublin as part of the Merrion's start-up team in 1997. He was skeptical, but the owners wanted an Irish chef.

The chefs interviewed for this article were bullish on the future of the Irish food industry. Cooney says that premium food exports will increase, and Ireland will become a real foodie destination. John McKenna, who has written travel guides about Ireland for 25 years, tells me that everything about the specialty food culture has gotten better every year. According to McKenna, "The Irish have moved from seeing food as fuel to viewing food as art, something that should be treasured and respected."

His sentiment is echoed by Michelin-starred chef J.P. McMahon, the co-owner of **Aniar Restaurant** in Galway.

"The food scene has dramatically changed from one that's essentially only for survival to a genuine appreciation of good food and the creative use of products," says McMahon.

Where years ago chefs would have had to backpack to countries to learn about cooking, spices and techniques, now they can do so in Ireland. The island has clearly come a long way along the food spectrum from subsistence conditions to a destination whose food alone is worth the trip. With its metaphorical ladder full of primary products, artisanal foods, food festivals, cooking schools and top-ranked restaurants, Ireland's culinary scene is now capturing the attention of foodie tourists.

Good Food Ireland - goodfoodireland.ie – is your guarantee of the best authentic Irish food experiences from more than 600 places to stay, eat, cook and shop around the Emerald Isle. Good Food Ireland is an all-Ireland food tourism proposition, that markets culinary tours and experiences across all 32 counties.

The following are located in the Republic of Ireland:

Aniar Restaurant and Boutique Cookery School - aniarrestaurant.ie – is a terror-based Michelin-starred restaurant located in Galway's West End.

Chapter One - chapteronerestaurant.com – is a Michelin-starred restaurant located in Dublin, with menu creations by chef Ross Lewis.

John and Sally McKenna's Guides - guides.ie – provide the best places to eat, shop and stay in Ireland.

Llewellyn's Orchard - llewellynsorchard.ie – a family run fruit orchard in Lusk, north of Dublin, that produces premium vinegars and juices from the fruit.

Milleens Cheese - milleenscheese.com – producers of specialty, washed-rind cheese on the Beara Peninsula.

The Tannery Cookery School & Town House - tannery.ie – was voted Ireland's Best Restaurant in 2013. It is located in Dunganen, County Waterford.

The Merrion Hotel - merrionhotel.com – is a five-star hotel property in the heart of Dublin. The restaurant, bar and food service are all in the responsibility of executive chef Ed Cooney. ★

Carolyn Kasser-Abbott writes gingeranddumplings.com, a travel blog for foodies, manages a digital magazine perfectprovidence.ca and has travel apps at edibleheritage.com. All images provided by Good Food Ireland.

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