

# FOOD

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WHEN IN RHÔNE  
MARTIN MORAN  
PICKS THE BEST  
WINES FROM  
THE REGION



EAMON WARD; BRYAN MEADE; ANDREW DOWNES

## More room at the inn for proper meals

Publicans are slowly starting to realise there is money to be made, and Michelin stars to be won, if they dramatically improve their food offering, says *Corinna Hardgrave*



**S**teak and chips. That's what Michelin Guide supremo Rebecca Burr ordered in the Wild Honey Inn in Lisdoonvarna, Co Clare, when she went to see if it really deserved to be the first pub in Ireland to win a Michelin star. Burr, who is the editor of the guide for the UK and Ireland, has the final say in where the coveted stars go.

"It wasn't your common-or-garden steak and chips – it was really good," she says.

"I thought, I'm having steak and chips because if we give this a star, people are going to come here and see it on the menu and think, 'OK, what's so different about the steak and chips at the Wild Honey Inn?' And I thought, actually there is a difference here. The quality, the finish, the extra flair Aidan [McGrath] puts on it to raise it to a different level, it is brilliant. He's a proper chef."

Burr arrives at restaurants unannounced. She is never photographed and there are no images of her on Google if

**McGrath said he was stunned by the Wild Honey Inn's Michelin success**

you search for one. McGrath only suspected he was getting a star when Burr rang him afterwards and invited him to the launch of the 2018 guide in London.

"She didn't say, 'You have a Michelin star', but she said, 'You know what that means?'" McGrath says. "And I said, 'I have a good idea'. She told me I couldn't say anything to anyone – it had to be kept under wraps. And when I got off the phone, I was here by myself punching the air. I was kind of stunned. You can't go jumping with joy."

"Aidan and [his partner] Kate Sweeney have put their hearts and souls and money into the place," Burr says. "We've always had an eye on them and certainly on Aidan's cooking, which has just got stronger. He takes a different slant on the menu, which

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# Sunday Food

works well. There's a classical foundation there with enough personality and a little bit of flair to lift the dishes. There is fantastic produce and really knowledgeable preparation, but there's nothing fidgety or unnecessary on the plate."

McGrath's cooking is clearly a cut above your typical pub grub. With dishes such as "royale" of pigeon, tartiflette with ham hock, duck and foie gras terrine, beetroot with smoked eel, and turbot with lobster velouté, the years McGrath spent cooking the classics in London restaurants including L'Escargot shine through.

He describes his style of cooking as "bistronomy", a highbred term popular in Paris where there has been a revolution in how bistro staples are being cooked. It makes the term gastropub sound decidedly dated.

Burr says: "In our guide we've got everything, from traditional inns to something a bit more contemporary. They all focus on the food, and I know in Ireland that's not always the mainstay in pubs in towns and villages. But I'm pleased with the emergence of the pubs in Ireland of late."

Wild Honey Inn aside, it is clear the food in our locals still has a long way to go before it becomes "the mainstay".

This year, just 30 pubs in the island of Ireland (including eight in Northern Ireland) merited a listing in the Michelin Eating Out in Pubs Guide, compared with 32 last year. Shockingly, there are just two listed in the capital, but the hope now is that McGrath's success will spur on other landlords to do better.

"This year I've really noticed a lot of pubs are looking to improve their food because they've seen the growth in drinks sales it brings," says Anthony O'Toole, a chef who works as a food and drinks consultant, and who has a number of pubs as clients.

"People are looking for good food in pubs. They want



to have good bar snacks, and they're willing to stay and spend more money if they have that variety there," O'Toole adds.

"The people running these pubs are good people, they're families, but they don't know what's happening in the food industry at the moment in Ireland or around the world. They're not eating out, they're not researching themselves and they don't know how to

compile a menu. They know how to cook but they're not thinking outside the box. Experience of recession has caused them to keep everything cheap and cheerful, and sadly it has all been guided by the sales reps of big supply companies at the moment."

One of the pubs O'Toole has consulted on is Kenny's in Lucan village. "The chefs there were willing to change. Any

**“I've noticed a lot of pubs are looking to improve their food because they've seen the growth in drinks sales it brings**

advice I gave they took on board and Danny [Kenny], the owner, says it has changed his business," says O'Toole.

"It improved food and drinks sales, and the chefs are not working as hard because the menu is narrower. He [Danny] was afraid that his customers wouldn't like it, particularly because we removed the carvery on a Sunday. So it's all cooked fresh, you order it on a menu

and it's not left in a bain-marie all day. They're using local produce like Burren smoked salmon and free-range chicken, and their local fishmonger, McAlister's, supplies the fish."

While switching the focus from what's on tap to what's on the plate has been something new for many long-established pubs, there are others, particularly in areas that are driven by tourism (such as Moran's on the Weir in Galway, Toddies at the Bulmank in Kinsale and Morrissey's in Doonbeg), which have been operating like that for years.

Despite its meagre representation in the Michelin Guide, Dublin has been making strides in the right direction with its food pubs, most notably with recent openings such as the Legal Eagle on Chancery Place, close to the Smithfield Market.

Owner Elaine Murphy was keen to combine the Victorian tradition of pubs that served workers, dockers and market porters with Irish food.

Influenced by Fergus Henderson's philosophy of nose-to-tail cooking in his St John restaurant in

## ON THE MENU: IRISH LISTINGS IN MICHELIN'S EATING OUT IN PUBS GUIDE

### CO ANTRIM

**Billy Andy's**, Mounthill (near Larne); [billyandys.com](http://billyandys.com)

### CO CLARE

**Morrissey's**, Doonbeg; [morriseysdoonbeg.ie](http://morriseysdoonbeg.ie)  
**Vaughan's Anchor Inn**, Liscannor; [vaughans.ie](http://vaughans.ie)  
**Wild Honey Inn**, Lisdoonvarna; [wildhoneyinn.com](http://wildhoneyinn.com)  
**Linnane's Bar**, New Quay; [linnanesbar.com](http://linnanesbar.com)

### CO CORK

**Poachers Inn**, Bandon; [poachersinnbandon.com](http://poachersinnbandon.com)

**Deasy's**, Clonakilty; [facebook.com/Deasys-Restaurant-126741324027491](http://facebook.com/Deasys-Restaurant-126741324027491)  
**Cronin's**, Crosshaven; [croninpub.com](http://croninpub.com)  
**Toddies at the Bulman**, Kinsale; [thebulman.ie](http://thebulman.ie)

### CO DOWN

**Balloo House**, Killinichy; [ballooinns.com/balloo-house](http://ballooinns.com/balloo-house)  
**Bull & Ram**, Ballynahinch; [bullandram.com](http://bullandram.com)  
**The Parson's Nose**, Hillsborough; [ballooinns.com/the-parsons-nose](http://ballooinns.com/the-parsons-nose)  
**Pheasant**, Annahilt; [ploughgroup.com/pheasant](http://ploughgroup.com/pheasant)

**Pier 36**, Donaghadee; [pier36.co.uk](http://pier36.co.uk)  
**Plough Inn**, Hillsborough; [ploughgroup.com/ploughinn](http://ploughgroup.com/ploughinn)  
**The Poacher's Pocket**, Comber; [ballooinns.com/the-poachers-pocket](http://ballooinns.com/the-poachers-pocket)

### DUBLIN

**The Old Spot**, Ballsbridge; [theoldspot.ie](http://theoldspot.ie)  
**The Chop House**, Ballsbridge; [thechophouse.ie](http://thechophouse.ie)

### CO GALWAY

**Moran's Oyster Cottage**, Kilcolgan; [moransoystercottage.com](http://moransoystercottage.com)

**O'Dowd's**, Roundstone; [odowdsseafoodbar.com](http://odowdsseafoodbar.com)

### CO KILDARE

**Hartes**, Kildare; [harteskildare.ie](http://harteskildare.ie)  
**The Ballymore Inn**, Ballymore Eustace; [ballymoreinn.com](http://ballymoreinn.com)  
**Fallon's**, Kilcullen; [fallons.ie](http://fallons.ie)

### CO LEITRIM

**The Oarsman**, Carrick-on-Shannon; [theoarsman.com](http://theoarsman.com)

### CO LOUTH

**Fitzpatrick's**, Jenkinstown; [fitzpatricks-restaurant.com](http://fitzpatricks-restaurant.com)

### CO MAYO

**The Tavern**, Murrisk; [tavernmurrisk.com](http://tavernmurrisk.com)  
**Sheebeen**, Westport; [croninssheebeen.com](http://croninssheebeen.com)

### CO SLIGO

**Hargadons**, Sligo Town; [hargadons.com](http://hargadons.com)

### CO TIPPERARY

**Larkins**, Garrykennedy; [larkins.ie](http://larkins.ie)

### CO WEXFORD

**Lobster Pot**, Carne; [lobsterpotwexford.com](http://lobsterpotwexford.com)



**Wild Honey Inn's steak and chips, far left, wowed the Michelin inspector; the Fisherman's Pub at Ballynahinch Castle, above, serves up 'super-quality ingredients but in a simple and robust setting', says Patrick O'Flaherty, left, general manager of the estate; centre left, the Legal Eagle on Chancery Place**

## SIDE ORDERS

### BUTCHER WHY NOT?

Ever fancied learning how to butcher a pheasant? Broughgammon Farm in Ballycastle, Co Antrim — purveyors of all things gamey and delicious and the patrons of the now legendary Goatober, the October goat meat festival — are offering courses in butchery and small bird

game butchery taking place in December, January and February. The day-long courses will give you the knife skills you have always envied and you'll bring home some of the meat or game at the end of the day. The small game course costs €63.90 and the butchery masterclass is €197. [broughgammon.com](http://broughgammon.com)



### WHEY IT WITH CHEESE

A few years ago we got all excited about the fact we could now get Irish-made mozzarella cheese. Well now we are going to get excited about how you can make it yourself at home. Gift website [splate.ie](http://splate.ie) is hoping its DIY mozzarella cheese making kit is going to be a big hit this Christmas. The kit is €14.95 and contains everything you need to make some tasty mozz —

apart from the buffalo. It includes a thermometer, rubber gloves, citric acid, vegetarian rennet tablets, sea salt and a slate plate on which to serve your creation. Each kit makes four batches and it is ready to eat in less than 90 mins. [splate.ie](http://splate.ie)



### TONICS FOR THE TROOPS

There's no more just asking for a plain old G&T anymore, is there? What kind of gin would you like? Irish? English? Any particular aromatics? Which of our 375 brands would you prefer? Well, now the tonic bit is getting complicated too — and not just in terms of small artisan producers either. Big

guns Schweppes has expanded its range of tonics to try and keep up with our ever-expanding taste buds. Now, in addition to the brand's classic tonic, you can get cucumber tonic water (recommended for dry, floral gins and fruity vodkas) and salty lemon tonic water (recommended for tequila).



Clerkenwell, east London, Murphy devised a menu with head chef Ian Connolly that includes offal and other robust ingredients.

"Offal is still a little bit of a foodie preserve in one way. However, when we were talking to our butchers, they told us about Kate McLoughlin in Ballyfermot who makes haslet — it's like a pork meatloaf," says Murphy.

"Kate told us that they [McLoughlins] sell lots of tongue and heart; it's an old working-class tradition that is still around, as well as being a

foodie thing. So on our menu we have bone marrow, tongue and heart croquettes. The bone marrow is served with oxtail and Gaelic escargot.

"We have a wood-burning oven to make our flatbreads. They're potato flatbreads, so glorified boxty with toppings that are right in that tradition, including bacon and cabbage and parsley sauce, haggis with pickle, turnip and potatoes, and a smoked haddock brandade."

While not all publicans will be as innovative in how they approach their menu, Burr

says there are a few key things to remember. "We tend to say, look after your business and make sure you've got a good livelihood because it's tough out there," she says.

"As well, I would say, go and visit the pubs that have Michelin stars. They're all a bit different actually and they're all really good. The Hand and Flowers [in Marlow, England] has two stars, so you could separate that from the rest and there is a difference. I would say, go and look at some of the starred pubs and hopefully you'll be pleasantly surprised that it's not so complicated. But there still is a lot of work involved there in all the dishes."

One of the country's most charming pubs, not listed in the Michelin Guide, is the Fisherman's Pub & Ranji Room which, despite being in Ballynahinch Castle, is very much part of the local community. "The idea of a pub is always very emotive," says Patrick O'Flaherty, the general manager of the estate.

"One person's idea of a pub can be very different from another's. But on a country estate in the west of Ireland, a pub should really be an inn

with good food, with staff who are nice and casual, and that's what we strive to achieve.

"Ideally the menu should be a blackboard. We do have some staple dishes that people like but it's on the blackboard where you can see what's going on — we don't need to overcomplicate things," O'Flaherty says.

"We're all about killing our own pigs if we can, getting that pork belly on the menu, and getting a nice rib-eye from Malone's in Clifden. We're getting into the game season now so we have a few terrines and more robust dishes like pot-roasted venison. They lend themselves to the open log fire, a nice bottle of wine and a decent pint with a dozen oysters before dinner — super-quality ingredients but in a simple and robust setting. That for me is what a gastropub is about. It's about simplicity but really properly cooked and with fresh ingredients.

"Sometimes there's an effort to try to be different and you end up creating things that people don't want. The trick is to give them what they want, but make sure it's right."

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**Bone marrow and snails from the Legal Eagle**