

# TheBigWeekend

## Saturday night at the Palladian

The team behind some of Dublin's hippest clubs and bars has turned its attention to something grander. The result is the first boutique country house hotel in Ireland

**T**he drawing room of Bellinter House has many classic Georgian features. There are wide, dark-stained timber floorboards, soaring floor-to-ceiling sash windows with panelled shutters, and deep cornices supporting a ceiling of elaborate ornamental plasterwork. But look at the furnishings of this fine 1750 Palladian-style hotel, 50km north of Dublin, and you could be forgiven for thinking that you've wandered into a funky urban bachelor pad. There are glass-and-chrome coffee tables, 1950s leather armchairs, and two paper-and-wire wall lights playfully shaped into antelope and bison trophy heads.

This mingling of traditional rural mansion and eclectic contemporary

styling is well established in Britain, at such "groovy grand" hotels as Cowley Manor in the Cotswolds, The Grove in Hertfordshire and Babington House in Somerset, but Bellinter is a departure for the Irish hotel market.

Pitched somewhere between the boutique bling of designer hangouts such as Dublin's Morrison and Galway's G Hotel, and the more genteel surroundings of country houses like Ballymaloe House in Co Cork and Castle Leslie in Co Monaghan, Bellinter has attracted much attention since it opened last December.

This is partly because the hotel is co-owned by one of the country's most successful businessmen, Jay Bourke. With partners Eoin Foyle and

John Reynolds, Bourke has opened a dozen or more clubs, bars and restaurants, mostly in Dublin, over the past 15 years, from the POD and Ri-Rá nightclubs to the budget Café Bar Deli restaurant chain and the Odessa private members' club.

"When we were in our twenties, we opened nightclubs; when we were in our thirties, we opened restaurants; and now we're in our forties it seems only right to open a hotel," says Bourke, 41.

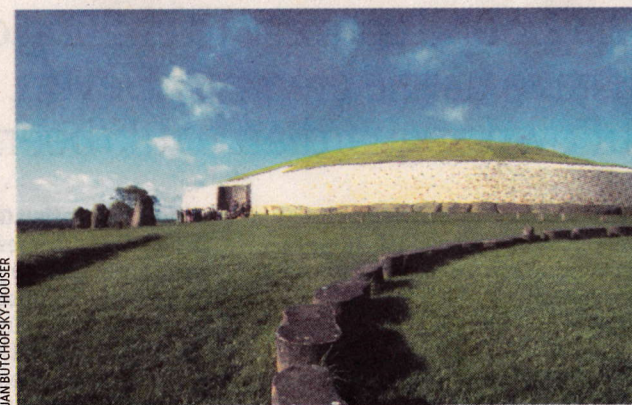
Bellinter is for fashionable city folk caught socially somewhere between the night club and the golf club; a country house hotel for the acid house generation. The three-year, £11m renovation and redevelopment of the house was overseen by one of Ireland's







JAN BUTCHESKY-HOUSER



**Hip house . . . Bellinter is aimed at ‘city folk caught socially between the night club and the golf club’. The passage graves at Newgrange (below left) are half an hour’s drive away**

wonderful mahogany and marble bar, the traditional vibe of which has been subverted by a specially commissioned mural by leading Irish artist David Godbold of an angel looking down on a fairy-tale mountain landscape.

The vaulted cellar restaurant, sister to Bourke’s Eden brasserie in Dublin, can feel a bit austere on sunny mornings and early evenings, although breakfasts and lunches are served on the back lawn, weather permitting. The sound of the space needs more care, too; the Gotan Project’s *La Revancha del Tango* CD, in itself a ubiquitous cliché, was played on a loop for all four meals we had in the restaurant.

Still, these are small quibbles in a new hotel that gets many more things right than wrong. Not only have Bourke and his team thoughtfully and intelligently restored a landmark Irish property, they have also captured a sense of a long history of hospitality. Bellinter seems somehow to embody the Irish gift for mixing people up and making them feel comfortable. As Bourke says: “Bellinter is a very happy, very egalitarian, and very Irish country house.”

● *Bellinter House* (00 353 46 903 0900, [bellinterhouse.com](http://bellinterhouse.com)) doubles €225-€380 B&B; midweek special of €250 per room including dinner; three-course dinner around €48pp excluding drinks and service. *Guardian* readers receive a 10% discount until September 1 by quoting *Guardian* reader offer.

**Philip Watson**

hippest architects and designers, Pierce Tynan, who has created a feel of what he calls “threadbare elegance”.

While the preserved buildings – a main house with projecting wings and connecting colonnades designed by the renowned architect Richard Castle, who created the Irish parliament building, Leinster House – have been meticulously restored, there is no excessive purity about the hotel.

One of the reception rooms is now a games room, complete with wall-mounted flat-screen television and blue-baized American pool table, and in the library there is an old oxblood leather Chesterfield armchair that has a front leg propped up by two blocks of wood. The guiding hand here is humorous, honest, slightly leftfield.

It’s an approach that extends to the 34 bedrooms, some of which are in former outbuildings. All have hi-tech

features such as multimedia, 40-inch LCD televisions, Bose sound systems, wireless internet access, and remote-control lighting. There are luxuries such as extra-large beds, Frette bed linen and goose feather pillows.

The country-urban feel is completed with bespoke Japanese-style wardrobes handmade in Irish ash, and cowhide rugs sourced from a local tannery.

There is the obligatory spa, but again with interesting twists; a range of modern treatments are available in the seven treatment rooms, but there are also traditional seaweed baths. Elsewhere, there is an indoor swimming pool with a sauna and steam room, an outdoor hot tub, and a heated infinity pool with fine views over the river Boyne.

Brown trout fishing is also available; Bellinter has rights to a three-mile stretch of river. One of Europe’s most

important and fascinating Neolithic monuments, the passage graves at Newgrange, older than the Pyramids, is around half an hour away by car.

Bellinter is very much a work in progress, with more facilities opening over the coming months. Past the two giant, 250-year-old beech trees on the front lawn, two more outbuildings are being converted into a cinema and children’s playhouse; the latter will have a miniature version of the nearby Hill of Tara, the mythical seat of the high kings of Celtic Ireland. Diarmuid

Gavin’s “pavilion pod”, a silver medal winner at last year’s Chelsea Flower Show, will also have a permanent home in the gardens by the end of the year.

Unfortunately, the unfinished nature of the project seems occasionally to extend to the service. The staff are young, friendly and very willing to help, but sometimes their inexperience shows. If you’re paying up to £260 for a room, you don’t expect the hotel barman to greet you with “yes, mate”. You are not in a Dublin boozer; you are in a