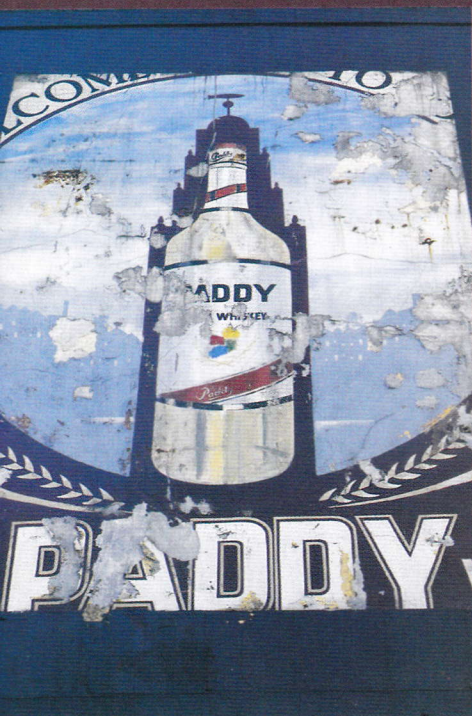
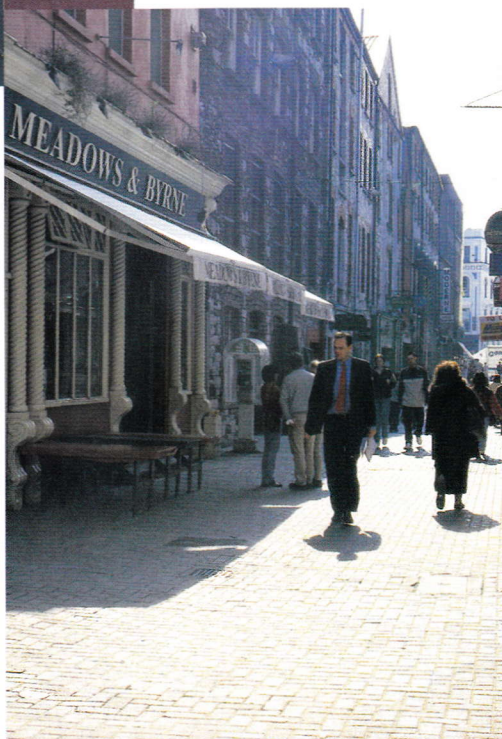


close up



THIS AND FACING PAGE: SCENES FROM CORK, A CITY OF HILLS AND WATER WITH A REPUTATION FOR LIVELY INDEPENDENT-MINDEDNESS



Photographs by **Angela Dukes**

Deep down, Cork's residents know that they live in 'de real capital' of Ireland. English ex-pat Philip Watson celebrates the revolutionary spirit and unexpected foodie delights of this year's European Capital of Culture

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on reflection

CORK

The Irish novelist John McGahern recently noted that Ireland has moved from the 19th to the 21st century in the space of ten short years – and nowhere more so than in Cork

When Rick Stein visited Cork for the BBC series *Food Heroes*, he was so impressed by the quality and diversity of the local produce in the city's English Market that he was moved to make a surprising assertion. 'This is probably the best food market of its kind in Britain and Ireland,' he enthused, 'and the equal of any you might find in Europe.'

While Ireland's second city is getting used to being placed firmly on the map – Cork is this year's European Capital of Culture – it's to be less expected, perhaps, that its culinary life should attract such enthusiastic approval. Think of traditional Irish food, outside Dublin at least, and you think of the ubiquitous lamb stew, the glutinous seafood chowder, and the regulation three types of potato with everything. You do not usually think of a fish counter so bounteous that it could put even the fishmongers at London's Bibendum or Selfridges to shame, row upon row of stalls selling world-class Irish cheeses, handmade breads and smoked meats, and top-quality restaurants that range from traditional French to inspiringly vegetarian to wilfully iconoclastic.

Yet Cork is changing, and it is changing fast. Even before the city had won its Capital of Culture status and set in train thousands of events to celebrate the fact, the city authorities had embarked upon an extensive £130 million civic improvement scheme that has radically transformed the look of this once-scruffy city. The main thoroughfare, St Patrick's Street (locals refer to it as simply 'Patrick Street' or even 'Pana'), for example, has been given a comprehensive makeover with smart new pavements and theatrical street lighting designed by Catalan architect Beth Gali. The effect on the feel and flow of pedestrians has been so marked that the *Irish Times* recently boasted that the street was becoming Cork's equivalent of Barcelona's great boulevard, the Ramblas.

Cork is shaking off its provincial prejudices and learning to be a European city, a place that looks out not in, a city that can be justly proud of its blossoming restaurant, nightlife and arts scenes. It can be proud too not just of its historic past, which stretches back 1,400 years, but of its increasingly cosmopolitan and welcoming modern character – as well as new Europeans speaking Russian, Latvian and Slovakian in the pubs, Cork now has Chinese food stores, African hairdressers and Nigerian cafés.

For all this, Corkonians remain steadfastly independent. Walk around the city and you'll soon spot someone wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan 'The People's Republic of Cork'. Most of the shirts sport the city's colours, red and white; some have pictures of Lenin, Che Guevara and the Irish Republican leader and County Cork hero Michael Collins; on others, the name of the self-proclaimed republic is written in Irish.

It's a playful, tongue-in-cheek declaration of autonomy, of course, yet it perfectly embodies the city's rebel spirit and non-conformist zeal. Cork's inhabitants have always stood in opposition to external rule (whether it be from London or Dublin), retained a healthy disregard for authority, and forged an identification with other radical national and historical causes (go to a Cork game of Irish football or hurling and you'll see Palestinian and Confederate flags dotted throughout the crowd).

There is a solid belief among its citizens that far from playing second fiddle to Dublin, Cork is, in fact, 'de real capital'. Cork has its own inimitable accent (a sort of modulating sing-song), language (Corkonians often add a friendly 'boy' to the end of sentences), and slang (most famously 'langer', which can mean fool, drunk or penis, depending on the context). It has its own stouts – this is decidedly Murphy's or Beamish, and not Guinness, country – and its very own Rebel lager. It is a city of bridges and hills – considerably smaller, perhaps, than the capital, but a proud, hard-working and free-thinking port nonetheless. In fact, Cork stands in relation to Dublin much as Glasgow does to Edinburgh, or Liverpool to Manchester.

The celebrated Irish novelist John McGahern recently noted that, in social, economic and political terms, the Republic of Ireland has progressed from the 19th to the 21st century in ten short years. Nowhere is that more obvious than in Cork, a warm, vital city of engaging people that has not only come of age but is also enjoying the most exciting and dynamic time of its entire, lengthy history. As it says on the many red-and-white flags that flutter provocatively around the city, 'Up the Rebels!'. Boy.□

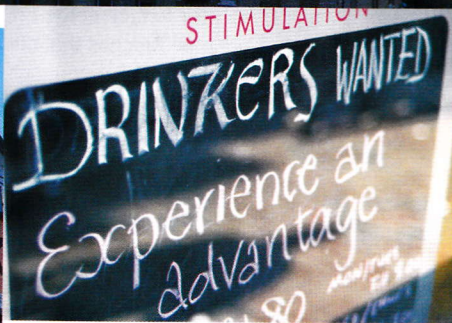
INFORMATION

Preface all Cork numbers with 00 253 21. Ireland's currency is the Euro.

GETTING THERE

There is a regular service to Cork from most British airports. Operators include Aer Lingus (0845 084 4444; aerlingus.com), Aer Arann (0800 587 2324; aerarann.ie), and BMIbaby (0870 264 2229; bmibaby.com). Prices vary but fares can regularly be found for under £5, excluding airport taxes. Flight time is around one-and-a-half hours.

Alternatively, there's a daily ferry service between Swansea and Cork (01792 456116; swansea-corkferries.com). The crossing takes ten hours, and costs around £40 return for a foot passenger, or £200–£300 return with a car.



TOP: CORK SEEN FROM ON HIGH; ABOVE AND LEFT: CORK MAY BE CHANGING, BUT ITS PEOPLE WILL STILL TAKE A DRINK
BELOW: CHILDREN AT PLAY IN KINSALE



WHERE TO DRINK

Bodega (46 Cornmarket Street; 427 2878).

Cork's best bar is housed in a converted warehouse, with whitewashed walls, tall mirrors, exposed roof beams and oversized light shades. DJs play in the evenings, there's a weekend club space called the White Rooms, and good bar food. Great for weekend brunches of Bloody Marys, big cooked Irish breakfasts, and eggs Benedict.

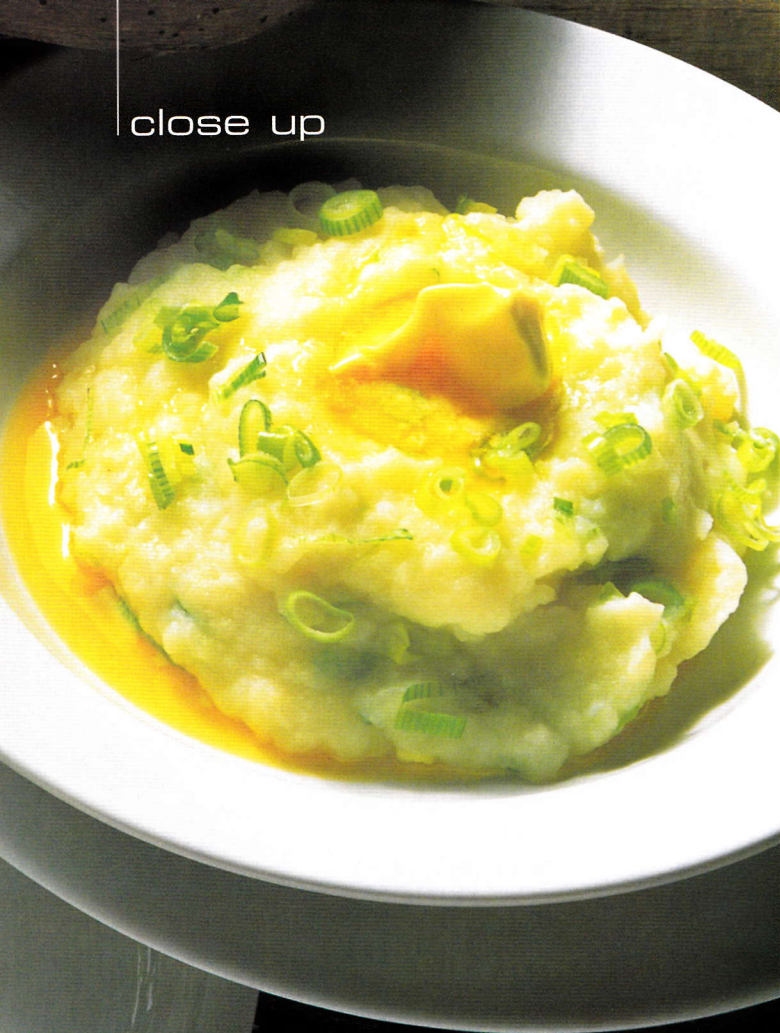
Sin E (8 Coburg Street, 450 2266). It's

pronounced 'shin ay', it means 'that's it', and it's the best place in town for traditional Irish music sessions, usually in the corner of the old, dark and atmospheric ground floor bar. Great selection of local brews (Rebel Red, Blarney Blonde), as well as German and Belgian beers. Next door is The Corner House, which also has live Irish music, as well as folk and blues nights.

The Castle Inn (99 South Main Street).

With its front snug, lino floor, nicotine-stained walls, Double Diamond light shades and friendly landlady Mary O'Donovan, this is like stepping into a splendid old pub in the Irish countryside – or a John B. Keane play. Unchanged for more than 50 years, it is the perfect antidote to the homogenous super-pubs that are taking over the city. Popular with locals, students and those in search of good conversation.

close up



CHAMP

Recipes start on page 117

(BELOW) VENISON WITH BACON AND IRISH WHISKEY CREAM



WHERE TO EAT

Unless otherwise stated, prices quoted are approximate, and per person for a three course dinner with a half-bottle of wine

ISAACS (48 MacCurtain Street, 450 3805). Fun and friendly brasserie in a converted Victorian warehouse with high ceilings, modern art and a lively atmosphere. Good value modern Irish and European dishes using local ingredients and tasty twists, plus lots of specials, homemade desserts and a good wine list. Around €50.

THE IVORY TOWER (Exchange Buildings, 35 Princes Street, 427 4665). Seamus O'Connell is perhaps Ireland's most original and innovative chef, and his small dining room on the first floor of an early Victorian commercial building is closer in feel to a private Cuban *paladar* than a formal restaurant. Flavours are also influenced by Latin America – jalapeños, salsa and *escabeche* (pickled vegetables) feature regularly on the daily-changing menu – yet dishes are equally inspired by Japanese and French cooking, and by the wild and organic produce of Ireland. A wonderful one-off. Set dinners €55 for five courses, plus wine and service.

CAFE PARADISO (16 Lancaster Quay, Western Road, 427 7939). Relaxed and colourful bistro that is not just Ireland's best vegetarian restaurant, but one of the country's most notable culinary experiences. Chef Denis Cotter's seasonal organic menus include imaginative and taste-provoking dishes (eg roast pumpkin stuffed with lemon-and-hazelnut risotto), often using fine Irish cheeses. Great service and good organic wines. Around €55.

FARMGATE CAFE (English Market, 427 8134). Located on a first-floor terrace in the English Market, the Farmgate serves superb-value lunches that often use ingredients sourced from the food stalls below. The menu includes tripe and onions with drisheen (a kind of black pudding), plus oysters, Irish stew, salads and open sandwiches. Best to sit on one of the stools that line the balcony and observe the market activity below. Around €38.

FLEMINGS (Silver Grange House, Tivoli, 482 1621). Classical French cuisine served in two period dining rooms in a Georgian house set in grounds three miles east of the city centre. Chef-patron Michael Fleming's menu features foie gras served with Timoleague black pudding, local produce such as loin of venison and seared scallops, and organically home-grown vegetables and herbs. Also has four spacious bedrooms (doubles from €110). Gets top billing for Cork in the Michelin Red Guide to Ireland. Around €68.

JACOBS ON THE MALL (30a South Mall, 425 1530; jacobsonthemall.com). Bold, modern Irish cooking presented in a large, double-height, glass-roofed 19th-century building that was once a Turkish bath. Menu includes such dishes as crab wontons, seared marinated squid, and poached natural smoked haddock with braised potatoes and leeks. Excellent service, and lots of contemporary Irish art on the walls. Around €58.

CRAWFORD GALLERY CAFE (Emmett place, 427 4415). Busy yet friendly café-bistro – run by Isaac Allen, son of Darina Allen, proprietor of the famous Ballymaloe Cookery School in East Cork – that is a popular spot for casual lunches. Good-value dishes change weekly and feature local ingredients and Ballymaloe breads. And, of course, take a trip round the gallery when you're finished. €36.

BOQUERIA (3 Bridge Street, 455 9049) Fine new addition to the Cork food scene that is a kind of Irish tapas bar. Housed in a former traditional-style pub, Boqueria serves Spanish snacks with a local twist – choose chick peas and black pudding with garlic and parsley, or the *charcuteria raciones*, which includes both chorizo and West Cork saucisson. Wine is served by the bottle or in 25cl carafes. €32.