

Edited Interview with Fred Gygax (FG) in Greystones (19/5/2005)

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (MM) Fred Gygax (FG)

Fred had written down much of his story in a copy book which he gave me so the interview was slightly different to the usual format. Below is an amalgamation of the notes and the transcribed interview.

1. Fred Gygax, the oldest of six children, was born in Greystones in 1929. His father Ernst Gygax (1897-1953) was Swiss and apprenticed as a chef in England, where he had relations in the trade, working in hotels in the seaside resorts, and on ocean liners prior to coming to Ireland in the 1920s. His first job in Ireland was as head chef in the Royal Hotel, Glendalough. In 1926 he spent some time as temporary roast cook in the Shelbourne Hotel. He later moved to the Grand Hotel in Greystones, which later became the LaTouche Hotel, where he met his wife, Rose Ward. In 1929 he was appointed head chef in the Savoy Restaurant in Dublin's O'Connell Street. The Rank Organisation, who also owned the Metropole and the Theatre Royal, owned the Savoy. He was a good friend with Charles (Carl) Oppermann, another Swiss national, who was head chef in the Gresham Hotel at the time. He mentioned to his son Fred that he once played in goal for the Gresham Football team.
2. Fred Gygax's father was an extremely quiet man who was fond of gambling on greyhounds. Ernst specialised as a sauce chef but as head chef in the Savoy he had to do everything. Fred grew up living on Griffith Avenue, near the Rise, and was schooled in O'Connell's schools and later in Rathmines School of Commerce. He was sports mad and wanted to be a professional golfer like his uncles, but his father wanted him to be a hotel manager. In Rathmines he studied typing, shorthand, accountancy and other general business subjects. In 1948 he started as an apprentice in the Metropole, which had been closed for renovations at the time. Michael Marley, from Belfast, was the head chef, Bill Ryan was *sous chef* and Fred started in the pastry house with a Swiss *patissier* named Mr. Senn who was very stern but went back to Switzerland after a year or so. His first job prior to the re-opening was to skin a large sack of almonds; it took him a whole week. His fingers had blistered. At 17 ½ he was older than the other apprentices but he as a quick learner and got on well with all his co-workers.
3. He moved around the different sections of the kitchen working for a while under Willie Opperman who was the larder chef. Tommy O'Mahony was the grill chef and Paddy Burtonshaw took over as *sous chef* when Bill Ryan moved down to Shannon. The restaurant manager was Mr. Boyle and the general manager for Ranks was Mr. Margey. During this time he played football with the Metropole who had a great team. They trained twice a week in Shelbourne Park in Ringsend and in 1949 they won the Hotel Cup, beating Jammet's in the final in Tolka Park. Both teams went out to the Sands Hotel in Portmarnock to celebrate and he remembers it being a hectic night.
4. In September 1949 he decided to go to Switzerland for three years to finish his apprenticeship. His relations got him a start in a small country bakery in *Windist Kit Aargau*, working 80-hour weeks with the owner Mr. Obrist. At first he found it difficult, not knowing the language (Swiss German) but he just got on with it. After six months he received a letter from the Swiss military, saying he had to do military service (he had a Swiss passport). At the barracks he failed a medical, having a broken ankle (from football) so instead of the full service he joined the Auxiliaries and was called out on some manoeuvres. During his sixteen months with Mr. Obrist, he had been attending the Bakery school in Baden. Early in 1951 he got a job in the *Hotel Elite, Hauptstrasse, Zurich* in the patisserie department. After a while he moved down to *Laussane* (French speaking) and worked in *Buffet de la Gare*. In Switzerland he sometimes met up with Ivan Waldmeyer whose father Fritz was pastry chef in the Shelbourne Hotel. In Lausanne he also met a young Swiss commis chef who would, years later employ him in Dublin in the Intercontinental Hotel.

5. He returned to Dublin in 1952 and spent six months looking for work without success. This was a combination of jobs being scarce at the time and the fact that his union membership had run out during his time in Switzerland. He had offered to keep up his dues whilst he was away but was reassured there would be a job for him on his return.
6. When this promise proved false he went to London on the famous 'Princess Maud'. Having walked around many top hotels and asking for work, without success because work was scarce, he went to an agency and through them he got a job at Lyon's Corner House in Soho. It was like working in a factory, one man could be making meringues all his life whilst another made éclairs. After a while he moved to a restaurant called 'the Wayfarers' near Marble Arch, where the confectionary was extra special, which was run by continentals. There was no English working there; he was considered Swiss. He later worked for an Italian group of cafés where his pastry boss was a Yugoslavian who had been with General Tito's partisans during the war. He didn't like London much and in 1953 he returned home. It had been his father's dream that they would both open a confectioners shop but he unfortunately died of Leukaemia. Paddy Burtonshaw replaced him as head chef in the Savoy.
7. An Irish lady had tracked him down in London and asked him to work for her in her cake shop in Rathgar, Dublin. She proved to be high on expectations and low on physical resources (only one oven in the shop). Having worked in a few small operations for a while, Johnny Opperman offered him a job in Dublin Airport as pastry chef. The airport at that time was riding a gastronomic wave. Mr. Flanagan was head chef but was replaced with Jimmy Flahive who had Jimmy Kilbride as *sous chef*. They catered for a lot of dress dances and corporate parties. Other chefs at the airport at the time included Jackie Hitchcock, Jackie Grant, Dessie Cuningham and Jimmy Doyle.
8. **MM:** What was the Savoy like at that time?
9. **FG:** The Savoy in those days (1929) was a very upmarket restaurant, silver service, waitress and waiter service, plus music - an orchestra, they had a band box where the orchestra changed, over the years every thing changes particularly with the war years. During the war years it was very difficult to keep everything going, no food, no fuel, well a certain amount of food, very little fruit, and they got through it somehow or other. He used timber to keep the ovens going, timber and anything they could get their hands on, wet turf (laugh).
10. **MM:** I believe the Phoenix Park was full of wet turf? (laugh)
11. **FG:** Absolutely, there were mountains of turf in the Phoenix Park and it all wet, they didn't even cover it, just left it in the open. It's unbelievable
12. **MM:** So it started off high class (the Savoy), quite upmarket with French Classical Cuisine and then it went down market a bit?
13. **FG:** It was upmarket with all that kind of thing when it opened but as the years went on it began to go down market, probably for the reason that the place was not making enough money. You see, you would get people come in and order tea and scones on a set table of silver and sit there all day over a cup of coffee, so that didn't pay off. So they had to change it, the whole idea.
14. **MM:** It was also a cinema, though?
15. **FG:** The Cinema was there right beside it, but Ranks owned the lot (the cinema and the restaurant) like they did in the Metropole and in the Royal, they owned them too. Mr. (Louis) Elliman was the chief man for the Ranks Organisation. Anyway they all answered to him.
16. **FG:** At the Metropole at the time the kitchen was up on top of the building, three or four stories high and everything went down by chute by lift, the orders would come up by chute and the kitchen clerk would take them off, read them out, and then wait for them. He'd be saying 'it's time

so and so went' and you'd hear 'ready chef', all this shouting going on, and then the food would go down. The cinema was there and the ballroom also. The band leader was Coughlan (he was a Saxophonist), I knew his brother Johnny Coughlan, that was 1948 at the re-opening.

17. There was a great atmosphere in the Metropole, Mr. Marley ran it very fairly, but like military, you had to be on time, you didn't necessarily have to go on time (laugh) but you had to be on time. You had most afternoons off, there would be someone there to mind the place until you got back alright around 5pm, that is where the football came in – (showing picture of the football team that won the hotel's cup from Jammet's in 1949) That's Mr. Margey, that's Mickey Mullen, that's Paddy Donaghy who was my pastry chef after Mr. Senn left – he was from northern Ireland and was a great little footballer, That's Franky Mahony, that's (his father) Tommy Mahony who worked in the Grill in the Metropole. The Grill was in the basement and he'd go down at 6pm until 12am as a grill chef. He'd bring down all his *mis en place* steaks, point steak, rump steak, fillet steaks and bring it down with him, and salmon steaks, all that stuff, mixed grills, that's what he'd do. (pointing to the photo) That's Mr. Boyle, he was a manager, Mr Margey was the chief bottlerasher, the head man, that's me, I didn't play that day, I was injured. That's your man Tommy White from the union, he was actually a waiter in the Metropole and was a shop steward and later worked as a union official with Mickey Mullen. There are a lot of names there that I can't remember.
18. **MM:** What's this other photograph?
19. **FG:** That was taken at the airport, that's the chef Flanagan that was head chef there before Jimmy Flahive, that's Dessie Cunningham, that's myself, and did you ever hear of May Devitt, she was a famous singer, but that was her son but Devitt was her maiden name, and that's Marcella Bracken, she was helper with me in the pastry department in the airport, I think that fellow's name is Jimmy Doyle, I'm not too sure. Someone said that's a terrible photo, look at the aprons they're filthy. (laugh)
20. **MM:** Was there much shouting or screaming in the kitchen in the Metropole?
21. **FG:** All kitchens had that at the time, you had to be heard over the din, it wasn't malicious, you had to shout, there was no other way. I never saw anything more though in any kitchen I worked in. I enjoyed working in all these places. It was great fun. Everybody seemed to enjoy their work, the camaraderie and all, a bit of a laugh, you helped one another out a lot, no pulling back. No such thing as 'the union wouldn't let me do this or that', it had to be that way, and when people went on holidays, you covered for them, that was it. There was no thing like saying 'that's not my job', there were people depending on you to get the stuff out, that is the way it was. You see people moaning in other industries that certain things is not their job, it doesn't work like that in hotels, as you know!!!
22. **MM:** Were there any women working in the kitchen?
23. **FG:** Not as chefs, they were doing the sandwiches and coffees and there was plenty of waitresses, when I was in the Savoy, there were no waiters, it was all waitresses. Female chefs were strangers; they were to come in future years. I suppose Cathal Brugha Street started that of, when the girls came in to Cathal Brugha Street and they started learning to be chefs, but then they were called cooks, we had cooks, we never had chefs. I suppose they were cooks until they were called chefs, there is a lot of lady chefs around everywhere now. I suppose you could say the kitchen was fairly rough and tumble, carrying heavy weights, carrying heavy pots, it was a physically rough business. I don't know what happens today if they have to carry a big pot, whether they get somebody to do it for them.
24. **MM:** When was the first time you ate out in a restaurant?

25. **FG:** First time I ate out was when I was at Punchestown races with my father in 1947, my mother, my father and myself came back into town and went to the Red Bank in D'Olier Street. At the time, the Red Bank had a good name for food, but at that time there was nothing exotic about the food in any of the restaurants, it was just after the war and the stuff wasn't there for any of what is happening in any of the upmarket restaurants today. The way it was cooked was important and the service. It was simple enough food, but presentation, time, and I suppose the ambience of the place was important and the Red Bank had that.
26. **MM:** Would you have ever eaten in Jammet's or the Dolphin?
27. **FG:** No, they were hotels, The Dolphin was used by the racing people, usually to eat in these places, you stay there, the racing people used to go there. After a while the racing people, the Prendergasts and the O'Briens used to come the Intercontinental Hotel – the New Jury's at the time – to eat, they had a special place called the Martello Room which was the highest point in the hotel and all the racing people used to come there after the races for a big celebration. Certain hotels and restaurants were where people used to meet after the races, I think the Red Bank was one of them but I was very young, only seventeen, I wouldn't have been eating there, I had no money. In the Metropole I was earning thirteen (shillings) and fourpence a week (laugh).
28. The Capital had a restaurant, the Carlton Grill was famous but they were all the same, grilled food, quick, in and out. The Green Rooster was famous because it opened late. It and the Paradiso on Westmoreland Street opened late. People would go there after the cinema, after the races, after the dogs, people would have been out entertaining and they wanted to start eating at eight or nine o'clock at night and they would still be there until after midnight.
29. **MM:** There were a lot of Milk Bars around at that time? What was available in a Milk Bar?
30. **FG:** I used to go to one in North Frederick Street called Fred's Milk Bar. You would go into a Milk Bar like that and it was sixpence for a glass of milk, a big pint glass, and there was a lot of straight forward simple confectionary like snow cakes and rock buns. And you would get your rock bun and glass of milk for a shilling after having a dance somewhere in Parnell Square or these places, and then you would cycle home, It was just simple food, milk and cakes and maybe a few sandwiches. We were simple people at that time, we didn't know much.
31. **MM:** Did the Monument Creamery have a Milk Bar?
32. **FG:** No, they had a café, and also the Kylemore had a café. The Monument was on North Earl Street. The Broadway Soda Fountain was called a soda fountain but it was actually a café, it was very famous at that time, well known all over the whole country, people would come to Dublin and meet up at the Broadway, again simple stuff, tea, cakes and sandwiches. (**note:** The Broadway was run by an Italian Geraldo Boni) There was also Clery's, which had a restaurant which did good business, it was sit down on the first floor.
33. **MM:** Was the Russell open at this stage?
34. **FG:** Oh, yeah the Russell was open, they had a good football team, I don't know much about the Russell except that it was a very upmarket hotel, and people used to go to The Russell, The Hibernian, that kind of hotel. The chefs in the Hibernian and the Russell generally speaking were foreign chefs, a lot of them. There wasn't that many Irish chefs there at the time but the Irish chefs took to the business very well. A lot of them went abroad to learn more, as you know, they are still doing it.
35. At that time jobs were scarce, and no matter what kind of apprenticeship you wanted in anything, you had to be lucky to get into it. Be it printing, carpentry, painting, you had to have a connection to get into anything, and you did your three to five year apprenticeship practically working for nothing in those days, just happy to be doing something and learning something. In those days,

people in clothing shops had to pay a fee to be there, had to pay a certain amount of money up front just to be taken in. (laugh) I presume I got into the Metropole since my father was in the Savoy, because in those days it was very hard to get in anywhere.

36. **MM:** How many working in the Savoy at the time?
37. **FG:** I can only talk for when I was there. We had fourteen in the kitchen between the chefs and commis. We used to cook for 120-200 people.
38. **FG:** Mickey Mullen said 'sorry Fred, it is not in our hands at the moment, it is in the hands of the chefs committee and they look after the jobs for the catering industry'. I think I was offered a job here or there but I had to forget about it, go through the union, the chefs committee held the power. The chefs committee were representatives of the different hotels, but I'm not sure how they were picked, I never met the chefs' committee even to talk them about it. I put my application in but nothing was forthcoming, eventually when I got a job in Ireland having spent two years in London.
39. **FG:** After Bill Ryan left to go to Shannon, Paddy Burtonshaw took his place as sous chef in the Metropole. Paddy was from Dublin, lived in Whitehall, he then took over as the head chef in the Savoy in 1953 when my father died. And he was still there years and years later when I went back to the Savoy.
40. **MM:** When you went to Dublin Airport, did you concentrate totally on confectionary?
41. **FG:** That's interesting; in the airport we had to do the confectionary, sweets, and also did a lot of the confectionary for the planes which went through the flight kitchen. Jackie Grant was in charge of the flight kitchen, but I also had to prepare things like Beef Wellington, I'd put the pastry around it and decorate the pastry, things like cheese straws, anything of a pastry nature, any *mis en place*, things like *fleurons*. It was rough heavy work to get all this stuff moving, you know, and I was in the airport when the Transatlantic flights, and we got orders to give the fresh rolls for the flights, and that was grand until I had a little *tête à tête* with Mr. Opperman at the time. He said 'we have to have rolls every day' for this flight and I said I only have so many staff, and he said get them in on a Sunday and I asked the crew if they would and they said 'no way', so I told him and he said 'sack them', and I said 'I tell you what, I'll give you a weeks notice and you sack them' (laugh).
42. **MM:** That was the end of you.(laugh) How long had you been there?
43. **FG:** Around two or three years, but I wanted to work there forever, I didn't want to leave, but it was very difficult.
44. **MM:** Did Bill Ryan take over from you?
45. **FG:** No, I left and I was no sooner gone and within a week an Austrian guy was in my place, I feel Johnny Opperman was under pressure to get me out of there, he was a friend of mine, still is, but I think he was under pressure to get this Austrian to get this fellow in, whether that is true or not. Any way things soured between us. The Austrian fellow only lasted six months and the same thing happened to me also happened to the next Irish fellow who took over and the next thing they shut down the confectionary department and they started buying the stuff in. (laugh) It was cheaper for them to outsource.
46. That's what I should have done instead of opening up the shop, I could have gone into outsourcing.

47. **MM:** Was that the next thing you did, open the shop? You had been in the Metropole, then off to Switzerland, then back to Ireland and no work so off to London, then back to Ireland and a few little jobs before the airport and then to the Savoy?
48. **FG:** Yeah, I went to the Savoy, I got a job from Mr. Margey. I met Mr Margey and asked him if there was any chance of a job. 'By God', says he, 'how did you know there was one going here?' 'I didn't' says I. I was married with a couple of children at this stage and I knew I wanted to open my own place but my own place was delayed through a building strike by two years. I was in the Savoy around five years, I came back one day after holidays to get something out of my locker and Paddy Burtonshaw said to me 'sorry Fred, but your job is gone', and I said 'what, it can't be gone like that', he said 'yeah, we can't afford you'. We were supplying the Metropole as well as our own place with confectionary. Now when Mr. Margey gave me the job, he said 'I have an idea, I want to introduce a thing called a king size cake, a large cake that's bigger than the normal cake so that a person can have one large cake with a cup of tea or coffee – a large individual éclair, a large *mille feuille* slice and they're to cost one shilling', so I got to work on that. You know the confectionary they sell everywhere now, well that was the start of it. There was never king size cakes anywhere prior to that, everybody seem to take it up, it snowballed after that, in Bewleys and everywhere. Kevin Duffy was working with me and he had to carry them over the Metropole in boxes or trays on his head (laugh).
49. So they couldn't afford me and I said 'Ok', I didn't go to the union or anything and I was wandering where to go, so I went to Kevin Duffy who had been abroad in India and been abroad in Switzerland and had come back and got a job as assistant confectioner in the new Jury's or The Intercontinental. Whoever the confectioner who was there had left and I went to Kevin and said any chance of a job in this new place and Kevin had worked with me in the Savoy as an apprentice. 'Why don't you see the chef', says Kevin, 'there is somebody missing here', so I went to see the chef (laugh). 'So you are looking for a job' said the Swiss chef, 'yes chef', says I, he looks at me and says 'you don't know me?', and I said 'no chef'. 'I think you do, do you remember in Lausanne and we were friends and we were in the *plage* (swimming pool) and we were boxing and you punched me on my nose and there was blood all over my body, do you remember that?', and I said 'Jesus, is that you?'
50. **MM:** This was Freddy Goldinger? That's hilarious.
51. **FG:** We had a good laugh over that and he said 'I suppose you want a job after all that?' and I said 'yes chef' (laughter) Good God, this is donkeys years later and here was the same Freddy Goldinger who was an apprentice himself at the time and he wasn't even an apprentice in the same place that I was working, I had just met up with him. We were only fool acting with the boxing gloves but it looked terrible in his bathing togs, it looked as if I had hit him with a hatchet or something (laugh). So I got the job there until I left to go to the shop in Raheny.
52. **MM:** It just goes to show you how small the world is.
53. **FG:** I met Bill Ryan when I was over in London, in the Soho, he was going up the steps of the new Lyons Corner House and we were talking about old times and when a fellow told us we were blocking up the stairs, so we parted ways (laugh).
54. **MM:** Tell me about Bill, this is Bill Ryan that went down to Shannon airport, he would have been older than you?
55. **FG:** When you met Bill first, you would think he was Italian, a foreigner because he trained with all these foreigners in the Royal Hibernian, he did his apprenticeship there as far as I know, and he spoke French and he was a great guy, he got into it in a big way. He was very big man, very much in command, so Marley and him could not have got on, he was there as second chef in the Metropole for a short time. But Bill and I used to go greyhound racing up in Santry near the

Swiss Cottage in the fields, before this industrial estate was built, and this flapper meeting was going on, where the hare was been pulled around the field on a pulley.

56. I wanted to tell you about Croke Park. Croke Park was a big day for us in the Savoy when there were finals or semi-finals on.

Fred Gygax ran a Confectionary shop in Raheny for years before retiring to Greystones, Co. Wicklow.

End of Tape, End of Interview