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## How Irish Food Criticism Reflected and Helped Shape a Changing Nation, 1988-2008

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## How Irish food criticism reflected and helped shape a changing nation, 1988–2008

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### ABSTRACT

The perception and practice of eating out are linked to larger socioeconomic patterns. Newspaper restaurant reviews provide evidence of these trends which can be traced along a specific timeline. The early 1980s in Ireland were a difficult time for restaurants due to high taxes on food, a national recession and a lack of positive restaurant reviews. The economic upturn in the following decade contributed to unprecedented developments in the restaurant industry. Dining out became a regular activity – fuelled in part by restaurant criticism by Irish food journalists, which joined pre-existing theatre, music and book reviews as regular features in national newspapers. The restaurant scene was burgeoning as Irish society experienced a new self-confidence bolstered by the growing economy. Data from restaurant reviews published from 1988–2008 in three national newspapers reveals the Dublin-centric middle-class nature of dining reflected in critics' reviews, alongside changes in Irish society.

### KEYWORDS

Restaurant reviews; food criticism; Irish restaurants; food culture; economy

## Introduction

Restaurant criticism can be regarded as both food writing and as a form of specialist journalism, providing informed guidance for the dining public while also serving as a useful lens for observing food and culinary trends within society. Restaurant reviews are a conduit between the restaurant scene and the relationship between food, culture, and identity<sup>1</sup> – 'a space within which the boundaries of metropolitan and good taste are policed and conveyed to others'.<sup>2</sup>

This critical ethnographic analysis of the history of dining out in Ireland from 1988–2008, as reflected in newspaper-based food journalism, provides a framework demonstrating the effectiveness of these sources to trace changes over a twenty-year period, and for comparative study. Today, Irish consumers have multiple options in terms of cuisines, restaurant styles, and price range, but this was not always the case. The cosmopolitan, multicultural restaurant scene is relatively new, as is the frequency with which Irish people dine out. The early 1980s were a difficult time for restaurants due to high taxes on food, a national recession and a lack of positive restaurant reviews.

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However, by the late 1980s it was apparent to newspaper editors that there existed a public desire for food criticism, and over the following decade, restaurant reviews gradually found a regular home, fitting comfortably alongside theatre and book reviews in national newspapers.

During the period of economic growth referred to as the Celtic Tiger (1994–2008), dining out ceased to be reserved only for special occasions and became a regular activity – encouraged in part by reviews, food writing and restaurant criticism. Restaurant options soared and the country became heavily invested in and obsessed with food.<sup>3</sup> In food terms, the restaurant scene was burgeoning, while society generally was experiencing a new self-assurance bolstered by the growing economy. The chosen time frame for the study is significant as it is flanked on either side by two economic recessions. By evaluating data generated from weekly restaurant reviews published in three newspapers, *The Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Tribune*, bolstered by interviews with critics from each of the newspapers and a magazine editor, this paper argues that critics' reviews reflected and shaped changes in Irish society.

The significance of restaurant criticism and how it shapes our thinking on food, chefs and restaurants, has been highlighted in Davis' doctoral research on restaurant reviews in New York City.<sup>4</sup> Vincent's in-depth study of restaurant criticism in Australia reveals that the field contributes to our understanding of what is regarded as good taste.<sup>5</sup> In the Irish context, food representations in women's magazines have been explored,<sup>6</sup> although a gap remains regarding restaurant reviews, criticism, and food content from Irish newspapers – where the bulk of such writing ended up. McCombs, writing during the timeline of this study, suggests that print media remained an important social driver.<sup>7</sup> However, few studies focus on food content and its evolution in the printed mass media.<sup>8</sup> The period from 1988 to 2008 presents an intriguing temporal cross-section for analysis due to the shifting nature of the restaurant scene in Ireland.

### Scope of this study

The 1980s saw restaurant criticism appearing more regularly in Irish newspapers and Mac Con Iomaire notes the sharp growth from 1985 onwards in column inches dedicated to food in this popular format.<sup>9</sup> In choosing to examine newspaper restaurant criticism over any other form of food writing, this research also highlights the severe competition print media faces from digital media.

To put this in context, using circulation figures for three Irish newspapers, in the period under review, the sharp drop in sales is evident. The *European Newspaper Publishers Association* found that newspaper readership in Ireland did not change dramatically between 1988 and 1994.<sup>10</sup> The *2004/2005 European Social Survey* of newspaper reading found that Irish people spent more time than any other nation in Europe reading newspapers.<sup>11</sup> In 1990, the daily July to September circulation figure for the *Irish Independent* was 151,927; *The Irish Times*' circulation was 94,058; and the *Sunday Tribune* was 101,660.<sup>12</sup> By December 2018, daily circulation figures had almost halved – *Irish Independent* (83,000), *The Irish Times* (58,131).<sup>13</sup>

The Ireland of the late 1980s was a markedly different country to that of 2008, both aesthetically and socially. During the early 1980s the country was in a deep recession but was showing signs of recovery by 1987 following the election of the 25th Dáil.<sup>14</sup> Although

national debt was high and spending cuts were widespread and severe, construction began in 1988 on the newly established International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in Dublin's Docklands, a key driver in invigorating the economy. Significantly, the city also designated that year to celebrate its millennium. The 1990s saw more dramatic social and cultural change. The Republic of Ireland's football team performed well at the Italia '90 World Cup, lifting the spirit nationally. In 1994 the Provisional IRA declared a permanent ceasefire in Ireland and Britain. The following November (1995), a referendum in Ireland narrowly voted in favour of changing the constitution on divorce. In April of 1998, after a decade of talks, the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement was signed, putting an end to the ambiguously titled 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Ireland was on the up, the mood across the country was positive and more people were spending, holidaying abroad, gaining new experiences, and developing a taste for new food experiences.<sup>15</sup>

### The Irish economy and restaurant scene 1988-2008

Ireland suffered a severe recession in the 1980s with economic stagnation marked by emigration, high unemployment, and significant public debt.<sup>16</sup> By the end of that decade, aspiring young chefs and waiters were still leaving for better work prospects in Britain and the US.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to previous generations, many young people were better educated<sup>18</sup> having profited from the increase in tertiary level education and vocational training.<sup>19</sup> However, in Ireland, the social infrastructures and work specifications did not yet align with their qualifications and specializations.<sup>20</sup> Domestic job creation rose steadily but a few years would pass before it would be on par. Diarmaid Ferriter highlights the fact that 513,000 jobs were created in Ireland between 1986 and 2000.<sup>21</sup> During this renewal, the young chefs and waiters who had gained experience abroad were returning<sup>22</sup> to an 'increasingly open country, heavily influenced by European and American culture, society and economics'<sup>23</sup> and contributing to the change themselves. The country was becoming more cosmopolitan – not least in its food and restaurant scene.

While good restaurants did exist in 1980s Ireland, there were very few Michelin stars awarded.<sup>24</sup> It was a difficult time for restaurateurs due to prevailing economic conditions, including the abolition of tax relief on business entertainment and a 25% VAT rate on meals.<sup>25</sup> As a result, few people ate out. A feature article about food and dining,<sup>26</sup> rare in itself in this period, responded to Ireland being dropped from the annual UK publication *The Good Food Guide*.<sup>27</sup> Marilyn Bright explained that the guide had described the Irish restaurant scene as deplorable on the grounds that the public were passively accepting of bad food, poor service and exorbitant prices. Bright had interviewed various restaurateurs for her feature, including Patrick Guilbaud and Colin O'Daly, both of whom noted the crippling VAT rate as the primary driver of high restaurant prices.<sup>28</sup> Somewhat understandably given the economic climate, the primary focus of Bright's feature was on the economics of dining, rather than on the food and the experience itself.

1986 heralded a new epoch for the Irish restaurant industry. On 1 July 1986, VAT was reduced from 25% to 10%. By November of the same year, the Restaurant Association of Ireland reported that the vast majority of its 300-members' restaurants had implemented the 15% reduction, a significant development for the Irish restaurant industry.<sup>29</sup> In October 1986, Irish restaurants were included once again in *The Good Food Guide*. Along with the 1986 VAT reduction, Deleuze highlighted the 1988 Intoxicating Liquor

Act as also being significant<sup>30</sup>; for the first time in the history of the State, this Act set out a procedure for the full licensing of restaurants whereby ‘good quality’ restaurants could obtain a full liquor licence for an annual payment of £3,000.<sup>31</sup>

The gradual national economic recovery from 1987 onwards<sup>32</sup> reverberated throughout the restaurant scene. Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud was awarded a Michelin star in 1989, the first Dublin star since the closure of the Russell Hotel in 1974.<sup>33</sup> A new breed of chef/restaurateur began to appear in the city such as Kevin Thornton, who opened The Wine Epergne in Rathmines and Alan O’Reilly, who opened Clarets in Blackrock. This coincided with the opening of Dublin’s first Japanese, Malaysian and Thai restaurants.<sup>34</sup>

Deleuze<sup>35</sup> noted that, predictably, as the economy strengthened, the number and variety of restaurants consequently soared. It would be remiss to suggest that everyone in Ireland was on board. A letter to *The Irish Times* in 1996, complained about John McKenna’s ‘foodie’ column, which listed the ingredients for a recipe as available in Chinese grocery stores. The author wrote, ‘I am fairly certain that there are no such purveyors of exotica in Galway, and I suspect that they’re difficult to find even in cosmopolitan Dublin’, concluding that a recipe with such ingredients ‘smacks of an elitism which I find genuinely uncomfortable’.<sup>36</sup>

Mac Con Iomaire identifies 1994 to 2008 as the era of the rebirth of haute cuisine in Dublin, with chefs such as Johnny Cooke returning to Ireland, having worked in the United States and bringing with him new Californian-inspired food ideas, such as Caesar Salad, sundried tomato bread and tapenade<sup>37</sup> – there was ‘growth in the number of restaurants, and an improvement in the quality of cooking, as well as an increase in the general awareness and knowledge of the average Irish person about food and dining’.<sup>38</sup> Critic Paolo Tullio, food critic and acclaimed chef, writing in 1997, presented his overview of the developments that had taken place:

When I first started eating in Dublin restaurants in the late sixties, menus had a uniformity: you could always find prawn cocktail, steak Diane and crêpes Suzette. All wine lists contained Barsac and Graves and not much else. Good restaurants like Jammet’s tried for a French feel, others simply offered steak and chips. How times change. Gastronomically Ireland is hardly recognisable from those dull, unimaginative days. There is now an eclectic streak running through our restaurants where Italian, French and Tex-Mex dishes frequently sit side by side on the menus.<sup>39</sup>

## Irish food journalism

While food continues to gain strength as an area of academic research in Ireland, similar consideration of Irish newspapers and media<sup>40</sup> has tended to focus on issues such as ownership, controversies, and the major stories. It was only in the second part of the twentieth century that a five-day week became the norm and the idea of the weekend took root in Ireland.<sup>41</sup> This was an important development for newspapers who published on Saturday and Sunday, with the latter especially becoming more conscious of leisure-based features such as travel and wine.<sup>42</sup>

Mac Con Iomaire points out that from the 1980s onwards restaurant reviews became regular features of daily or Sunday newspapers, whereas restaurants were previously

mentioned in the context of gossip columns or social diaries.<sup>43</sup> This was a seminal moment for elevating the status of food and dining while giving the public a roadmap to experiment confidently in the nation's growing number of restaurants. The establishment of the Irish Food Writers Guild in 1990 further pooled the knowledge, standards, and expertise of food writers at the time.<sup>44</sup> Dining out became increasingly normalized<sup>45</sup> but as the re-birth of gastronomic dining unfolded and knowledge about food and dining grew, Irish people needed help navigating this exciting new landscape.<sup>46</sup>

With changes in editorial policy and technological developments in newspaper printing, it became increasingly possible to include more food coverage. In 1986 *The Irish Times*' new colour press allowed the paper to have colour editorials and colour advertising; in addition, the number of pages within the newspaper increased.<sup>47</sup> The new press facilitated the introduction of specialist sections including *The Weekend* supplement on Saturdays, which featured recipes by Theodora Fitzgibbon, alongside fashion and gardening.<sup>48</sup> Conor Brady, the then new editor of *The Irish Times*, was responsible for the paper's shift towards increased specialist reporting, including the areas of media, food, and entertainment.<sup>49</sup> During this period, the *Irish Independent* carried its *Weekender* section on Saturdays, where the food components included restaurant reviews and a wine column. The *Sunday Tribune* differed from the other two newspapers in that it was a weekly (not a daily) paper and had incorporated a magazine since its initial launch in 1980.

Prior to the late 1990s, restaurant reviews were frequent but not always a consistent element of the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times*. For example, there is little evidence of restaurant reviews in the *Irish Independent's Weekender* section from 1991 to 1997; it did, however, run features about food.<sup>50</sup> From March 1995 to October 1997, the *Irish Independent* published a weekly supplement called 'Dubliners', which was exclusive to the Dublin area and regularly carried a feature called 'Take me to your Chef'.<sup>51</sup> In this, journalist Myles McWeeney interviewed Irish chefs and featured recipes. Similarly, during much of the mid-to-late 1990s, *The Irish Times* ran restaurant reviews, but food-related coverage often took the form of news snippets in the *Megabites* section on Saturdays, initially written by both John McKenna and Sandy O'Byrne, and subsequently only by McKenna. Examples of restaurant coverage included a round-up of the best places to eat *al fresco* in Dublin<sup>52</sup> and a feature about Roly's Bistro with quotes from chef/proprietor Colin O'Daly, but which again could be regarded as a profile more than a review.<sup>53</sup> The *Sunday Tribune's* reviews had been a regular feature in its magazine and Helen Lucy Burke's influential review (Figure 1) of The Park Restaurant in Blackrock was testament to the growing importance of restaurant criticism in Ireland at that time. Colin O'Daly credits this review as being transformational for his newly opened restaurant.<sup>54</sup>

It was with the launch of the Saturday magazines of the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times* that their restaurant reviews found a permanent home. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, 1997, the *Irish Independent* launched *Weekend*, a full-colour 64-page magazine.<sup>55</sup> Horgan notes that while it was advertised as a free supplement, the cover price of the newspaper increased by 5 pence to cover higher printing costs.<sup>56</sup> *The Irish Times Magazine* launched three years later in October 2000, in what was perceived to be a move to boost its circulation figures.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, restaurant reviews appeared every week from 2000 in both the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times* weekend magazines.

## Helen Lucy Burke laps up the memory of the Sea Urchin Sauce at the Park, Blackrock.

SEA URCHINS are little circular black brutes, with sharp spines, who hide in pools waiting for swimmers to stand on them. They look like miniature versions of the mines used to destroy shipping in the first world war. Hark to Colin O'Daly telling how he prepared them for the Sea Urchin Sauce that accompanied my Seafood Cocktail:

"Eight out of ten of them are empty when you open them, so there's a lot of wastage. I empty the full ones into a pan, and reduce the liquor down with white wine and some fish-stock. Then some cream — not too much. You try all along to keep the sea urchin's flavour." His eyes closed as he indulged in a vision of sea-urchins filled with aromatic juice. We might have been listening to Rembrandt describing how he painted 'The Night Watch'.

The artistic temperament can express itself in many forms, but a dedication to innovation and a compulsion to perfection are a part of it. Colin O'Daly is an artist who works in food. To call his creation 'Seafood Cocktail' may have been Colin's little joke, for the name conjures up memories of wedding-receptions, and the fake prawn cocktail with the bottled Marie Rose sauce. The Park Restaurant's version included sea trout, sole, John Dory, mussels, the sweetest crab claws I have ever tasted, one scallop and the

divine sea urchin sauce. The little salad of frisé lettuce formed part of the dish, and not just a decorative frill.

My guest's dish — a hot Cassolet of Seafood — consisted of shellfish in a lime butter sauce, and she got on a side-plate a whole sea-urchin in all its spiky majesty. We had to instruct her how to eat it: 'snippet of bread dipped into the central cavity and swished around is the easiest way.'

Dinner at the Park is table d'hôte only, and costs £21.50 for eating, according to the printed menu, or £25.50 for 'Tonight's Specials', which are written on a blackboard and wheeled around to the tables. The food has been (of course!) influenced by *nouvelle cuisine*, but not in the pernicious style of starving a customer in the interests of having a pretty arranged plate. In fact the five courses, and coffee, and petits appetites.

We moved on to the soups. Two were listed: Cream of Watercress (meat from the blackboard menu) and Oxtail Soup (guests). 'I love oxtail,' she said happily, thinking of the meaty lump in your average family version, with connecting bones spat out *en famille* into the hollow of the hand. What she got was the soul of an ox's tail, rendered down. An ethereal broth with a julienne of vegetables, rendered sublime with a hefty dollop of Malmsey,

Collin's method with it was this: 'I half-roast the goose, then rest it in the cooling cabinet. This is important to let the sinews relax, and become tender. When it is ordered I sear it for eight minutes, and finish by flashing it under the salamander.' Sounds fairly basic, but does not describe the pasta parcel like a tiny dolly-bag, containing julienne pieces of goose-leg, celery, and parsley, nor the timbale of goose-liver mousse, nor the heavenly port-wine sauce with its grapey goosy aroma.

MY GUEST had just the best venison we had ever tasted. Tender as butter, although from a wild deer, four large chops overlapped in a deep red sauce made with blackberry and sloe gin. Like the *nouvelle cuisine*, it was in the reduction of venison stock with the sloe gin used for deglazing the pan. The really permanent influence of *nouvelle cuisine* may lie in the abandonment of heavy flour-based sauces.

Vegetables were good, as usual, with the exception of the green beans. Imported out-of-season beans are not best suited to cooking *à l'étouffée*, for there is a vital difference between crispness and toughness, and these specimens had to be gnawed rather than snapped. Anyone who grows them, and cooks them newly picked while

they are still quivering in their death-throes, will understand what I mean.

With this abundance we drank a half-bottle of Chateau Trimolet 1979, a St. Emilion Grand Cru Classé, a very agreeable wine though past its best, I thought, as is sadly often the case with half-bottles. A Grand Cru St. Emilion is not as grand as the layman fancies, for there are at least 67 wines in this category at present, and when it was bottled, it was one of a great many more. I am sorry we did not try the full bottle.

Puddings were composed by Margaret Ryan from Wexford, who is talented indeed. My guest ordered the lot, and got a plate with such delights as a meringue with a swan's neck arching from it, and a *tuile* with scoops of blueberry ice-cream. My chaster plate was a Caramelised Pear with Orange Bavarois: just a simple pear with its sides sliced and spread into a caramelised fan, with a simple cream mousse of orange topped with kumquat, in a simple gooey orangey sauce. Excellent coffee with truffles, candied orange peel, and peppermints followed. A marvelous night which cost £73.50 including wine and service, and if you had to think of London I should think that it would cost.

Park Restaurant, 26 Main Street, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. Tel: 886177.

# LOOK SEA



which give the tum-tum a breathing space, we finished off the Gewurtztraminer half-bottle we had ordered with our fish. A very pleasant 1986 from Emile Kugler, it is a spiffing wine to drink with shellfish, and also (remember!) with smoked salmon. The price of £6 a half-bottle was also pleasant. Next came the mighty centrepiece of the main courses, both our chosen dishes ancient, historic, and earthy, Roast Venison (her) and Roast Goose (me).

The goose had a rich dark flesh, streets ahead of the effete and whimpy turkey, and as you savour each unctuous goblet, you can taste the hungry generations treading you down.

that intensely sweet Madeira. Said Colin: 'Tuesdays we put the big pot of oxtails on the fire, and start the slow cooking with vegetables for flavouring. We strain it, reduce it, add some fresh chopped vegetables, and a good big dollop of Madeira. No thickening.' He added, after a reflective pause, 'Some customers sent it back last week. They said it tasted like Coca Cola — that was the Madera.' It didn't. It was wonderful, and I slightly preferred it to my Cream of Watercress, in spite of the topping of my favourite toasted pine-nuts. In her turn, my guest preferred my soup.

Before our lemon sorbets,

Figure 1. Review of The Park, Blackrock by Helen Lucy Burke in the Sunday Tribune, 18 December 1988. Image courtesy: Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire. Copyright: Mediahuis Ireland Group Limited.



## Sources of data

This research uses both interviewing and document collection for its primary sources, while typically relying on secondary literature to set the tone, historical background, scope and timeline. Four interviews were conducted with restaurant reviewers and a commissioning editor.

The quantitative phase of the research involved an initial collecting of reviews from the period of 1988 to 2008 using purposeful sampling. Content analysis of 155 newspaper reviews was followed by further thematic analysis of 55 selected reviews. 63 sampling time-points were identified across the 21 years from January 1988 to December 2008, alternating for each year so that each month was represented. For example, reviews from January, May, and September were collected in 1988; reviews from February, June, and October were collected in 1989, and so on. One review during the same week at each of the sampling time-points was selected. Content analysis sought further themes, commonalities, consistency and anomalies.

The thematic analysis involved reading through the data and generating initial codes. A deductive approach was taken to this process. Four domains of inquiry guided the theoretical thematic analysis. These were:

- The critic's function
- Changes in Irish food culture and restaurants
- Values prioritized by critics
- Economic references

The qualitative ethnographic research included interviews with persons who played a significant role in the writing and commissioning of restaurant reviews between 1988 and 2008. This sampling was purposeful, including a reviewer from each of the three newspapers along with an editor.<sup>58</sup> The interview questions were informed by the four domains of inquiry established by a review of the literature and further informed by themes that emerged from the analysis of the reviews.

**Sally McKenna** – *Irish Independent* 1988–1990: 'Guest Who's Coming to Dinner' (dinner with a guest/review); 1990: 'Dinner Date' restaurant critic.

**Tom Doorley** – *Sunday Tribune* 1994–2005 restaurant critic. Subsequent posts – *Irish Times Magazine* restaurant critic – *Irish Daily Mail* restaurant critic.

**Sandy O'Byrne** – *The Irish Times* 1986–1996: 'Table Talk' restaurant critic.

**Fionnuala McCarthy** – (editor) *Sunday Tribune* magazine 2004–2011. Commissioned/edited weekly restaurant review. Employed five restaurant critics during her tenure.

## Limitations

While some restaurant reviews were also available from other regional newspapers, the largest selling newspapers in Ireland at the time were Dublin based. Additionally, a quarter of the nation's population live in and around the capital city and circulation of the three newspapers was highest in the Dublin and Leinster area. This necessarily focuses the research more centrally on Dublin because the bulk of reviews included in our corpus also took place there.

## Findings and discussion

### *Increased frequency of reviews*

Quantitative analysis of restaurant reviews from 1988–2008 shows that newspapers began to give more column inches to restaurant reviews, suggesting that they were of increasing importance, to editors and readers alike. By 2001, all reviews were larger than a half page in size. These were accompanied by more generous and richer visual illustrations. Early reviews tended to carry illustrations of food, but from 1996 to 2008 all reviews carried photographs of the food, the chef, or the establishment. In short, reviews became more prominent in newspapers.

The majority of the reviews were written by Tom Doorley who became restaurant critic for the *Sunday Tribune* in 1994 and then joined *The Irish Times* in 2005. The critic with the second largest number of reviews published in this period was Paolo Tullio, who contributed 33 reviews, and who joined the *Irish Independent's Weekend* magazine in 1987. The next most published critic was Sandy O'Byrne, who wrote the 'Table Talk' column in *The Irish Times*, which ran from 1986 until the early 1990s. Helen Lucy Burke, who in the first half of 1988 was writing restaurant criticism in the *Irish Independent* before moving to the *Sunday Tribune*, and John McKenna, writing for *The Irish Times*, were the next most represented.

When they carried reviews, all three newspapers had dedicated reviewers during the period 1988 to 2008, although the critics changed. In contrast, earlier reviews in the 1980s, which appeared in *The Irish Times* under the heading 'Table for Two', according to Sandy O'Byrne were, written by members of staff.<sup>59</sup>

Tom Doorley remembered 'Table for Two' as follows:

The features editor of *The Irish Times* used to basically pay the restaurant bill for any member of staff who was prepared to write about the meal they had out, wherever it was, and it was absolutely terrible. It was like a school essay.<sup>60</sup>

When Sandy O'Byrne began writing 'Table Talk' in 1986, she recalled it as a time when food was becoming serious, with the advent of nouvelle cuisine:

I think newspapers started to think "we need a restaurant column; we need to put this in with the theatre reviews, with the music reviews". Before that, I suppose restaurant columns were partly the information side of papers, they were partly a sort of hangover in a way from the old social columns or society pages . . . but then they became more of a sort of feature in their own right as we went into the 1980s and as food became more trendy, restaurants became sexy.<sup>61</sup>

### *Changes in the Irish restaurant scene and attitudes to eating out*

All of the critics agreed that the experience of dining out and attitudes to food changed dramatically from the late 1980s onwards. During the interviews, they posited that Irish restaurants were beginning to emerge from a style of cooking strongly influenced by the classical French tradition, with the restaurant experience characterized by formality.

Beginning her tenure as *The Irish Times* restaurant critic in 1986, Sandy O'Byrne<sup>62</sup> identified this as a time when a shift in the food scene was taking place:

There were obvious things like the beginning of the different ethnic restaurants, Chinese restaurants, Middle Eastern, Italian, different food backgrounds. I suppose Irish food had come out of quite a traditional, classical, almost sort of hotel-type food. If we think back to the 1960s and the 1970s, the history if you like, of Dublin restaurants—you had Jammet's; the Dolphin. Otherwise it was the Russell, the Hibernian, the Shelbourne, the Gresham and around the country, it was the grand hotels that were often seen as the local restaurant for some sort of occasion, and that kind of food, that traditional, quite classic food. Suddenly that changed very much in the 1980s . . . You were beginning to see ingredients on menus that hadn't been used before. The traditional things like Irish seaweeds, nettles, things like *crubeens* or heaven forbid *drisheen* . . . But it was great to see those sorts of produce coming on a menu. There were also new imports. You don't realise how narrow the choice of food was. At one stage I did some teaching and some demonstrating of cookery and I remember, it would have been the late 1980s I think, one of the people in my class went out to buy pesto in her local supermarket, which was near Dublin, and they sent her to the fly spray area because they thought it was a pesticide.

Sally McKenna<sup>63</sup> described the restaurant scene at the time she was writing for the *Irish Independent* in the late 1980s as:

. . . bizarre. There were no ordinary people going out to eat in the way that there is now. People now go out to eat all the time; people just didn't go out to restaurants. If you did, it was your birthday and you went to one of these places or you were a top business man.

She also noted the absence of mid-price restaurants:

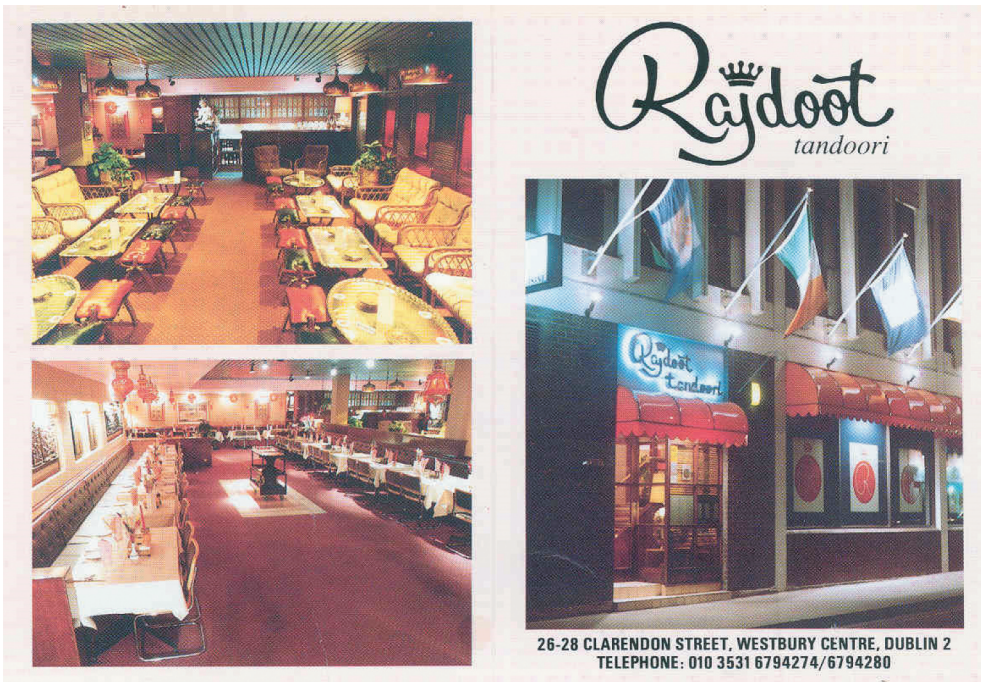
There was no brunch; it was all three-course dinners with lavish wines and that was what restaurant dining was and what people thought of.

Sandy O'Byrne described the 1980s as being an era of new ideas, but one still dominated by classical French cuisine.<sup>64</sup> The 1990s, in comparison, saw the appearance of a lighter and more casual style of food. In the early 1990s, Tom Doorley stated that dining options were poor but that the latter half of the decade saw more innovation and increased confidence in Irish cuisine.<sup>65</sup> He suggested that two things were happening in parallel. One was the return of chefs from abroad, whom he feels brought outside influences and more exacting standards with them, and the other was the pioneering work of Myrtle Allen at Ballymaloe House, who advocated using quality Irish ingredients:

I think you can't discount the effect, the influence of Myrtle Allen championing really good Irish produce because we were coming out of a time when Ireland in general had a cultural cringe . . . and where we lacked confidence in particular in anything that was our own. You know, the plutocrats would eat French food in Le Coq Hardi. They weren't eating dry-cured Irish, free-range, organic ham or Carrageen moss puddings, and that sort of thing, and Myrtle had the ability, not just to recognise that but she could evangelise brilliantly.

Sandy O'Byrne<sup>66</sup> pointed to evidence of a greater interest in food during the 1990s such as more television cooking programmes and glossy cookbooks and the birth of the celebrity chef:

If you were invited to somebody's home you didn't mention the food, it wasn't considered to be the right thing to do. But suddenly, if you went out to dinner, everybody was talking about food and it was "Where did you find this?" and "Isn't this a wonderful sauce?". It had suddenly become part of culture, the way you'd discuss a book or a play.



**Figure 2.** Advertisement for the Rajdoot tandoori Restaurant, Dublin in 1991. Image courtesy: Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire.

She saw the changes both in restaurants and in people's attitudes to eating out as remarkable; describing it as 'extraordinary' the way that visiting restaurants changed, from something that was an occasion or was business related (what she called 'expense account eating'), to becoming more commonplace.

A greater choice of dining options, especially the emergence of restaurants offering mid-priced menus appears in reviews from the early 1990s onwards. **Figure 2** shows an advertisement from 1991 for the Rajdoot Tandoori at the back of the Westbury Centre in Dublin's Clarendon Street, a marker of the growth in mid-priced ethnic restaurants. The opening of the Elephant and Castle diner in Dublin's Temple Bar, now one of the city's best-known tourist destinations, was observed as being 'an interesting place, which was set up by owners John Hayes and Elizabeth Mee to fill a perceived gap in the middle-price Dublin market'.<sup>67</sup> Dublin restaurants in the mid-1990s are described by reviewers as being often glitzy, even ostentatious. By comparison, another Dublin restaurant, Girolles, is praised for 'the sort of true Mom n' Pop "Come in, sit down" relaxation we might have believed had vanished from city centre restaurants'.<sup>68</sup> The food at Ernie's in Dublin garnered the accolade of being 'a bit of a rarity these days: well-executed, unpretentious dishes at a reasonable price' and 'very good at what appears to be a dying art'.<sup>69</sup> Ernie Evans' letter of congratulations to Colin O'Daly on gaining an Egon Ronay Gold star is a sign of both his collegiality and his belief in Colin as one of a promising new generation of Irish chefs (**Figure 3**). John McKenna, writing three years later in *The Irish Times*, noted The Eglantine in Cork was 'so understated as to hark back to a bygone age, before



Dec 31<sup>st</sup> Sat.

Dear Colin,

Congratulations to both  
yourself and Lynn on getting an  
Egon Ronay Gold Star - Great stuff !!  
I wish you more and continued  
Success in the future - a real  
Irish Chef of great quality has not  
been seen in our business up to  
now.

Again my sincerest wishes to you both,  
and to all your staff

Ernie

Figure 3. Letter of Congratulations from Ernie Evans to Colin O'Daly 31 December 1988. Image courtesy: Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire.

anyone even thought of the razzmatazz that is now so prevalent in the restaurant business'.<sup>70</sup>

That Dublin restaurateurs in the mid-to-late 1990s faced increased competition to attract diners is evidenced by statements such as 'an exemplary wine list is just not enough these days, especially in an area where a well-aimed brick will more than likely hit somewhere with good grub',<sup>71</sup> in reference to a restaurant in Temple Bar. It was discernible that diners now had greater choice. However, more dining options did not always translate as improved standards or a greater variety of food. In noting that work-a-day lunch spots in Dublin 'have improved so much in the last 10 years, it seems

churlish to complain’, the writer opined that ‘despite the influx of new cafes, we’re faced with a series of identikit menus offering pale imitations of a once good idea. Panini anyone?’.<sup>72</sup> Later reviews indicated that critics still thought there was room for improvement. Doorley suggested some reasons why there was a scarcity of Michelin stars in Ireland – the relatively sparse population in comparison to the UK, but also that ‘standards in Irish restaurants, by and large, are pretty low’.<sup>73</sup>

### Perceptions of Irish cuisine

Defining Irish cuisine has traditionally proved to be challenging. As recently as 2013, *The Irish Times* asked the question:

What is Irish cuisine? Have you ever fumbled for words when asked this question by a visitor to Ireland? Should you say bacon and cabbage? Potatoes? Irish stew? Or are we now defined by our black pudding, heirloom vegetables and pig’s cheek?”<sup>74</sup>

Mac Con Iomaire has suggested that the concept of ‘national’ food in an Irish context presents some difficulties of definition because the island only gained independence in 1922.<sup>75</sup> Analysis of restaurant reviews from 1988 to 2008 reveals a growing national pride in Irish produce and cooking. Writing in 1989, Sally McKenna suggested that Gallagher’s Boxy House Restaurant, with a menu which included Irish stew, bacon and cabbage, and the traditional Irish potato dish *boxty*, was ‘popping the myth that there is no such thing as Irish cuisine’ and states that ‘this is Irish food as a living culture, improving and enhancing ingredients that were not available in the Emergency years when many of these dishes were at their most popular’.<sup>76</sup>

Another establishment considered worthy of plaudit was The Purty Kitchen, where the reviewer recommended the restaurant as ‘an excellent place to bring visitors for a taste of Ireland’.<sup>77</sup> In subsequent years more reviews reflected this pride, as exemplified by Tullio<sup>78</sup> who, in one of his first reviews for the *Irish Independent’s* newly launched *Weekend* magazine, highlighted ‘a new-self confidence in our food’, which he attributed partly to the fact that:

There is no large corpus of national recipes to stop chefs from trying and choosing the best dishes from around the world. Freedom from the straight-jacket of a traditional cuisine has allowed choices that the French and the Italians are denied in their restaurants, bound as they are by their traditions.

### Provenance of ingredients

Mentions of ingredients, or questioning provenance, was infrequent in the early years, with the exception of cheese. Sally McKenna, who noted that the first reference to Irish cheeses was found in one of her reviews from 1989, also confirmed that regionality became increasingly important in restaurants:

We copied the French and then we learned. We felt the value of our cheese and our salmon and we changed and we became a really interesting destination.<sup>79</sup>

Naming the menu's cheese and valorizing local varieties was standard over the years – e.g. McKenna described the farmhouse cheese available at The Lobster Pot restaurant: 'a lovely lemony fresh *Lavistown* from Kilkenny, and the award-winning *Milleens* from Cork'.<sup>80</sup> The origins of most ingredients used were not often clarified. However, in 1994 when writing about a wild salmon dish, Helen Lucy Burke reflected that 'It had been caught that afternoon on a rod and line, I was told'.<sup>81</sup> Such descriptions were not usual in the earlier reviews; a concern with provenance became more of a feature from 1994 onwards. Citing a menu of hot smoked Ummera salmon on blinis, local oysters baked with almond and parsley and Bresaola dried by the chef, John McKenna commended this 'bedrock of peerless ingredients' and asserted that the 'menu is among the best sourced you will find anywhere'.<sup>82</sup> A 2001 review in *The Irish Times* praised the Red Bank restaurant for 'its clear enthusiasm for, and championing of, local produce. My experience here makes me wonder why other restaurants can't follow suit'.<sup>83</sup>

Mentions of food provenance between 1994 and 2008 were not uncommon but nor was it standard; by 2008, it was clear that food provenance in reviews was more noteworthy. Tom Doorley documented the native lobster, Galway oysters, Tipperary water, and farmhouse butter at Bentley's,<sup>84</sup> while a review of Dublin restaurant, Alexis, applauded its produce, which was 'sourced locally, sustainably, organically where possible – which earns them major brownie points'.<sup>85</sup>

### *Irish taste preferences*

Several reviews referred to Irish preferences for types of ethnic food. A common assertion was that Irish preferences were for milder tastes such as a Thai green curry which was 'just hot enough for me (which means well-toned down for Irish tastes)' and starters which were 'outstandingly good, even if they reflected our own rather tame and unsophisticated approach to Thai food'.<sup>86</sup> One reviewer recounted his displeasure at being presented with foods that he considered to have 'the distinct feel of Chinese food for the Irish, and that was confirmed by not even the option of chopsticks'.<sup>87</sup>

Commissioning reviews from 2004 onwards, McCarthy<sup>88</sup> identified several trends that influenced the restaurants chosen by the *Sunday Tribune* to review:

I recall a big emphasis on the traceability of food and restaurants including on menus where their meat and vegetables were sourced. People also became aware of seasonal eating, so there was less emphasis on having strawberries in winter time. Big on meat restaurants also became very popular—Brazilian Barbecue Sabor and the Mongolian Barbecue are just two I recall—the heavy emphasis on meat could be linked to the popularity of the Atkins Diet at the time.

### *Critic as educator*

The reviews point to a newspaper readership that was becoming increasingly knowledgeable about food trends and global cuisines. Earlier reviews often took on an educational role in informing the reader as to a particular ingredient or cooking method. Early critiques included descriptions of how a consommé is made<sup>89</sup>; what a sundried tomato

tastes like and where they can be purchased in Dublin; and what the dish of potato skins is composed of.<sup>90</sup> Baklava was explained as a stuffed filo pastry in a 2002 review in *The Irish Times*<sup>91</sup> and an explanation for *boudin noir* as ‘lovely smooth delicious black pudding’ was provided in a 2003 *Sunday Tribune* review.<sup>92</sup> However, such expositions became less common in the last five years of the analysed reviews and only occurred with more unusual ingredients such as *lardo*,<sup>93</sup> and ‘ramsons’<sup>94</sup> (the old English name for wild garlic).

Sandy O’Byrne suggests that in the early 1990s, when most people dined out it tended to be for an occasion or a celebration. As more dining options became available, it was sometimes a case of managing the reader’s expectations so that the ‘event’ of dinner was not a disappointment, while at the same time pushing readers out of their comfort zones:

I remember years ago writing a review of a small sort of bistro restaurant in Sandymount or Ballsbridge or some area like that, which I thought was really good for what it did. I remember getting a storm of abuse because the expectations were wrong.<sup>95</sup>

Tom Doorley felt that the reader needed very little guidance because they were already *au fait* with what he was writing about:

I suppose if I caricatured it, it would be people who lived in Dublin and in Dublin even-number postcodes, if you know what I mean—two, four, six, eight<sup>96</sup>—who would see themselves as being vaguely sophisticated, reasonably well travelled and ‘cultured’ as they say. I do remember saying to somebody that my typical reader is somebody who lives in Dublin 6 and goes to the Concert Hall three or four times a year. But the reality was probably very different and I got a reasonable amount of correspondence from readers for all sorts of reasons. Some of them saying, ‘Thank you for introducing me to this restaurant, I got engaged there last week’ . . . Or ‘I have never been so disappointed. I don’t know how you described that as being a blissful experience. We were horrified’.<sup>97</sup>

Commissioning reviews between 2004 and 2008, Fionnuala McCarthy suggested that the *Sunday Tribune* readership was already sophisticated in culinary matters:

I pictured them eating out regularly and hosting Ottolenghi dinner parties.<sup>98</sup>

### *Reviews as reflective of changes in the economy*

Price was a routine component of reviews, and reviewers were aware that not everyone had the financial means to visit restaurants. While this is evident in earlier reviews, it was of mixed consideration from 2001 to 2008; arguably reflecting the country’s economic growth.

#### **1988-2000**

In 1989, Helen Lucy Burke explained that the reason for her restrained ordering at The Connaught Room at Ashford Castle was so that she didn’t ‘run up a bill which would a) give readers a heart attack and b) give the impression that you had to spend a fortune’.<sup>99</sup> In a review of Il Primo, the reviewer advised that ‘the bill does not require an overdraft’,<sup>100</sup> while another review of Elephant and Castle suggested that while the experience can be expensive, ‘with a little bit of tailoring you could come out with



a much lower bill. Next time I will skip the puds, and order one starter course with several forks'.<sup>101</sup> In her review of Duzy's Café, Orna Mulcahy in *The Irish Times* makes the point that two courses each and a modestly priced wine at £30 is 'reasonable but not cheap, although maybe some people think so'.<sup>102</sup>

In a glowing review in 1999 of the Transylvania Romanian Tavern, Paolo Tullio praised the restaurant for charging between £5.80 and £6.80 for a main course 'in a city where restaurants are increasingly pitching their main courses closer to £20'.<sup>103</sup> A year later the same reviewer writing about Dublin's Café Topolis noted 'starters, all of which cost £3.50, which these days is not expensive'.<sup>104</sup>

## 2000-2008

Three years on, Tullio wrote that 'you cannot say it often enough. This is becoming a very expensive country to dine out in', concluding his review by stating 'we mused that if that's the new Ireland – high priced and mediocre – it's time to take a stand'.<sup>105</sup>

A 2004 *Sunday Tribune* review of Nosh in Dalkey Co. Dublin where the bill was €93 elicited this response:

In many places outside of Dalkey, of course such a sum has to feed a family of six for a week but given Nosh's location, the fact that it always seems full and the price of an average night out these days, it's by no means an outrageous sum for a meal for two with a decent bottle of wine. Newspapers like to draw attention to pricing rip-offs. Now and again, though, it's nice to point out a place that is reasonably priced.<sup>106</sup>

Regardless of increased wealth in the country, reviewers indicated that not all restaurants represented good value from 2000 to 2008. Tom Doorley, praising his meal experience at Bentley's, where the bill was €168.50, wrote, 'I don't need to spell it out. You can spend that kind of money on complete rubbish in Dublin'.<sup>107</sup>

Sandy O'Byrne noted that regional bias and perceptions of reader demographic also played a role:

In practical terms, we did have a bias towards Dublin . . . but we did try to cover the country as much as possible. The brief was to give as much variety in the restaurants we chose . . .

. . . a lot of it was an unconscious demographic . . . towards *The Irish Times* reader . . . and probably towards a thirty-something age group. It tended to be towards *double-income-no-kids* as it was at the time, what they were called. There was some of that. We also did try and pitch it towards families because it was an opening market and towards younger people, because again that was something that was happening. People were having disposable income earlier as the workforce changed.<sup>108</sup>

*Sunday Tribune Magazine* editor Fionnuala McCarthy, explained that the restaurants selected to be reviewed were reflective of people's lifestyles and how much income they were prepared to spend on dining out:

I think the restaurants selected said a lot about who we were as a brand and who we thought our readers were, so that is why I liked to vet the proposed list. There was a sense of affluence and prosperity around the south of Dublin city up to 2007/2008 and we wanted to reflect where people were socialising in bars, restaurants and clubs. Then when the recession hit and people had a lot less money to eat out, we started to feature pop-up restaurants and ethnic restaurants in places like Parnell Street and Capel Street. It was reflective of how we

were changing as a country—no one had expense accounts anymore, most of these restaurants didn't even take credit cards. Over the summer, we would focus on restaurants in places where people liked to holiday—West Cork, Galway, Wexford, many of our readers decamped to holiday homes there for the summer. We also focused more on ethnic restaurants, reflecting the growing diversification in Ireland, as our readers were eager to try new cuisines in up and coming neighbourhoods.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

As a contribution to the historic and ethnographic record of restaurant dining in Ireland, this work adds to the growing canon of research on Irish food culture<sup>110</sup> and provides a more detailed explanation of its development than is currently available. The economic and social outlook of 1980s Ireland changed rapidly and saw the return of many educated, experienced, and enthusiastic young professionals. In the early 1990s there was an increasing number of new restaurants, which was reflected in the expanded food related content of newspapers. Initially restaurant reviews helped educate an Irish audience on new ingredients, cooking methods, and flavours; meaning critics played an important role in normalizing dining out. Burgeoning confidence in some quarters allowed for a new kind of discourse about food. Nonetheless, reviews made frequent reference to Ireland becoming an expensive country in which to eat out. In the main, reviews displayed an awareness of readers' financial means. However, critics interviewed for this research suggested that their readership were relatively affluent; and meals that increased cultural capital and provided an exceptional culinary experience, even if they were expensive, were deemed worthy of the expense. Authenticity was valorized, and this became increasingly important as the choice of ethnic restaurants began to grow. There were nods to food provenance in later reviews but by and large the focus was on flavours, dishes and chefs – some of whom became household names. The lack of a traditional repertoire appeared somewhat divisive but mainly a plus allowing diners to experience a myriad of globally inspired dishes – as long as they weren't too spicy and contained plenty of meat. The growth of mid-price and ethnic restaurants was observed, while French-influenced restaurants became less dominant. Wines and wine lists were mentioned infrequently and unless service was particularly bad it was rarely a topic of review. The focus, somewhat limitedly, lay with the place, the food and the bill.

If restaurant reviews can be argued as being reflective of the country's economic conditions, they could not be argued to represent the population's experience as a whole. It would be remiss to suggest that the entire population was dining out regularly using the professional guidance of newspaper critics, however dining out and the culinary capital associated with it became a habit and pastime for an upwardly mobile sector of society whose parents would have rarely entered restaurants. Wood has suggested that newspaper food commentators presume their audience to be middle-class and professional.<sup>111</sup> Vincent concludes that critics 'shape a shared symbolic environment for producers and consumers' in their role as cultural intermediaries and taste makers.<sup>112</sup> The Dublin-centric and somewhat bourgeois trajectory of restaurant reviews over the period further portrays the middle-class nature of restaurant criticism at a time when Irish society was by and large experiencing an increase in wealth and disposable income. While restaurants outside of Dublin were reviewed periodically and regional

Irish ingredients were highlighted, most of Ireland's chefs, restaurants, and growing food culture was to be found in the capital city. A distinct connection can be drawn linking the perception and practice of eating out to larger socioeconomic patterns, as well as the way in which we fashion our social persona.<sup>113</sup> By presenting a critical moment in Irish social and culinary history, a clearer picture of how the media articulated changes through the national press signifies the importance of critics and their role as documenters of food culture.

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