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Green Cuisine

The reality is that in the prosperous Ireland of today, a food revolution is going on. Pubs face stiff competition from cafes and restaurants; recent immigration has brought the multicultural dining scene that Australians have enjoyed for decades; and farmers' markets, boutique producers and celebrity chefs proliferate.

'With more affluence, there's less going to be pub and more enjoying a meal in a restaurant' says Pamela Coyle, who with her aunt, Eveleen, runs a food tour company, Fabulous Food Trails. 'Ten years ago, you would go out once a month; now, it is two or three times a week'

As well, there is a new pride about traditional dishes such as Irish stew and cabbage and bacon, and in the island's abundant produce; from beef and lamb to fish taken from Europe's cleanest waters, to game, vegetables and dairy produce.

Farm cheeses have been on the comeback since the 1970s, after an absence of nearly 200 years when Oliver Cromwell closed the monasteries where cheese was made.

'Our breads are really good, our dairy is really good and our meat is second to none,' says Pamela. 'There's been a rediscovery of our produce. It was always here but people didn't know what to do with it.'

At Saturday morning farmers' market in Galway, the start of the Food Trail, the finest Atlantic salmon comes oak smoked and peat smoked. There's sea spaghetti and carrageen moss, good in soups and puddings.

One floor above the markets is Sheridans Cheesemongers, where 200 cheese varieties are available, about 60 of them Irish. It's run by the fast-talking, slow-food philosopher Seamus Sheridan. He whips out a bottle of Muller Thurgau 2004 and lays out a selection of cheeses made from unpasteurised milk.

Dirty, real food, as Seamus calls it. The mentality that says food must be clean to guarantee safe mass consumption, we soon learn, belongs to those with their 'heads up their arses'. Australia does not allow unpasteurised cheeses,

which leaves us in no doubt as to where Seamus thinks our heads are.

He's forgiven, because his passionate conviction that the future of farming is in small-scale production with an emphasis on quality and environment sounds good to me. Could Seamus save the planet?

Happily acquainted with his view of the world, we set off for a silver-service picnic set up by the Coyles on the banks of the Owenriff River in the town of Oughterard, the gateway to Connemara. There is food from all over Ireland: handmade sausages and air-dried beef, pork and lamb from McGeough butchers up the road; raw milk cheeses from Galway, West Cork and Clare; benison and pistachio salami from West Cork; peat-smoked salmon and vegetable salads.

It was a magic pudding of a picnic: the food and wine went on and on as the river rushed past at a speed we don't see in Australia any more.

There was one more stop on the food trail; a visit to an oyster farm. Where we stood on the edge of the farm beds on Streamstown Bay and slurped back freshly shucked oysters, salty then sweet, while Richard West told us the strangest things; that oysters can be trained to keep their shells shut and the Irish, as a rule, don't eat fish.

We experienced Ireland as a land of plenty, but with the new-found prosperity there is a commitment to remembering the past.

Trip Notes:

Highly recommended:

Dublin-based Fabulous Food Trails run three-day tours in the south-east, Galway and Connemara and east and north Cork. Cost per person from €1250 (\$2144). Phone +353 1 497 1245, see www.fabulousfoodtrails.ie.

Fabulous Food*trails

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