

The Jewel in the Kerry Crown

by Frank Connolly, originally published in the Sunday Business Post in September 2000



Under the shadow of Mount Brandon and overlooking scenic Ballydavid Head and the Three Sisters, there is no better place from which to watch the sun set than Gorman's Cliff Top House and Restaurant in west Kerry.

Just a couple of kilometres from Baile na nGall, the town of the stranger, in the west Kerry Gaeltacht, and ten kilometres from Dingle, the road to Gorman's brings you through some beautiful countryside along the rough Atlantic coastline.

If you are fortunate enough to enjoy a clear evening, a window table at Gorman's can prove a wondrous experience. And that's just the view.

Sile and Vincent O'Gormain started the business as a salad and cakes affair in 1980 and began a full restaurant service some eight years later. Now it is positively one of the jewels in the crown of west Kerry eateries, based on a formula of hospitality, comfort, friendly service and excellent cuisine.

To those of us who have decried the overpricing in Irish tourist spots which has driven a generation to Spain and Portugal for more economically efficient family holidays, finding an authentic source of nutritious and exquisitely prepared food at home is rewarding. While the quality of food has undoubtedly improved in west of Ireland restaurants in recent years, it remains a serious bone of contention that too often customers are paying big money for poorly cooked and poorly served produce.

Places like west Kerry are also in real danger of pricing the average Irish family out of the market due to extortionate summer rents for basic accommodation and the high cost of eating out. But there are welcome exceptions.

We first discovered Gorman's magic some years ago after a leisurely afternoon cliff walk from TP O'Chonchuir's pub in Ballydavid village. There is nothing better than a good broth to round off a walk in Kerry's notoriously unpredictable weather and wild landscape.

While many restaurants in the area serve chowder there is something special about Vincent's concoction. Served with homemade brown bread, his wild salmon chowder is blended with

potato, corn, onion and a touch of dill to make for a wholesome but not over-thick soup. Gorman's is worth a visit for its chowder alone.

At least one annual pilgrimage followed for evening meals and of course the chowder is invariably a choice le tosnu. The simple but delicious crab claws in a creamy garlic sauce are also a must in season -- and you don't need expertise in claw breaking as they are served ready to eat. A warm prawn salad is another favourite starter with just the right mix of fish and dressing in fresh lettuce.

Last month our guests tried the Brie toasties with cranberry sauce and a house speciality, the vegan option of cashew nut and sunflower seed pate. The appetisers are served with generous portions of Gorman's famous homemade brown bread.

Heading for an priomh chursa as a clear sky over the blue sea turned 40 shades of red, the stirfried Dingle Bay prawns were an inevitable choice. Again the sauce is the secret in Vincent's recipe, which consists of small bits of various stirfried vegetables including peppers, courgettes and mushrooms. Oregano, garlic and seasoning are added with the prawns. Dry white wine provides flavour and body to the sauce with cream reduced into the mix and a touch of Parmesan cheese and Tabasco to finish.

Our vegan went for the Mediterranean-style vegetable parcels which were a delightful combination of aubergines, spinach and leeks in filo pastry with a tomato fondue sauce. No complaints here.

When you bring a guest who happens to be a trained chef for a meal, you can expect some comment or criticism. The graduate of Ballymaloe House did not let us down: without prompting, she offered some advice on the preparation of monkfish, another house speciality.

She explained that unless the membrane which comes on the base of the fish is separated before serving, it makes for a tougher dish with a slightly grey appearance on one side. When the fish is sliced, the membrane should be removed leaving pure white scallops. This small setback aside, she enjoyed the red pepper sauce although she felt that it could have been reduced a little more in cream.

The traditionalist had the fillet steak, a perfectly cooked meat dish in a mushroom and brandy sauce. At the risk of disclosing further secrets from the Gorman's recipe, this sauce is another reason to visit the Dingle peninsula.

The mushrooms are dry-fried with a tiny amount of butter and brandy to deglaze the pan, before oregano, seasoning and a little cream are added to take in all the juices. The result was as good as, and possibly better than, any steak I have tasted or cooked.

Bowls of homecooked vegetables including carrots, broccoli and locally grown saute potatoes and salad are served to the table for diners to help themselves.

The wine list is extensive with wines ranging in price from the house red, Domaine Sarret 1998, at £11.50, and the Chilean Cabernet, De Martino 1998/99, at £12.95 to Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Domaine Vieux Lazaret at £24.95 and the Chateau La Vielle Cure, Fronsac, another French red, for £29.95.

There is an equally impressive white wine selection with a French burgundy, Pouilly Fuisse, Domaine De La Collonge 1998, topping the price list at £27.50.

We plumped for the middle of the range Rioja Crianza, El Coto 1997 at £15, a soft and fruity wine and extremely good value which appealed to all, even the discerning graduate.

Despite the inviting dessert menu, which included meringue pyramid with summer fruits, rhubarb and strawberry crumble and a Bailey's hazelnut and chocolate delight, all we could collectively manage was a portion of profiteroles in chocolate sauce along with freshly brewed coffee.

With the bill coming to £128, including two bottles of wine plus a 10 per cent tip for the friendly and professional service, it was an enjoyable evening and, given the quality of the food, exceptionally good value.

It got us thinking about an autumn break in the area where there are plenty of scenic walks, the challenge of Mount Brandon and good Atlantic sea fishing. You can hire bicycles at Gorman's and should you decide to stay longer, the establishment enjoys a five diamond AA rating. Three nights in its superior rooms with jacuzzi and king-size beds, cost £170 pps. The price includes three evening meals in the restaurant.

Now that the train drivers' dispute is on hold, it is once again possible to travel directly to Tralee by rail, and by bus to Dingle and Ballydavid.