

Tradition gets a wee bit of updating at County Clare

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If you're one of those folks who thinks that all Irish dishes contain meat, potatoes and cabbage, it's time you got yourself down to County Clare.

The restaurant, which is as authentic as any Irish pub west of Shannon Airport, reflects a new interest in food that's sweeping Ireland. Chefs and cooking schools there are combining European, Asian and even American ingredients with traditional ones to create a cuisine that holds fresh foods in high esteem while still showcasing traditional Irish mainstays such as lamb, salmon and cream.

The man behind the menu at County Clare is head chef Roy Huth, whose dishes range from the super-traditional, rich Irish stew (\$11.95) to french fries served with a sweet curry sauce (\$5.95), very much the way you'd find them at french fry stands in Belgium or New York City.

For those who've never visited, County Clare oozes Gaelic charm, even though a section of one wall is dedicated to Scotland. It's attached to a bed and breakfast by the same name that is part of the Harp and Eagle Inns group.

The pub's walls are done in deep green, trimmed with a lighter green, and there's hardly a square foot of wall that isn't covered with an Irish poster, sign or other memento.

(I don't know why, but my favorite is a small sign for Guinness that pictures a zookeeper and an ostrich. The bird has a can-shaped bulge halfway down its neck. The sign says: "My Goodness! My Guinness!")

Windows facing Astor and Knapp streets provide plenty of natural light by day and give a view of street life in the neighborhood by night. Along the north wall, comfortable chairs surrounding an Irish woodstove invite patrons to linger over a pint of Irish ale or sip a whipped-cream-covered Irish coffee.

When it comes to food, County Clare's offerings vary to fit lunch, dinner or a snack in between. There's a list of eight "starters" (we call them appetizers), followed by soups, salads, sandwiches and entrées. Desserts are displayed on a tray that servers bring to the table.

I've visited the restaurant three times in recent weeks - twice for dinner and once for lunch. And at all three meals, I was impressed by the attentiveness of the staff, the quality of the food and the reasonable prices.

For example, the second-most-expensive entrée on the menu, grilled salmon (\$14.95) matched the quality and the quantity of similar dishes I've been served at \$20 or more. The fish was absolutely fresh, and its dill cream sauce had been made with fresh herbs.

(Be sure to pronounce the "h" if you're putting on an Irish accent for the day.) The potatoes and sautéed spinach served on the side were both done perfectly: The spinach had been sautéed only long enough to cook it through, and the potatoes were flavored with cheddar cheese to give them added richness.

County Clare's Irish stew would make a much more authentic dinner on St. Patrick's Day than any American corned-beef creation. Served in a white porcelain casserole, it featured large pieces of lamb cooked long and slowly to ensure tenderness without any loss of flavor. Rich, brown gravy enveloped both the meat and the carrots cooked with it.

I'm not sure if this really was Grandma Flanigan's recipe for pot roast (\$11.95), but the two thick slices of beef that made up our serving were tender and tasty. The meat had been braised in Guinness beer, which gave the gravy an unusual note. The idea of cooking beef in beer is one that I associate with the Flemish, but this Irish version of the stew was just as good and ought to be a national dish.

County Clare's meatloaf (\$11.95) delivered two similarly generous slices, but this time the meat was a mixture of beef, veal and pork, which made its taste much more delicate than either the beef or the lamb. A Worcestershire cream sauce was typically Irish, but just a tad too strong; it overpowered the mild taste of the meat.

A friend and I ventured into the salad and sandwich sections of the menu at lunch. Her grilled vegetable salad (\$8.95) with its zucchini and red peppers reflected the abundance of fresh vegetables available to Irish cooks since the formation of the European Union. But with its Gorgonzola cheese and vinaigrette, it tasted more Italian than Irish.

Then there was the variation on the American Reuben sandwich that the County Clare menu calls The Rachel (\$7.95). Made on light, grilled rye, the sandwich substituted turkey for corned beef and delivered a milder, sweeter flavor than a traditional Reuben.

It was in appetizers that I saw the biggest departures from Irish cooking. Yes, the curry fries were just the sort of snack you'd find in Europe, but Reuben Rolls (\$5.45) - corned beef and sour cream in a fried egg roll skin - seemed better suited to a German-American establishment than an Irish-American one.

Steamed Irish brown bread dumplings (\$6.45) were more traditionally Irish, but the cheese on top of them was Gorgonzola instead of a good Irish substitute. And while the thin sweet potato fries that topped the dumplings were delightfully crisp, they weren't all that Irish.

Molly Malone Mussels (\$8.95) were fresh and steamed with sherry, garlic and butter to produce a tasty broth in the platter beneath the shells. The problem was that the Irish brown bread with which they were served was too fragile to soak up any of that delicious broth. Every time we tried, the bread fell apart.

For dessert (\$5.50 each), bread pudding had an authentic Irish hard sauce, nicely spiked with whisky, while carrot cake was one of the lighter, fresher versions of the American classics that I've tasted.

Any Milwaukeean with a shred of Irish heritage or a simple interest in our city's ethnic

past should plan a stop at County Clare to see the lengths to which the staff has gone to reproduce a little slice of Ireland here. It's an excellent place before a game, a play or a show.

And it would be fine with me if the folks at the pub even pushed things further, by adding even more Irish dishes to their near-authentic menu.