



# Going green in Ireland!

In spite of their differences, one of the things Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland share in common is the philosophy of eating local. Nicola Monteath travels across the borders to taste the best of the island's produce.

Tons of restaurants and shops are located by the River Lagan in Belfast

Some might think that Irish cuisine is just potatoes and little else. This is because back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish found potatoes to be grown in abundance in the region and soon, it became a staple food. Potatoes were, and still are eaten baked, mashed or in stews. But the Irish have since expanded their cuisine to much more than just potatoes and meat, with the discovery of locally sourced ingredients over the years.

Ireland is divided into two countries, which are poles apart in terms of political beliefs, with Northern Ireland being a part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland being part of the Eurozone – but they share the same viewpoint when it comes down to supporting local producers and suppliers across the countries.

Dublin, the capital city of the Republic of Ireland encountered a boom in its gastronomic scene through the Celtic Tigers era, whereas across the border, Belfast, the Northern Irish capital city has slowly but successfully cementing its position as a fine dining destination. What's common is a love of eating local, organic produce. It is a long-standing practice across restaurants and

home kitchens. And why not? Delis and supermarkets stock fresh, delicious, homegrown produce, in abundance so it only makes sense to shop for what's available from the island itself. No matter where you eat in these cities, both offer an insight into the famed Irish hospitality. Here's my pick of a few must-visits, whichever side of the border you find yourself on:

## NORTHERN STARS

The city of Belfast is still on the quieter side, but is making countless efforts to promote the restaurant scene. The launch of Belfast Restaurant Week (an annual event of dining promotions and activities across the city) back in 2012, was a major culinary move for the city, where residents gathered to dine out at various outlets.

A good place to start exploring Belfast's gastronomic offerings is Shu ([shu-restaurant.com](http://shu-restaurant.com)), a highly recommended venue, and participant at the Restaurant Week. The modern, stylish restaurant, located in a Victorian building, features dark wenge wood and brown leather interiors to give it a cosy, sophisticated vibe. The menu here comprises of

French-influenced dishes made with seasonal, local produce, and includes a tasty and moist braised blade of beef with mushroom, spinach purée and a potato croquette.

You can't visit Ireland and not sample the famous Irish soda or potato bread, which is why, Ditty's Home Bakery ([dittysbakery.com](http://dittysbakery.com)) must be on your list of places to visit. Robert Ditty, the founder, uses age-old baking methods to make soda farls, potato bread and oatcakes – all of which can be bought at the bakery.

In fact, most restaurants in the city, including Ox Belfast ([oxbelfast.com](http://oxbelfast.com)), a lunch spot which overlooks the River Lagan, serves freshly baked soda bread – a perfect accompaniment to their hot fennel soup. The restaurant's décor is minimalist chic, with natural light flooding the indoors through floor to ceiling windows, and wooden tables. The food echoes the interiors in certain ways as well, with clean, simple flavours and minimalist presentation in dishes such as the salmon with leek, purple potato and parsnip purée, bursting with flavours from each of the fresh, locally sourced ingredients.

For a truly authentic meal made with Northern

Men's shirts hang high  
in LondonderryFresh produce is  
aplenty in Ireland

## Don't miss these gourmet pit-stops

### GO FOOD SHOPPING



#### Brighter Gold Oil Farm:

Rapeseed oil is an Irish cooking staple, so pick up a few bottles from this rapeseed farm located outside Derry. Visit [brightergold.co.uk](http://brightergold.co.uk).

#### St. George's Market:

Shop for souvenirs, pet food, vintage clothes, art and chocolate, at this marketplace established in Belfast in 1896. You can also sample Irish cheeses and delicacies here.



### COOK UP A STORM

**Belfast Cookery School:** Master the art of shucking oysters and prepare hearty seafood dishes at your own cooking station. Visit [belfastcookeryschool.com](http://belfastcookeryschool.com).

**Kitchen in the Castle:** This restored Georgian kitchen set in a castle in Howth – a coastal suburb of Dublin – is great for those who keen on learning how to bake Irish soda bread. Visit [kitcheninthecastle.com](http://kitcheninthecastle.com).

Irish produce, visit James Street Bar and Grill ([belfastbargrill.co.uk](http://belfastbargrill.co.uk)). This laid-back bistro offers a seasonal menu which features fresh seafood and premium meat from nearby farms. You can't go wrong with their succulent piece of rib eye or the grilled honey pork ribs with apple and celeriac salad. Seafood lovers can choose steamed mussels with white wine, chorizo and parsley. To end, the comforting sticky toffee pudding sundae is perfect for Ireland's cold, rainy weather.

Northern Ireland's culinary offerings aren't limited to Belfast alone; just an hour's drive from the city, you can experience rural joie de vivre in Londonderry. Once you've soaked up the interesting atmosphere – who needs great architecture when you have colourful shirts hanging on clotheslines between buildings to pay homage to women who worked in shirt factories? – head to Browns Restaurant and Champagne Lounge ([brownsrestaurant.com](http://brownsrestaurant.com)) to indulge in fresh seafood, grilled sirloin or Moroccan style goat. Head chef Ian Orr makes it a point to promote local produce on his seasonal menus. When here, you could also try the local Abernethy

butter, made by Alison and Will Abernethy, a couple who use traditional churning methods to make creamy butter rolls at their Berchtree Farm in Down (another county in Northern Ireland). This butter is so popular that it counts the likes of Heston Blumenthal as one of its customers.

For a more relaxed, riverside dining experience, stop by Pyke 'N' Pommes ([pykenpommes.com](http://pykenpommes.com)) – the first food truck in Northern Ireland – situated on Queens Quay, a stretch of land on the west bank of the River Foyle. Kevin Pyke, the owner of the truck, is a champion of local produce and one of his best creations is the 'The Cod father' which is made up of freshly caught cod, warm potato salad and the popular Irish delicacy black pudding (crispy batter fried blood sausage).

Even though Northern Ireland may not yet be on the world's culinary map, there are few destinations better than this to enjoy the celebration of fine ingredients and hearty, home-style cooking, than here.

### DELICIOUS DUBLIN

Leafy squares with Georgian townhouses, buskers, couples dancing at shopping squares, centuries-old castles and an area – Temple Bar – dedicated solely to pubs, make up the vibrant city of Dublin. The thriving foodie scene here means that any restaurant, even casual, street-side outlets, are busy on a week night. This is purely because Dubliners prefer to eat at laid-back restaurants rather than fine dining outlets.

A great way of eating your way through Dublin is with a tour with The Fabulous Food Trail ([fabfoodtrails.ie](http://fabfoodtrails.ie)), who offer a variety of tours in the city and beyond. My two and a half hour Dublin Tasting Trail, which covers leading hotspots to dine and shop at in the city (afternoon tours are also available), started with a visit to Sheridans Cheesemongers ([sheridanscheesemongers.com](http://sheridanscheesemongers.com)), a quaint cheese shop which sells Irish farmhouse cheeses such as Coolea – a butterscotch flavoured, salty cow's cheese. Up next was a whisky tasting at the Celtic's Whiskey shop, one of the oldest pubs in the city, and then The Pepper Pot Café ([thepepperpot.ie](http://thepepperpot.ie)) located in The Powerscourt Centre's Loft Market, to try the salmon with cream cheese bagel. We then made our way to Blazing Salads ([blazingsalads.com](http://blazingsalads.com)), a wholegrain, vegetarian deli perfect for a grab-and-go salad or soup, after which the tour came to a halt at Fallon and Byrne ([fallonandbyrne.com](http://fallonandbyrne.com)), a upscale gourmet food hall selling meat, cheese and produce from local and international suppliers.

Since lunch is out of the question after a morning like this, make a detour for the >>



The Temple Bar area is always buzzing



Vintage teapots at The Pepper Pot café



Get your Irish cheese fix at Sheridans Cheesemongers

Afternoon Art tea at Merrion Hotel ([merrionhotel.com](http://merrionhotel.com)) to treat yourself to rhubarb tea, finger sandwiches and a selection of pastries which resemble the artwork on the hotel walls from famous painters such as J.B Yeats, William Scott and Louis Le Brocquy.

For a taste of the authentic, head to Fade Street Social ([fadestreetssocial.com](http://fadestreetssocial.com)), a restaurant and bar helmed by TV Master chef Dylan McGrath, to try the traditional Irish lamb stew with carrots. The locally sourced lamb needs no effort tearing apart as it is incredibly tender and rich.

Another promoter of Irish produce is Hugos ([hugos.ie](http://hugos.ie)), a French eatery with an Irish twist, where you can relish chicken liver pâté with toasted brioche and slow braised daube of beef. You can also have a delightful, mouthwatering meal at Francesca's restaurant in Brooks Hotel ([brookshotel.ie](http://brookshotel.ie)). Don't miss their freshly poached chicken with tender mushrooms, that have a hint of sweetness, steeped in a rich, heavenly cream sauce. The head chef here is a keen forager and offers meals made with indigenous and wild ingredients through the seasons.

Of course, when in Dublin, you can't not pack in a bit of nightlife. End your day with a music pub crawl ([musicalpubcrawl.com](http://musicalpubcrawl.com)) led by two Irish musicians, which takes you to four bars in the Temple Bar area where you get to listen and sing along to witty Irish folk songs – a traditional music culture worth experiencing.

Dublin's warm, friendly vibe – where everyone from restaurant staff to taxi drivers have a kind word for you – only complement the high standards I found in restaurants here, where fresh produce meets passion for good food. **GF**

## TRAVEL DIARY

### GETTING THERE

British Airways flies to Belfast (Economy tickets from Dhs7,000; [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)). A taxi ride to Dublin with Value Cabs ([valuecabs.co.uk](http://valuecabs.co.uk)) is approximately an hour and a half away (from Dhs600), while the train journey takes one hour and can be booked on [irishrails.ie](http://irishrails.ie) (Dhs100). When in Dublin, hire the Ganter Brothers, a chauffeur-driven limo service, to whizz you through the city's crowded streets ([ganterchauffeurdrive.ie](http://ganterchauffeurdrive.ie)).

### STAYING THERE

**Belfast:** Fitzwilliam Hotel Belfast, a modern boutique hotel located in the centre of the city, offers stylishly designed rooms, complemented with The White Company toiletries to make for a luxurious stay. Don't miss their hearty breakfast offerings which includes a full Irish meal with eggs, bacon, hash browns and black and white pudding. Room rates from £105 pounds per night (Dhs635), visit [fitzwilliamhotelfelfast.com](http://fitzwilliamhotelfelfast.com).



**Dublin:** Brooks Hotel on Drury Street is located close to Grafton Street – home to designer and high-street stores. The rooms are eclectic and include everything a jaded traveller desires (upon request) – from a pillow menu to a foot spa. The hotel is also home to the Jasmine Bar – voted one of the 'Greatest Whisky Bars of the world' by Whisky magazine – The Café lounge, for a cup of tea or light lunch, and Francesca's restaurant (see above). Room rates from Euro €109 per night (Dhs550), visit [brookshotel.ie](http://brookshotel.ie).