

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Despite belonging to different countries, Belfast and Dublin have many things in common. Most notably a long tradition of sustainable and organic food. Now seeping into its restaurant scene, there's never been such a delicious time to go

WORDS NICOLA MONTEATH

BELFAST AND DUBLIN, TWO SIDES OF the same coin to some people, worlds apart to others. Leaving aside the difficult history these two cities share (Belfast as the capital of Northern Ireland and part of the United Kingdom, and Dublin, the capital of the Republic of Ireland), there's a sustainable and passionate outlook when it comes to local food that is shared across the border.

While Dublin's restaurant scene boomed through the 'Celtic Tiger' years, Belfast has been playing catch up in terms of fine dining outlets on offer. However, over the last few years, interest in organic, local producers and the area in general has rocketed. Newly opened restaurants are working with local farms and seasonal ingredients like never before. Delis and supermarkets are chock full with native options, which has been a practice for decades before 'local' became an important buzzword. Down south, the successful 'Buy Irish' campaign of recent years to help the national economy has only worked because the products to buy were actually already in-store.

Both sides of the border offer visitors glimpses into the famed Irish hospitality as well as a way to understand the key differences between the two cities. While Dublin has its famous Georgian townhouses, beautiful bridges and leafy squares, Belfast is a city in the midst of exciting regeneration projects. Neither are too far away from the beautiful Irish countryside either, whether it be the wild Northern Irish coast or the soft rolling hills of the east.

NORTHERN IRELAND

As you get out of the airport in Belfast, the first thing you will notice is that this isn't a city with cobbled streets, pollution or a grey blanket in the sky. The air here is fresh, crisp and clean, which makes wandering outdoors a pure delight. Belfast is constantly evolving, in terms of its gourmet scene, and offers multiple dining choices for travellers. The launch of Belfast Restaurant Week

in 2012 (an annual event of dining promotions and activities across the city) is one which has got people to visit restaurants and dine out more. Shu was one of the eateries which took part in the Restaurant Week in 2013 and came highly recommended by a taxi driver and hotel staff - there's no better place to eat than where the locals do. The all-wood décor, contemporary style restaurant makes you feel as though you are sitting in a country home, whilst indulging in a piece of steak. The cosy, fine dining restaurant is packed with guests all decked up for a lavish dinner, so book in advance to try French-influenced creations, all made with seasonal ingredients and some of the finest local meats. Try the braised blade of beef, mushroom and shallot crust with spinach purée, celery, potato croquette, thyme and red wine sauce. The succulent beef drenched in the aromatic red wine sauce is moist, while the potato croquette adds a bit of crunch to the dish. Another restaurant worth visiting is James Street Bar and Grill, a casual laid-back bistro popular with younger crowds, which serves a seasonal menu made with Northern Irish produce. The heady smells of beef cooked on a special charcoal grill here, will make you want to pick meat for at least one of your courses, such as a dish of grilled honey pork ribs with apple and celeriac salad or steamed mussels with white wine, chorizo and parsley. The bistro also offers a decadent sticky toffee pudding sundae.

Since Northern Ireland is home to multiple local producers, you might want to visit a few of them. Approximately an hour away from Belfast is the county of Londonderry (also known as Derry), the second-largest city in Northern Ireland. On the outskirts of Derry lies a beautiful golden farm where rapeseed is grown and you can meet with Leona and Richard Kane, producers of Brighter Gold Oil, a cold pressed rapeseed oil used for sautéing and searing everything from steak to fish and vegetables. If the lovely Leona is around, she will be more than happy to give you a tour of the farm and let you sample a few of the oils, which you can purchase from the shop or various restaurants. →



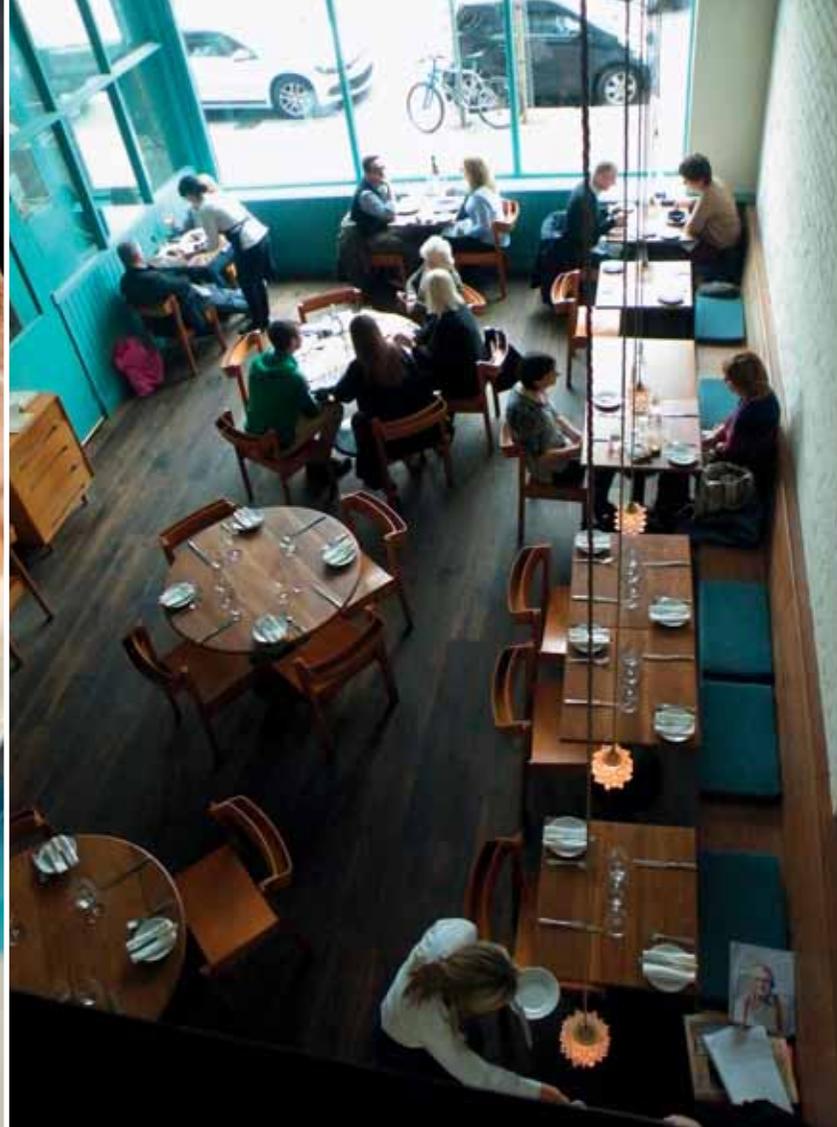
WHERE TO STAY

THE FITZWILLIAM HOTEL BELFAST

This centrally located boutique hotel is one of Belfast's finest and within walking distance to most of the city's restaurants and shopping boulevards. The modern style Executive room is designed with mild green and yellow colours and offers a selection of The White Company bath products to make your stay as comforting and luxurious as possible. If you're lucky you might spot a few members from the cast of Game of Thrones as well! (From Dhs660; free Wi-fi; fitzwilliamhotelbelfast.com).



THIS PIC A Victoria sponge awaits you on the Fab Food Trail, Dublin RIGHT Ox, Belfast overlooks the River Lagan



THIS PIC Leona Kane from Brighter Gold Oil. LEFT Shucking oysters at Belfast Cookery School

IRELAND

The city of Derry, which recently won the bid for the UK City of Culture 2013, is a rather colourful one. Here the alleys between buildings are covered with shirts in various colours, which are hung high on strings from one building to another. This is a homage to the ladies who worked in shirt factories centuries ago. If walking and driving around Derry has left you serious hunger pangs, visit Browns Restaurant and Champagne Lounge to sate your appetite with freshly caught seafood such as lobster, trout, scallops or seabass. Head chef Ian Orr serves all dishes made from ingredients sourced by local suppliers. If you don't get a chance to visit the rapeseed oil farm, you can have a taste and buy the oils here. You can also try 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 (a county in Northern Ireland). This butter is so popular that most restaurants in Northern Ireland use it for cooking. Celebrity chef Heston Blumenthal is also a fan and serves it with bread at his three-Michelin star restaurant Fat Duck.

A trip to Belfast isn't complete without a cup of local coffee and soda-and potato bread. If you're looking to try authentic bread from an artisan bakery, head to Ditty's Bakery, where Robert Ditty uses traditional baking methods to make soda farls, potato bread and oatcakes. And if you can't make it to the bakery, you're in luck, as plenty of local restaurants offer the loaves, including Ox Belfast. This popular lunch spot overlooking the River Lagan, serves freshly caught salmon with leek, purple potato and parsnip purée. All ingredients are local, fresh and flavoursome, and the presentation of the dish is as minimalistic and elegant as the restaurant itself, which features square wooden tables, pale blue wooden doors and floor to ceiling windows.

The people from Belfast have taken to local produce quite well over the last few years. One place to see and taste the best of all local and specialty food, and shop for fresh fruit, vegetables and other delicacies is the St. George's Market, one of Belfast's oldest attractions. Local artisan food producers, restaurants, cafes and retail stores have been setting up stalls here ever since 1896. If you're looking for

fresh fish, cheese, cookies, candy, vintage clothes, pet food and artwork, or to try black or white pudding – a crispy blood sausage, and international exports such as paella, you will find it all under this roof.

FURTHER INFO

- shu-restaurant.com
- belfastbargrill.co.uk
- brightergold.co.uk
- brownsrestaurant.com
- abernethybuttercompany.com
- oxbelfast.com
- belfastcity.gov.uk/stgeorgesmarket

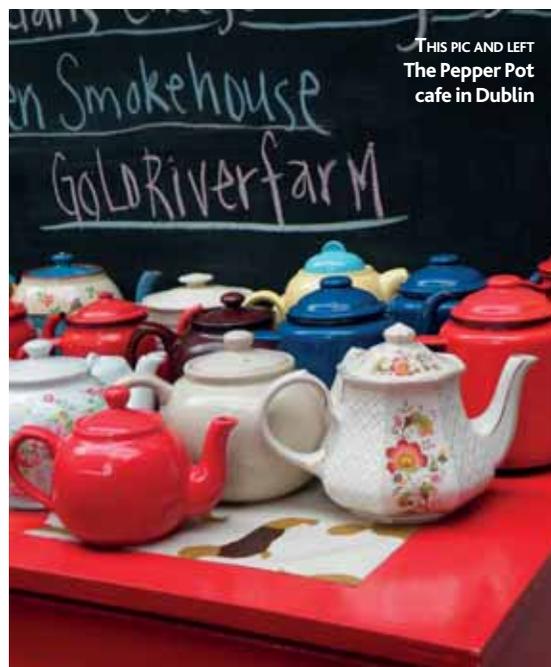
DUBLIN

The city of Dublin is one which takes the meaning of 'craic' to a whole different level. For those who aren't familiar with the slang, 'craic' means to have a good time, be merry, enjoy drinks with friends and just have fun in general – all of this is possible any day of the week in the Republic's capital.

Where does one begin here? The central city is compact enough to be walked on foot, but why not try with a chauffeur-driven guide such as the Ganter Brothers who will fill you in on the history of each building and sight, recommendations on what to try at a restaurant, and show you where to shop for souvenirs. Before you hit the pubs or go shopping, try the Afternoon Art tea at Merrion hotel to treat yourself to finger sandwiches, an extensive selection of tea or coffee and pastries recreated to resemble the works of famous painters such as J.B Yeats, William Scott and Louis Le Brocqy, and warm up near the stone fire place's roaring fire. Those looking for a more substantial meal can head to Fade Street Social (Fade Street; fadestreetssocial.com) helmed by TV Master chef Dylan McGrath, for traditional Irish fare such as scallop with hollandaise sauce and comfort food like Irish lamb stew with baby carrots. The meat, sourced locally, literally melts in your mouth and pairs well with the Irish soda bread with hazelnut butter that comes with it. The eatery is divided into a restaurant and bar area – both of which are packed on a school night as well and has a lively atmosphere with red brick walls, an open kitchen and wood-fired pizza



Shu Belfast comes highly recommended by locals



THIS PIC AND LEFT
The Pepper Pot
cafe in Dublin



WHERE TO STAY

BROOKS HOTEL, DUBLIN

The four-star hotel is located parallel to The Powerscourt Centre's Loft Market and Grafton Street. The quirky and vintage boudoir style rooms offer notable touches such as a pillow menu and a foot bath, to relieve aching feet at the end of the day. (From Dhs550; free Wi-fi; brookshotel.ie).



ovens. Those looking to try Irish cuisine with a twist can visit Hugos to savour French-Irish dishes including chicken liver pate with toasted brioche – the bread gives it a hint of sweetness – and slow braised daube of beef. All these restaurants are packed, so it's best to reserve a table in advance.

Dublin's culinary scene is blossoming and the best way to find out the leading hotspots to dine at or where the locals shop, is by going on The Fabulous Food Trail with Eveleen. The food walk takes you on a two and a half hour epicurean journey, which begins at Sheridans Cheesemongers, a quaint cheese shop where you will feel like a kid in a candy store, as the selection of cheeses – only from Irish farmhouses – are sure to leave you ooh-ing and aah-ing. Sample the Coolea, a rich, butterscotch and salty flavoured cow's milk cheese. You can also get the cheeses vacuum-packed to take home, along with oatcakes and chutneys. Continue your foodie walk with a drink at The Celtic's Whiskey shop, a salmon bagel at The Pepper Pot in The Powerscourt Centre's Loft Market and end with a trip to Fallon and Byrne, an upscale gourmet deli where you will find a selection of meat, cheese and other produce from local suppliers. As Eveleen takes you on your foodie tour, she also tells you about the history and transformation of Irish cuisine. She maintains the Irish still aren't particularly fond of dining at hotel restaurants, as

they are more likely to eat at a casual place or a pub which serves traditional favourites. This is a bit of a shame, as Francesca's restaurant in Brooks Hotel is nothing short of an exemplary culinary delight. The menu features a selection of meat and seafood dishes made with seasonal indigenous and wild ingredients. The head chef is a keen forager, so the menu includes dishes such as freshly poached chicken with tender and slightly sweet foraged mushrooms in cream sauce.

If you're taken with the Irish cuisine on offer, you can also learn how to cook it yourself. A cooking class at Kitchen in the Castle is highly recommended. The cookery school is set in a restored Georgian kitchen of the Howth castle in a suburb of Dublin where fresh fish and seafood are caught and distributed to the capital daily. Here you can hone your culinary skills and master the art of baking fresh soda bread, seafood with vegetables and bread pudding. Irish cooking has something so homely about it, it works perfectly for a country known for its informality and hospitality.

FURTHER INFO

- merrionhotel.com
- hugos.ie
- fabfoodtrails.ie
- brookshotel.ie
- thekitcheninthecastle.com 

THIS PIC AND BELOW Getting a meal ready at James Street Bar & Grill



MAKE IT HAPPEN

Ireland



The cities of Dublin and Belfast share the same passion for real food with local ingredients that supports the local economy. Now's the time to go and tuck in



ESSENTIALS

Getting there

British Airway flies to Belfast, via Heathrow airport in London (from Dhs6,000 return; britishairways.com). Take a train to Dublin from Belfast, the journey is approximately one hour (Dhs70; irishrail.ie).

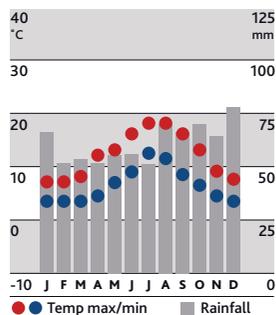
Getting around

Belfast is easily accessible on foot, but if you do need to head to a location far away from your hotel, book Value Cabs (valuecabs.co.uk). For Dublin try the Ganter Chauffeur Drive, founded by the Ganter Brothers is a great chauffeur driven service which is at your beck and call. They even have free Wi-fi! (ganterchauffeurdrive.ie).

Further reading

Buy the Dublin City Guide (Dhs84) or the Belfast chapter in the Ireland guide (Dhs18) Both from lonelyplanet.com.

Climate



8 THINGS TO DO (OTHER THAN EAT!)



1 Discover the SS Nomadic - the sister ship which ferried passengers to the Titanic at The Titanic Belfast experience. Read stories of the passengers and see models of sister ships built alongside the Titanic. (from Dhs85 per adult; titanicbelfast.com).

2 Don an apron and head to Belfast Cookery School to learn how to prepare delicious Irish food with local produce. Everyone gets a turn to be a cook and of course you can eat your efforts afterwards (belfast-cookeryschool.com).

3 To see panoramic views of Belfast, head straight up to the glass dome of the rather modern Victoria Square Shopping Centre. Once done taking in the city, head to the mall for a Sterling based shopping spree (victoriasquare.com).

4 The Powerscourt Centre's Loft Market in Dublin is nestled in a Georgian townhouse. The retail space sells everything from vintage jewellery and clothes to flower bouquets. (59 South William Street; theloftmarket.com).



5 Go on a musical pub crawl in Temple Bar area in Dublin. Try it with a two and a half hour guided musical tour led by musicians. The tour begins at Gogarty's Bar and then carries on to three other bars both sides of the river. (Dhs60 per adult; gogartys.ie).



6 Souvenir, designer and all the high-street shops are all found on Dublin's famous **Grafton Street**. If you are going to be claiming refunds on VAT at the airport, do remember to inform the staff when purchasing your products.

7 Visit the suburb of Howth, a scenic coastal village, close to the north side of the city on Dublin Bay. You can relax by the refreshing seaside. Home to a castle and a lighthouse, tuck into fresh fish and chips and enjoy a cliff walk.

8 Visit the Saint Augustine's Church in Londonderry/Derry, to see the first 'email' sent by cannonball (i.e a note wrapped around a cannonball from James II). It's a great look into the city's past. (saintaugustines.co.uk).