



# GEORGINA CAMPBELL IRISH BREAKFAST AWARDS 2017

## In Association with Fáilte Ireland

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#### 1. IRISH BREAD AWARD - INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL

*If ever there was a perfect example that the little things matter, its bread. It's something we're very good at in Ireland - every self-respecting hotel, B&B and restaurant makes their own special bread, and this simple gesture sets the tone for many a memorable experience. As good bread is recognised as one of the great strengths of Irish cooking, it is particularly disappointing when tasteless commercial baking is offered instead of the real thing. The visionary former Director General of Bord Fáilte, Matt McNulty, supported promotion of our national bread - the simple brown soda - in the early '90s, by sponsoring an Irish Bread Award at the inaugural Egon Ronay Ireland Guide Awards, held at Dublin Castle - an idea ahead of its time, as the press didn't see the point of it in those days and it only ran for one year. But things have changed and there is widespread understanding of the importance of good bread now, including the recent establishment of **Real Bread Ireland** (<https://realbreadireland.org/>), an organisation which mainly supports the new wave sourdoughs that have enriched the traditional range produced here, but also promotes the concept of correctly made, additive-free breads of all kinds. Our three winners, two from Ireland's Ancient East and one from Dublin give a hint of the diversity offered.*

#### **IRISH BREAD AWARD 1: King Sitric Fish Restaurant & Accommodation, Howth Co. Dublin for their King Sitric Brown Bread**

Named after an 11<sup>th</sup> century Norse king, The King Sitric has been a leading seafood restaurant in the *Dublin* region since 1971. Of the thousands of delicious homemade breads served to visitors, this one - which partners perfectly with fish - is one of the most interesting. Far from being picked at random from the hundreds of excellent brown soda breads being made on a daily basis across Ireland, chef-patron Aidan MacManus's recipe has interested me for many years (and has appeared in my cookery books, notably *Good Food From Ireland*, in 1991) because it is cooked in a cast-iron casserole with the lid on, showing a direct line of descent from the old bastable oven used for cooking over an open fire - a fascinating link between the old way of baking and modern cooking methods.



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#### **IRISH BREAD AWARD 2: Barrons Bakery, Cappoquin, Co. Waterford - for their Crusty Bread and Waterford Blaas**

Appropriately located in *Ireland's Ancient East*, Esther and Joe Barron's County Waterford business dates back to 1887, and this wonderfully traditional bakery still uses the original Scottish brick ovens to make breads with real flavour and an old-fashioned crust; the range is wide (and well worth investigating), but the Waterford 'blaas' are unique. Barron's is one of only four bakeries producing this traditional square white yeasted roll, which has held EU Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status since 2013 and is one of only a handful of Irish products to have achieved this. The bakery and its adjacent shop and café are a reminder of the importance of small bakeries to the community and the collective memory, and the story is well documented by Roz Crowley in their book, *Our Daily Bread*.

#### **IRISH BREAD AWARD 3: Declan Ryan's Arbutus Artisan Bread, Cork - for an inspiring combination of Tradition & Innovation**

Many young bakers have taken up the 'real bread' challenge recently, but Declan Ryan was a decade ahead of the current trend when he sold the legendary Arbutus Lodge Hotel in Cork city in 1999 and set up a little artisan bakery in his two car garage. Many have since followed his lead but there is still nobody to beat the Arbutus team. Most of his range - including a crusty Cork Beer Bread - are sourdough breads, but you'll also find traditional Irish specialities among them: a white West Cork soda bread, for example, and a nutty brown version including Macroom pinhead oatmeal - the recipe is on their website and it's available as Granny Ryan's Soda Bread Mix too. In the spirit of *Ireland's Ancient East*, Declan's combination of tradition and innovation has inspired a whole new generation of bakers, and great credit is due to him for his vision of a more varied future for Irish bread making.

## **2. IRISH BREAKFAST FOODS – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*The Irish Breakfast can be a wonderful experience - but it's only as good as its ingredients. All cooking depends on the quality of ingredients for success and the simpler the meal the more obvious that is - and breakfast is not only the most important meal of the day, but it is also the simplest. On the upside, that offers a unique opportunity to showcase the excellent Irish produce that is central to a memorable breakfast experience, and especially the traditional breakfast plate - the crispy rashers, the succulent sausages, the beautiful free range egg - but, on the downside for those who are running price-led food operations, any shortcuts taken are glaringly obvious. We aim to encourage everyone who offers an Irish breakfast to make it a really good one. To that end, we have selected just four of the elements of a good breakfast - Meats, Fish, Cereals and Dairy - two of which are typical of Ireland's Ancient East, while one is an iconic Wild Atlantic way product - and heartily commend a producer in each that is notable for consistent excellence. Source authentic ingredients and the difference will show on the plate.*



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### Winners

#### **IRISH BREAKFAST FOODS Meats: O'Neills Dry Cure Bacon, Enniscorthy, Co.Wexford**

Tasty rashers of bacon are the heart of the traditional Irish breakfast plate and, unlike many 'Irish' bacon products, this one produced in *Ireland's Ancient East* is genuinely Irish and it carries the Bord Bia Quality Mark, which guarantees the meat has been reared and processed in the Republic of Ireland and produced to the highest international standards that are regularly independently checked. Pat O'Neill's products are cured by hand for three weeks, low in salt and phosphate-free, and the difference is plain to see in the cooking - no white gunge and minimal shrinkage - and the taste. We would love to see all Irish breakfast providers aspire to this standard.

#### **IRISH BREAKFAST FOODS Fish: Burren Smokehouse Smoked Salmon, Lisdoonvarna, Co.Clare.**

Established in 1989, Birgitta and Peter Curtin's famous smokehouse produces an impressive range of products but it is best known for their organic smoked salmon. Produced using the renowned organic salmon from the *Wild Atlantic Way*, it is among Ireland's finest - and a highlight on many excellent breakfast menus, either on the buffet or in delicious dishes such as the popular treat, scrambled eggs with smoked salmon. Burren Smokehouse salmon is sold in some very prestigious shops internationally and visitors to County Clare can taste it at their Burren Smokehouse Visitor Centre (going since 1995).

#### **IRISH BREAKFAST FOODS Cereals: Flahavan's Oats, Kilmacthomas, Co. Waterford.**

One of the unsung heroes of the Irish food scene, what would an Irish breakfast be without porridge? Unthinkable! The vast majority of Irish people begin the day with a bowlful of goodness from this much-loved producer and it features in various tempting guises on many of the country's best breakfast menus. One of Ireland's oldest family businesses, Flahavan's is a sixth generation family firm and has been milling oats in *Ireland's Ancient East* for over 200 years; their iconic and mainly locally grown products support Irish famers, including organic producers, thereby also playing a role in sustaining the traditional rural Irish landscape as well as delighting users with the consistent excellence of their products.

#### **IRISH BREAKFAST FOODS Dairy: Clandeboye Estate Yoghurt, Bangor, Co. Down**

Lady Dufferin, owner of the Clandeboye Estate is rightly proud of her pedigree Holstein and Jersey cows and, when the estate needed to diversify, it was the rich milk they produce that provided a solution: **Clandeboye Estate Yoghurt**. Many people will be surprised to hear that this is the only yoghurt made in Northern Ireland but, boy, is it a good one. Free from additives or preservatives, it is blended by hand and cultured very gently over 24 hours in small batches, which helps create an exceptional flavour and texture. Available in natural and Greek styles, which taste wonderful on their own or with fresh berries, it makes a great contribution to a thoughtfully assembled breakfast menu.



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### 3. BRUNCH INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL

Defining 'brunch' is not as easy as you might think. For a start, although its timing may seem obvious, there is a tendency towards moving it later in the day - lunch-time/ afternoon - instead of the original late morning meal, and even restricting it to weekend activity. For our purposes - this being the Irish Breakfast Awards - we'll stick to the early end of the spectrum: "*Brunch: a meal that combines breakfast and lunch and that is usually eaten in late morning, around the hour of 11 a.m. ...*" Whether it's actually called brunch or not, those flexible menus that straddle the borders of conventional daytime meals have become incredibly popular of late - and we're happy to forget about semantics and focus on quality.

#### **Highly Commended: Hatch & Sons Irish Kitchen, Dublin**

"If it isn't Irish we don't sell it" is the motto of this unusual café. Set in the basement of Dublin's Little Museum on St Stephen's Green, this city centre flagship for Ireland's artisan produce is run by food writer and caterer Domini Kemp, her sister Peaches and food consultant Hugo Arnold. A popular brunch destination in *Dublin*, its all-day menu includes fried breakfasts served with rustic chic in a cast-iron pan, complete with homemade soda bread and pats of Glenilen butter - leaving no doubt as to the status of the Irish Breakfast. Adding to the experience, loose leaf Barry's tea is served in generous silver pots with dainty strainers...

#### **Highly Commended: Knox, Sligo, Co. Sligo**

Two former bank employees, Paddy Sweeney and David Dunne, opened Knox in the heart of Sligo Town in May 2015 and it's not hard to see why this funky little place on the *Wild Atlantic Way* was an instant hit. How good to find a menu that is short, balanced and so carefully considered that it's hard to choose - breakfast and brunch dishes like Eggs Benedict or Florentine perhaps (Benbulbin Farm eggs being the stars in both) or Knox Spanish Brekky (chorizo sausage with patatas bravas & baked eggs in house tomato sauce), which is also available in a vegetarian version ... Whatever you choose, it is sure to please.

#### **Winner: Rua, Castlebar, Co. Mayo**

Seen by many as a benchmark for the way things should be done to promote local food, this is the place to go to find a real Taste of the West - and, more specifically A Taste of Mayo - breakfast, brunch, lunch you name it, you won't find it done better anywhere than at Aran and Colleen McMahan's Rua. Super all morning choices range from classics like the Cafe Rua Fry (Kelly's sausages and black & white pudding, 'Andarl Farm' bacon, fried eggs, grilled tomato and mushrooms with toast or brown soda) to a range of gourmet sandwiches and blaas - later merging into a more grown up lunch menu that includes options that also say brunch (Kelly's sausage blaa with melted Maryland cheddar, perhaps). But the big story here is the sheer quality - and the stated aim to support Irish artisan food producers throughout all menus, and in the shop.



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### 4. VISITOR ATTRACTION – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL

*Our Visitor Attractions are not generally known for their food - and, all too often, can be downright disappointing. This is letting everyone down, and it's a missed opportunity to enhance the experience. But it doesn't have to be like that - our three winners today offer very different experiences, focusing on interests as diverse as the arts, gardens, agriculture and science, yet they all have one thing in common: a memorable food experience. All are food destinations in their own right and - crucially - they're accessible to all, as you don't have to pay the entrance fee to the attraction in order to eat there. Each offers a great example for our visitor centres to aspire to.*

**Highly Commended: Courtyard Café, Birr Castle, Co. Offaly.**

Tucked away in a restored stable block in the entrance courtyard to Birr Castle in *Ireland's Ancient East*, this gorgeous café is a daytime dining destination in its own right. Blackboards offering tempting seasonal dishes proclaim in no uncertain style the local food philosophy upheld by Manager Mary Walsh-Kinsella and her team since opening here in spring 2013. The day begins with delicious simple morning dishes like granola with yoghurt, baked eggs or boiled eggs with toast and tasty brunch style offerings such as ham and cheese croissants or homemade sausage rolls - and a blackboard announces the weekend brunch specials, as well as gourmet sandwiches, salads and sharing boards. Tasty brunches, lunches, afternoon teas and snacks are the main order of the day here, but they sometimes do pop-up tapas evenings too, at weekends or when there are events on at the Castle - and the catering style is delightfully rustic.

**Highly Commended: NATIVE by Yellow Door, the MAC (Metropolitan Arts Centre), Belfast**

Food and theatre are a happy marriage at this modern café bar and restaurant in Belfast's impressive MAC arts venue, and the menus read like a Who's Who of Northern Ireland artisan food and drink production. As would be expected of any enterprise that The Yellow Door puts its name to, it's big on local, sustainable and home-grown produce (and the famed Yellow Door baking of course), and the food that Simon Dougan and Marianne Hood's team delivers is vibrant and packed full of flavour. Open for breakfast, lunch, dinner (on show nights) and light bites, the menu at NATIVE changes according to the seasons. Well worth a visit, theatre or not.

**Winner: Overends Restaurant, Airfield Estate, Dublin**

A high point for visitors to *Dublin* - this was formerly the home of the Overend family; sisters Naomi and Letitia who established Airfield Estate as a charitable organisation for educational and recreational purposes in 1974. Way ahead of their time in many ways, they saw the need for people to refresh their connection with food



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and the land, and that is Airfield's mission today. Set amidst Dundrum's suburban bustle, it now offers a unique rural experience in the city. The 38-acre farm - famed for its Jersey cows - is a big attraction (egg collection 10am daily, milking at 10.30), and Overends Restaurant is a destination in its own right. Using the fresh ingredients produced by farmer Eamon Younge and food gardener Kitty Scully, cooked simply to produce great tasting seasonal dishes, Overends offers a genuine 'farm to fork' experience at all meals including excellent weekday breakfast menus and a weekend brunch.

### 5. WELCOME STANDARD – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL

*The recent introduction of Fáilte Ireland's Welcome Standard Category has opened up a whole new element to our accommodation sector, allowing quirky stays - such as glamping, and many other interesting establishments that don't tick all the usual boxes - to join the mainstream offering. This is great news for visitors, who have a much more varied choice of experiences to choose from - and it has introduced some great characters to the Discover Ireland website. Our winners in this category are very diverse, each with its special appeal - and the overall winner is especially innovative, offering a totally unique experience in terms of both accommodation and food.*

#### **Highly Commended: The Tannery, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford**

Paul and Maire Flynn offer comfortable, stylish accommodation at The Tannery Townhouse and lucky overnighters have a breakfast worth getting up for in their acclaimed restaurant, The Tannery, where Passionfruit Prosecco or a Bucks Fizz promise to start the day on a high. On the food side there's a great rendition of the Full Irish, of course, and tasty options like scrambled eggs with smoked salmon or chorizo - and if a DIY breakfast appeals, there is the somewhat unusual invitation to boil your own eggs. There are some great vegetarian choices - sweet goat's cheese with honey and salted almonds on toasted brioche, for example - and, at weekends, there is often a grilled fish special in addition to the main menu too. A real treat in *Ireland's Ancient East*.

#### **Highly Commended: Bervie, Keel, Achill Island, Co. Mayo**

Everything about John and Elizabeth Barrett's wonderfully low-key beachside hideaway on the *Wild Atlantic Way* is special, yet finding such choice and high standards of food often surprises first-time guests to this special place. Dinner is a memorable experience, but breakfast - cooked by John, and served by Elizabeth and their lovely staff - is also a real treat. A beautiful buffet display of fruits and other good things is set up in the centre of the dining room and the hot dishes are carefully cooked to order and presented with panache, so guests are well set up for all the many activities that Achill has to offer - although many find that having direct access to Keel's famous south-facing beach makes it tempting to stay around all day.



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**Winner: Burren Glamping, Kilfenora Co.Clare**

Already well known for their wonderful free range pork, Eva and Stephen Hegarty started Burren Glamping in 2015, offering cosy accommodation in an imaginatively converted vintage horse truck on their small farm. It's quirky - and it's gorgeous. It's hard to imagine that a horse truck - even a 4-horse truck - would have space for

all the amenities and comforts that they have somehow fitted in, but it's very cleverly arranged. And, better still, it's not necessarily just self catering as Eva and Stephen offer a package including breakfast and other meals (lunch/dinner/picnics) made with produce from their farm - and also guided tours of the area, as Stephen is an experienced Burren Guide. So, as well as staying in what must be Ireland's cutest accommodation, guests can breakfast on tasty rashers supplied by the Hegartys' happy Burren Saddleback and Saddleback/Tamworth cross pigs. Burren Glamping is a total one-off and the Welcome Standard could have been invented for it.

### **6. BED & BREAKFAST – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*The family run B&B is our most familiar accommodation across Ireland and, whether rural or urban, it's especially popular with overseas visitors. So what makes a great B&B? They can be anything from a roadside bungalow to a country house, but the best are just lovely, friendly places to stay, offering comfort at a reasonable price, great breakfasts and interested hosts who anticipate their guests' needs yet give them space – and who enjoy nothing better than introducing people to their area. And for many people – especially families who live in cities - an Irish farm B&B, in particular, is the most idyllic holiday imaginable, especially when you can enjoy fresh farm produce at the breakfast table. We have some superb farm stays on offer in Ireland - but there is room for many more, and we'd like to see more farm B&Bs upping their game to make this a more obvious choice for discerning visitors.*

**Highly Commended: The Mill Restaurant & Accommodation, Dunfanaghy, Co Donegal**

An 'open secret' destination that has attracted discerning visitors to the glorious north-west of Donegal on the *Wild Atlantic Way* for many years, Derek & Susan Alcorn's beautifully located restaurant with rooms is on the shore of the New Lake, which is a special area of conservation. There's a real sense of place about everything at The Mill, and especially the food. Derek's menus are a seasonal expression of the surrounding sea and landscape - and that includes the delicious breakfast offered to overnight guests: as well as a lovely cold buffet, the hot dishes star breakfast meats from the famed butchers McGettigans of Donegal Town (vegetarian version also available), Billie's homemade potato bread and other delicious options, including fish, all cooked perfectly to order and served with home-baked breads and preserves.



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#### **Highly Commended: Ballinwillin House, Mitchelstown, Co.Cork**

It is the quality of their products that leads many to Pat and Miriam Mulcahy's farm on the edge of Mitchelstown in *Ireland's Ancient East*, as their tender Ballinwillin venison and free range wild boar features on many leading hotel menus. And these meats are also on the breakfast menu at their 18th century house, where deer can be watched grazing on the 80-acre estate. An enjoyable breakfast is served at a common table and it is for the hot dishes that the Ballinwillin experience stands out, as virtually everything comes from the farm. The full Irish, for example, will include venison or wild boar sausage, eggs from their hens, rashers and black and white puddings from their free range pigs. There are other choices but it is the unique full Irish that gives a real taste of Ballinwillin, and the full Irish doesn't get any more Irish than that.

#### **Winner: Corrib House Tea Rooms & Guest Accommodation, Galway.**

Victoria and David Bohan's handsome waterside Georgian house in the heart of Galway was sensitively restored before opening as Tea Rooms and Guest Accommodation in 2011. Excellent breakfast and brunch menus are offered and pride in provenance is seen in the supplier list given on all menus. The day begins early, with tempting breakfast offerings such as Kilbeggan porridge with banana and cinnamon, buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup, free-range scrambled eggs on toasted sourdough and the traditional 'full Irish' and variations. Breakfast is lovely (no sliced pan here) and, at weekends, an extended version is offered as a brunch menu through to mid afternoon. Breakfast is included in the room rate, of course, but it is also available to non-residents so items are individually priced. This is one of Galway's most special daytime dining destinations and a visit to this delightful spot on the *Wild Atlantic Way* is always sure to be enjoyable.

## **7. GUESTHOUSE – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*So what exactly is a guesthouse? In the AirBnB era, this question is being asked more and more often. Bigger than a B&B (2-6 rooms) and smaller than most hotels, a guesthouse has 7 to 30 en-suite bedrooms and must be registered with Fáilte Ireland in order to use the term. Breakfast must be provided and, in the Guide's experience of this somewhat misunderstood and underrated category, the best Irish guesthouses provide some of the finest accommodation, food and hospitality in the country - as our three winners demonstrate.*

#### **Highly Commended: Inch House, Thurles, Co.Tipperary**

This magnificent Georgian house outside Thurles town in *Ireland's Ancient East* was built in 1720 and managed to survive some of the most turbulent periods in Irish history - but it is current owners, John and Nora Egan, who have made it the handsome, comfortably furnished period house that guests enjoy today. A very good breakfast is served in the restaurant, which is bright and cheerful in the morning sun - and smartly set up for guests to enjoy a homely feast of freshly baked breads and homemade preserves, fruits, yogurts and juices



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along with hot dishes featuring local Crowes Farm rashers and sausages as well as their own Inch House black and white pudding - which, incidentally, is proudly made to Nora's mother's recipe and you may well meet her when visiting this delightful farm guesthouse.

**Highly Commended: MacNean House, Blacklion, Co Cavan**

Neven Maguire's position as one of Ireland's leading chefs is well earned, and the prospect of a meal at the restaurant that he and his wife Amelda run in this little town in *Ireland's Ancient East* has long attracted devotees from all over Ireland, and beyond. Once a modest restaurant with rooms, they have made it a spacious place of sumptuous comfort, providing the setting that is deserved by Neven's exceptional cooking of the local foods that he has always championed with such passion. As would be expected of an establishment where so much TLC has gone into every detail, breakfast for guests who have been lucky enough to stay overnight is also an experience to be relished. Tables are beautifully set up with crisp white linen, white china and salt and pepper mills, and served by warmly efficient local staff, the traditional breakfast offering - with fresh juices, fruit with yoghurt and granola, and a perfectly cooked Irish breakfast plate among the choices - is immaculately presented. Simple perfection, in fact.

**Winner: Newforge House Magheralin, Co. Armagh.**

Louise and John Mathers are the sixth generation of John's family to live in this beautifully located Georgian country house, just half an hour's drive from Belfast. Following major restoration work they opened it as a guesthouse in 2005 and it soon became one of Ireland's most desirable destinations - especially for food lovers, who relish John's cooking. Local and seasonal produce is king in his excellent dinners, and the same philosophy applies to carefully prepared breakfasts featuring freshly baked breads and pastries, a lovely selection of fruits and juices (including local apple juice), organic yoghurt and delicious hot dishes in which Moyallon dry cured bacon and award winning sausages and puddings from Madden's butchers in Lurgan are the stars of the traditional Ulster Fry - along with the Newforge freshly-laid eggs, collected each morning from the rare breed chickens that peck around the orchard, juicy tomatoes and that Ulster classic potato bread. Other tempting choices include scrambled egg with the famous Walter Ewing smoked salmon, and a vegetarian breakfast is also offered. Great coffee too, and delicious homemade preserves with you toast - a breakfast to relish.

## **8. COUNTRY HOUSE – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*While the Irish B&B and Guesthouse categories are quite clearly defined, that great gem of Irish hospitality, the Irish Country House, will generally be found tucked in somewhere among the B&Bs, listed as an Historic House. There is a logic to this as, although large properties, they rarely have more than half a dozen guest rooms. However, it would be lovely to see these wonderful places - and the extraordinary families who run them*



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- given the starring role that they deserve, in a special category. As is self-evident from the range of winners representing them here, they are the beating heart of Irish rural tourism - and especially rewarding to seek out.

**Highly Commended: Rathmullan House**, Rathmullan, Co. Donegal.

Built as a summer house by the Batt banking family of Belfast, this gracious nineteenth century house on the shores of Lough Swilly *on the Wild Atlantic Way* was opened as a hotel in 1962 by Bob and Robin Wheeler, whose son Mark and his wife Mary currently run it. Although fairly grand, it has a laid-back holiday charm that is very relaxing - and a well earned following for many special attributes, including superb food based on the very best of local and artisan foods. Fresh organic produce from their own beautifully restored walled garden is a major feature at all meals, including the legendary Rathmullan breakfast which usually includes a lovely compôte of garden fruits with carrageen pudding that - like the fine farmhouse cheese selection that is also displayed on the breakfast buffet - is equally at home on the dinner menu. Bob Wheeler, who is a keen gardener, oversees the kitchen garden - and he is also famous for his award-winning marmalade, which not only takes pride of place in the dining room, but is offered for sale at reception.

**Highly Commended: Roundwood House**, Mountrath, Co. Laois.

This unspoilt early Georgian house at the foot of the Slieve Bloom mountains *in Ireland's Ancient East*, was given over a quarter of a century's TLC by Frank and Rosemarie Kennan and is now run by their daughter Hannah and her husband Paddy Flynn - who "retain the philosophy of the old, with no introduction of wide screen televisions or trouser presses", much to Frank and Rosemarie's relief. Good food has always been a high point of a stay here and Rosemarie's famous 'good home cooking' dinners, based on the best local and seasonal ingredients (notably locally reared beef and lamb), are now happily provided by Hannah and Paddy - and breakfast, which is served until 11am, is another especially enjoyable experience. 'Local and seasonal' will again decide what make it to your plate - garden fruits in season, for example, are used for a delicious fruit compote, to enjoy with homemade yogurt and muesli, and breads are freshly baked. And as for the full Irish, it is carefully cooked using the best quality ingredients, simply presented - and it tastes wonderful. What more could you want?

**Winner: Ballymaloe House** Shanagarry Co.Cork.

*An interesting destination in Ireland's Ancient East*, Ballymaloe House can be traced back to an Anglo-Norman castle built on this site around 1450 and, today, Ireland's most ancient hotel room is to be found here, in the Gate House. A tiny one up and one down in the original medieval wall of the old house, it is delightful and highly romantic. And, as the standard bearer for the best of Irish food, quality prevails at every service, including breakfast. Each morning the Yeats Rooms restaurant is transformed into a breakfast room, with cheery blue and white checked tablecloths and napkins setting the scene for a feast that will start the greyest day on a high. Like every meal at Ballymaloe, 'fresh, local and seasonal' is the philosophy. The buffet offers



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porridge, made with Macroom stone-ground oatmeal, Bircher muesli made with their own apples, seasonal fruit compotes and home-made yoghurt from the cookery school. Fresh breads - Ballymaloe brown yeast bread, traditional Irish soda breads, spotted dogs and scones - are accompanied by homemade butter and preserves, and the hot cooked to order options include the traditional cooked breakfast made with Ballymaloe farm eggs, bacon and sausages. Honey is from their own hives - and even the coffee is hand-roasted on site by The Golden Bean, which operates in a farm building near the Ballymaloe shop and café. This wonderful breakfast experience says a great deal about Ballymaloe.

### **9. 3\* HOTEL – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*The majority of Irish hotels fall into the 3 Star category and the range is inevitably very wide. They include everything from excellent small family-run hotels to much larger properties that might score on amenities (such as the leisure facilities that are so important for family holidays), rather than hands-on hospitality or a focus on good food. Our winners represent the best at the smaller end of the spectrum, and show just how rewarding a stay at a 3 Star hotel can be. We would love to see more hotels in this category up their game at meal times, however - and especially at breakfast, which is too often a price-led offering.*

**Highly Commended: Raheen House Hotel, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary.**

In a countryside setting yet within walking distance of Clonmel, and surrounded by designer gardens, this 17th century hotel in *Ireland's Ancient East* was Elizabeth and John Day's family home until 1996, when they established it as an hotel. It now offers tranquillity and charm - guests feel very much at home here, as there is a welcome emphasis on service, attention to detail and quality in all areas, including food. Breakfast is served in the elegant Dining Room (imposing paintings and white linen set the tone), which becomes a fine dining restaurant in the evening. A small but carefully presented breakfast buffet on the sideboard offers fresh orange juice, cereals, fresh fruit, fresh fruit salad and yogurts; hot dishes include porridge, the full Irish, poached eggs, omelettes etc and there's homemade soda bread to accompany. All is just as it should be at this delightful place.

**Highly Commended: Killeen House Hotel, Killarney, Co. Kerry.**

Just 10 minutes drive from Killarney town centre and 5 minutes from Killeen and Mahony's Point golf courses, this early nineteenth century rectory on the *Wild Atlantic Way* is now Michael and Geraldine Rosney's "charming little hotel". You don't have to be a golfer to stay here but it must help, especially in the pubby little bar, which is run as an "honour" bar with guests' golf balls accepted as tender and plenty of bonhomie. The restaurant, Rozzers, also has a cosy charm - and not only is it appreciated by resident guests, but it's one of Killarney's most popular dining destinations in its own right. Quality is the watchword here too, with local suppliers proudly credited. Breakfast is served in the restaurant and, like everything else at the hotel, is very much a bespoke affair, with orders taken at the table and an emphasis on service. Killeen House Hotel is a



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delightful and slightly quirky place where excellence abounds - and the owners' hospitality is its most outstanding feature.

**Winner: Gougane Barra Hotel, Macroom, Co.Cork**

In one of the most peaceful and beautiful locations in Ireland, this delightfully old-fashioned family-run hotel is set in a Forest Park overlooking Gougane Barra Lake (famous for its monastic settlements). Neil Lucey and his wife Katy took over management of the hotel from Neil's parents in 2005 and, while the spirit of the place thankfully remains unchanged, their energy has brought a fresh approach, including a stronger emphasis on food. Breakfast is served overlooking the lake, a very pleasant setting for an enjoyable experience. Like the rest of the food at this delightful place, quality is the by-word here - Flahavan's porridge, breakfast meats from Twomey's craft butchers and free range eggs all get a mention on an appealing breakfast menu that also offers a Veggie Brekky and teas and coffee from Cork. Katy's lovely rich walnut and treacle bread deserves special mention too, as it's one of the recipes that she brought from her late father's kitchen in Lahinch, where her parents ran Mr Eamon's famous restaurant for many years. Visitors are encouraged to drop in for informal meals - an invitation well worth heeding.

#### **10. 4\* HOTEL – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*Usually seen as luxurious, 4 Star hotels are spacious and offer suites and extensive amenities, often including a spa. They also tend to have ambitious restaurants, many with a national reputation that ensures their success as a food lovers' destination. At their best, destinations like our winning establishments offer an outstanding guest experience and often very good value too, usually seen in special offers such as midweek and off-season breaks. But sometimes the high standards of food and service enjoyed at dinner can descend into something very different at breakfast time - and we would love to see breakfast given the same status as dinner, and be accorded the same respect.*

**Highly Commended: Galgorm Resort & Spa, Ballymena, Co. Antrim**

Set amidst beautiful scenery, with the River Maine running through the grounds, this former gentleman's residence is one of Northern Ireland's best known country house hotels. Following major redevelopment, it emerged much larger and more contemporary – and ready to take its place among Ireland's leading hospitality players. Particular pride is taken in the breakfast offering ('the renowned Galgorm breakfast'). Depending on the category of your guest room, breakfast service is split between Gillies and the River Room, but both feature an extensive choice of buffet offerings (including organic and 'healthy' options) and cooked to order hot dishes. Daily specials are offered as well as the full traditional cooked plate, and (notably in the River Room) the presentation is unusually creative. A real pleasure.



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**Highly Commended: The Mustard Seed, Ballingarry, Co. Limerick.**

Opened by the legendary hotelier Dan Mullane in the mid '90s, this very special and hospitable Victorian country residence is now in the experienced hands of the former manager, John Edward Joyce. The house is set on seven acres of lovely gardens, including an organic kitchen garden and orchard. Breakfast is served in the restaurant and it is a memorable experience. The highlight of a small but carefully selected buffet display is the choice of luscious home grown fruits - and everything offered is delicious, including the fresh eggs produced by the hens housed just outside the kitchen. Hot dishes, including a house variation on the traditional Irish breakfast, are perfectly cooked and beautifully presented and the menu includes some less usual dishes, such as omelettes made with the renowned Ummera smoked chicken from West Cork. Beautiful garden flowers on every table too - a lovely experience.

**Winner: Ballynahinch Castle Hotel, Recess, Co. Galway**

Enjoying a romantic riverside location in 450 acres of ancient woodland and gardens (including walled kitchen gardens, under restoration) on the *Wild Atlantic Way*, this wonderful place is much loved for its beautiful setting, high standards and relaxed atmosphere. Despite the impressive scale, hands-on General Manager Patrick O'Flaherty and his outstanding staff make sure the atmosphere is relaxed, and a high level of comfort and friendliness combined with huge open fires, excellent local food cooked with finesse by Head Chef Pete Durkan and his team, and a little quirkiness (plus an invigorating mixture of residents and locals in the bar at night), keeps bringing people back. Breakfast is a high point of the Ballynahinch experience; an interesting menu, excellent breads, the homemade granola and, especially, their own rare breed pork products attract praise. These include a baked ham that takes pride of place on the buffet each morning and the delicious bacon that features in the full Irish Breakfast and other dishes on the day's menu. The pigs are kept near the walled garden and guests are welcome to go and see them. A great start to a day's fishing, wilderness walks and other activities on the estate, or simply touring this beautiful area.

### **11. 5\* HOTEL – INTRODUCTION BY GEORGINA CAMPBELL**

*We all expect a stay in a five star hotel to be an all-round special experience, offering the very best of the best of everything - impressive surroundings, exceptionally spacious and luxurious accommodation, outstanding food and service, wonderful leisure amenities.... It should be a real treat and, at its best, that's just what it is, providing superb and truly Irish experiences. Yet, with as many as 40 hotels listed as five star (36 in the Republic and four in Northern Ireland), perhaps it is not surprising that - even at this level - there are variations in standards. And an area where these variations are especially noticeable is in the breakfast offering, which can be genuinely memorable - but is not always as wonderful as the experiences which are such a pleasure at our winning hotels.*



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#### **Highly Commended: The Europe Hotel & Resort, Killarney, Co. Kerry**

Open since 1965, this impressive hotel on the *Wild Atlantic Way* may now be over fifty years old, but it was exceptionally well built and has been so well maintained through the years that it has continued to outshine many a new top level hotel. The hotel's continental connections show clearly in the style throughout but especially, perhaps, when it comes to food - breakfast, for example, is an impressive hot and cold buffet. Displays of fruits, cereals and freshly baked breads and pastries are laid out enticingly, along with cold meats, honey roasted ham and a selection of mature cheeses, while the hot counter offers sweet American style pancakes and also everything needed to make up a bespoke breakfast plate together with eggs 'the way you like them'. The choices are extensive and everything is of the highest quality - so this, together with one of Ireland's most stunning views, makes for a memorable breakfast experience.

#### **Highly Commended: Culloden Estate & Spa, Belfast**

Formerly the official palace for the Bishops of Down, Northern Ireland's premier hotel - and flagship of the Hastings Group - is romantically set in beautifully maintained grounds overlooking Belfast Lough and the Antrim coastline. It is a lovely place to stay, and The Culloden has always taken particular pride in the food served and its provenance. Fine dining in the Mitre Restaurant, overlooking the lough, can be memorable, and the excellent Irish Breakfast that is also served here is keenly anticipated by guests who have spotted that the information supplied in guest rooms includes the Hastings Hotels booklet '*Food Heritage, Our Little Book of Local Cuisine*'. Featuring the characterful Lady Dufferin, of Clondeboy Estate (famous for her pedigree dairy herd) on the cover, it catalogues many of the food and drink producers that the Hastings Group support and makes an interesting read - leading on nicely to the excellent Irish Breakfast experience, with its exceptionally informative breakfast menus and labelled displays of local produce, that awaits in the Mitre Restaurant. A great experience all round.

#### **Winner: The Merrion, Dublin.**

Comprising four meticulously renovated Georgian townhouses, The Merrion Hotel is a luxurious retreat in the heart of historic Dublin - a jewel in the crown of *Dublin*. A warm Irish welcome, historic décor, plush bedrooms and classy service make it five-star all the way and, with Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud (next door) and the elegant vaulted Cellar Restaurant among the dining options, it is a leading destination for food lovers. Breakfast is especially noteworthy: outstanding for its range, consistency and seamless service, The Merrion Breakfast is served in the Cellar Restaurant, and is one of the best breakfast experiences in any top Irish hotel. Highlights include superb baked goods (freshly baked breakfast rolls and traditional Irish brown bread, as well as treats such as fresh fruit Danish, croissants, pain au chocolat and muffins); an impressive charcuterie board showcasing both Irish and international meats and artisan cheeses; a fine rendition of 'The Full Irish' including 'The Merrion Breakfast Sausage' and eggs cooked to your liking - and a comprehensive beverage list that



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includes the hotel's own house coffee, The Merrion Blend. In a world of indentikit hotels with bland service, The Merrion feels incredibly special.

- *Citations end* -