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## PERSONAL JOURNEYS



OLLY MOSS

# Drinkless in Ireland: Pubs but No Pints

By MAURA J. CASEY

WHAT is Ireland without a Guinness? Consult the typical guidebook, and you'll get the impression that downing pints is the epitome of the tourism experience in Ireland, even the mystical key to the Irish soul. Flowing stout is the backdrop to the Celtic music and dancing; the famous craic, or conviviality; the pub itself, which stands at the center of town and neighborhood life.

So for the tourist who doesn't drink, is Ireland a country to be avoided?

Surprisingly — to lovers of the stereotype, at least — the answer is no. I confirmed this on a tour this past spring designed specifically to test the teetotaler-friendliness I had detected more informally on earlier visits. With my American cousin Dan Galvin, I traveled the winding roads of our ancestral County Mayo and sampled the pubs. The "Guinness Is Good for You" signs hung proudly on the walls, but nowhere was I pressured to order a stout. One night, I noticed a woman leading the banter of an animated group of beer drinkers at a long mahogany bar. She was drinking a large glass of ice water. I had my nonalcoholic O'Doul's, and at one point, we caught each other's eyes. She nodded, smiled and raised her glass to me in a silent, nondrinkers' salute.

Growing up Irish-American, I bought into the idea that you couldn't be truly Irish without alcohol. From foamy mugs of green beer on St. Patrick's Day to teary-eyed toasts to the Auld Sod, the message was hammered home. But before I could make it across the sea in my 30s for my first visit to Ireland, I quit drinking. So as I planned that first Irish trip I wondered how comfortable I would be.

My anxiety was heightened by the memory of a journey to Russia a few years earlier on a journalists' exchange program. That trip was so saturated in alcohol that I thought my hosts would break my arm to make me drink, and my demurrals were a daily scandal,

greeted by Russians with disbelief, pity and horror. It all became hilarious when a woman hissed, "You must be an adeekt."

The Irish, I quickly discovered, either didn't judge or didn't care. On our way through the sweeping vistas of Connemara, my husband and I and our two children stopped in Clifden, a picturesque town of about 1,900 with Victorian houses and stunning views of Clew Bay, and walked into E. J. King's, a pub that has occupied the center of town for more than 100 years. I stepped into the narrow barroom and, somewhat tentatively, sat on a stool. The bartender looked at me expectantly. I shook my head slightly, and before I could speak, he smiled and poured me a steaming mug of strong black tea. And that was that.

To my relief, virtually every pub was much the same.

The guidebooks are right about one thing; you wouldn't want to travel in Ireland without ever going into a pub. They are where you'll find the people — and the all-important craic, which, translated loosely from Gaelic, means fun, often involving banter and good conversation. A good pub is judged on its craic. But you can get your craic with orange juice.

Westport, the seaside town where my cousin and I began our pub check this year, has 5,100 people and 30 pubs — one for every 170 residents. It lies at the foot of Croagh Patrick, the mountain on which St. Patrick is said to have fasted for 40 days. The shallow Carrowbeg River divides the downtown; streets busy with small shops radiate off a central square.

We entered Matt Malloy's, one of the region's best-known pubs, owned by the musician of the same name who plays the flute for the Chieftains. The walls were covered with photos of the Chieftains, posters and the occasional advertisement for Guinness. I took a seat at the bar, ordered a nonalcoholic beer, and asked the bartender, who said her name was Deirdre, how unusual it was

for people to go to pubs without ordering alcohol. She popped open a bottle of Kaliber for me, smiled and said, "Plenty of people who come here don't drink."

Ireland, it turns out, has a strong teetotaling tradition of its own to go along with the better-known habit of drinking; 20 percent of adults in Ireland don't drink. And the best-run pubs don't rely only upon alcohol to attract patrons; they tend to their craic.

Matt Malloy's looked promising that night, with a diverse group of patrons who at around 8:45 began to drift into the music room in the back, which was set up with neat rows of chairs. We followed, paying the cover charge of 12 euros, or \$17 at \$1.45 to the euro, to hear a group called Nabac play for two hours to a crowd of about 50. They were swept away by songs in Gaelic and nimble fiddle playing. After the band finished, the craic in the bar rose, lifted aloft by the last notes, and strangers began to laugh, talk and introduce themselves.

It's simple in Westport to walk from pub to pub. If the craic isn't good in one, there's often a better prospect a few feet

away. One pub we tried held our interest only briefly. Nearly every customer was a middle-aged man, and all kept to themselves. The bartender looked noticeably startled when I said I wasn't drinking.

We ended up that night in John's Bar near the town center. The lighted fireplace beckoned, the cushioned seats along the walls looked comfortable and the patrons engaged in easy conversation. Most were drinking pints, but several were nursing glasses of water or seltzer. People looked expectant when the owner, John Staunton, sat down on a stool and began to strum the guitar. I waited for the traditional strains of Gaelic lyrics, only to hear a familiar twang, welcomed by the enthusiastic clapping of the bar patrons. Thursday nights at John's, we learned, are reserved for American country music. However bewildering the experience to hear "Okie From Muskogee" in Ireland, we decided to stay, drawn by the friendliness of the patrons and the intelligent conversation. We lingered after the bar stopped serving at midnight.

Another night, we drove to Ennis, a town of about 18,000 with narrow, winding streets and the ruins of a Franciscan abbey built in the 13th century. For dinner, Dan and I chose Knox's Pub & Bistro, whose reputation for superb food was more than justified. Then we walked down the street to Ciaran's Bar, enticed by the promise of traditional music.

The music never materialized. But it almost didn't matter. The bar was crowded and jovial, and a fire glowed. A few minutes after our arrival a man turned to us and said, "So, are you here on holiday?" Later, smiling, he included us in on the round he was buying his friends, a Guinness for Dan, an O'Doul's for me. We edged forward and joined the easy conversation, which got louder and more animated. The craic was on, the night was young, and it became as comforting as the smell of the peat fire, and as warm as the memories of Ireland itself.

## Bites

**VIENNA**  
 Schweizerhaus

The day after a meal at a this-could-be-anywhere sort of Italian restaurant, some friends suggested the beer garden Schweizerhaus for an "authentic" Viennese experience. I imagined an arbor, gravel underfoot, umbrellas, metal tables and chairs, not-too-strong beer and not-very-good food. Still, I thought, why not? Better than Italian food again.

What we got was all of the above — except food far better than expected. In fact, the place nearly perfectly meets my fantasies of a beer garden, but is considerably larger. (Whether it has 300 seats or 500 or even more, I couldn't say, but it has a lot, and the number of beers served daily must approach 10,000. The kitchen, in keeping, looks like it could feed a small army, which it kind of does.)

Schweizerhaus is situated in one corner of the Prater, one of Vienna's large public parks. See if you can get seated toward the back (look for the larger-than-life model of the schweinsstetzel, the pork shank, which, along with beer, is the raison d'être of the place), where it's a little calmer. Then settle in.

The house beer is pilsner-style, natch, which remains the preferred type in central Europe; it's good quality, not overly carbonated, with some flavor but not a lot of that of either malt or hops — again, as it should be. The schweinsstetzel is liberally coated with salt, pepper and garlic, then spit-roasted. The skin is close to crackling in texture, with a thin lacquer, and unbelievably delicious; the meat is soft and juicy (and best eaten along with the skin). An order is 15.80 euros (about \$23 at \$1.45 to the euro) for a kilo (a little over two pounds) — easily enough to feed two or three.

There are other winners on the menu: fried potato pancakes, the original hash brown, very crisp and made from good potatoes; pork schnitzel, panned thin, and also nicely crunchy; sausages, especially the weisswurst, which is not as



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smooth and innocuous as most; and, thankfully, given the plentiful meat, all of the salads, including cucumber and potato, and the coleslaw.

There are some less-than-fabulous items on the menu too, so I suggest that you stick pretty close to the formula: schweinsstetzel, maybe some schnitzel, potatoes, salad and beer. It is as authentic as you can get, and cheap to boot.

Schweizerhaus; Prater 116; 43-1-72-80-1520; www.schweizerhaus.at

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