

# Food & Drink

Just what do nice girls get up to in the Boudoir? See Fashion, page 10

## BRENDAN BITES

Just what is Fergus MacCabe showing Italians how to make? The finest olive oil, that's what



**F**ERGUS MacCabe isn't your typical Tuscan farmer. If the name isn't enough of a hint, the red hair should probably tip you off that Fergus is a bit of a blow-in to the Colli Senesi region, just south of Siena. But, extraordinarily, this self-confessed "plastic Paddy" from north London is producing some of the finest olive oil in Italy at a small-holding he shares with his beautiful Belfast-born girlfriend. And what, you wouldn't have gone to see him if he invited you out to witness the harvest and eat a bit of his produce?

And it's not just because he cooked me such nice pigeon that I'm raving about his produce. If anything, a visit to Fergus is likely to make you think: "You bastard." This guy really has the dream — a beautiful stretch of Tuscan land with olive groves, a market garden, some chickens and plans for some pigs to root around in the forest and, ultimately, provide the raw material for salamis and cured hams.

But it's hard not to like Fergus, such is his devotion to good food and the Italian way. The small-farmer culture that Fergus has bought into is quite unbelievable for anyone brought up among the fallow fields of Ireland. These guys use every spare inch of land they have for

something, and rather than sell to big companies, most of them do all the production themselves.

Take Fergus's olives. A bunch of friends from Ireland come out every year to harvest the olives by hand with little plastic rakes. Then, at the end of every second day's picking, it's off down to the neighbour's olive press to get the oil out. The modern way, however, is more accurately called "spinning" rather than "pressing". First, Fergus blows the leaves out. This is important because it is the leaves that give olive oil the peppery tang you sometimes get. Then he spins a few times, to get the water out, and ultimately to get the oil out.

Fergus is a gas man, really. You meet him and you reckon he's some sort of north London wideboy, but this guy has passed all his Italian state farming exams with top marks and it just so happens that he also has some of the best land in Tuscany for producing olive oil.

When the authorities came to test his soil they thought there was some mistake, but it turns out Fergus has the lowest soil acidity in Tuscany. This, combined with the fact that he picks the olives early, thus getting less oil but *nicer* oil, and the fact that he presses it straight away, makes for a great

product. Compared to your normal Tuscan olive oil, which has that peppery aftertaste, this is smooth and kind of nutty. Drizzle it over pasta or dip bread in it.

Fergus now bottles just 1,500 bottles of oil a year, though it will only be 500 this year due to crazy weather, and he sells it directly to delis in London and Ireland. He has also spearheaded a co-operative effort in his locality — Fergus and all the ancient peasants bring together their produce and Fergus sells it in Ireland under their own brand.

For example, the guy who uses his dogs to hunt the truffles on Fergus's land makes truffle oil which Fergus sells on. Fergus also goes to a neighbour's kitchen to bottle all his own vegetables — artichokes and aubergines and courgettes — in olive oil. They also do cakes, biscuits, sauces, herbs, jams and flavoured oils.

Fergus's products are available around Dublin in places such as Caviston's in Glashule, Terroir in Donnybrook, The Butler's Pantry in Donnybrook and Blackrock, Dunne & Crescenzi, Sth Frederick St, Dublin 2, Best of Italy, Ranelagh, and Thomas's in Foxrock. The oil is branded "Antico Podere da Casa Nuova", it's top stuff and when you use it you can imagine a bunch of Irish guys, out in Tuscany, with the stereo blaring, picking olives all day. You can contact fergus at [fergusmac-cabe@hotmail.com](mailto:fergusmac-cabe@hotmail.com)

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## VINO VERITAS

**I**RISH wine buyers have never been particularly enthusiastic about supermarket "own-label" brands, unlike the British public who love those anonymous Sainsbury Claret and Waitrose Chardonnay labels, preferably on the shelves at £3.99. But it's a mistake to dismiss the own-label approach out of hand.

In Ireland Tesco, is the place for own-label wines, with its 77 stores, and though many of these are everyday in style they often represent good value — and occasionally one can come upon a wine of character and distinction. Tesco Finest Muscadet 2002 is a good example. Now muscadet, made at the western end of the Loire Valley from the grape variety that bears the same name (also known as melon de Bourgogne), doesn't get a very good press: dull, unin-

spired, tame are common reactions. But modern muscadet from the Sevre et Maine appellation can be quite tangy — and Tesco's gives unusual apple notes and, at €8.89, would make a grand partner for most seafood dishes.

Another Tesco white worth noting is Domaine Cazal-Viel, a Vin de Pays d'Oc made from the increasingly-important viognier grape. Soft and packed with ripe fruit, it's well-priced at €10.99. At the same price, Tesco Finest Chardonnay Reserve 2001, from Chile, has lovely creamy, honeyed flavours and gentle oak. Tesco Finest Sancerre 2002 represents sauvignon blanc in the French style, perhaps with some New World influence (€12.99).

A super bargain among the reds is Chateau Cazal-Viel Saint Chinian 2001, from a

spectacularly mountainous part of the Languedoc and made from syrah (60 per cent), cinsault and carignan. Robust and earthy, it retails at a decent €8.99. Even better is its fellow Saint Chinian, Chateau Cazal-Viel Cuvee des Fees 2000 at just €10.49. Made entirely from syrah, this would stand out in any company at that price, with its dark fruit, well-knit oak and a hint of spice.

Other reds include Tesco Finest Merlot from Chile, conventionally soft and attractive (€10.49), Tesco Finest Vina Rioja Reserve 1998 from Spain, with restrained oak and and typically Rioja flavours of vanilla and berry fruits (€10.87). And the sound Chilean own-label Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon are being held at €4.99 until Christmas.

**Ronan Farren**

# No bum notes at Soprano

## TABLETALK

Lucinda O'Sullivan got her hand kissed and her palate more than satisfied when she visited this trendy Italian

**I**T'S not over 'til the fat lady sings," I said to my better half in Soprano's Italian Restaurant in Bray, observing that we had better reserve judgment until we received our main courses. The "first act" had been more than in tune, but sometimes a bum note can be had after that, so better not get too excited!

I had spotted Soprano when returning from Greystones recently. It is opposite the Tudoresque or Germanic Bray Town hall, having lain idle for many years, is now a branch of McDonald's. It is an end of the town which has come up somewhat in the past few years with the addition of an upmarket interior decor shop, a snazzy-looking hairdressers and a few other businesses which now draw people up there.

Soprano, with its colourful faux stained glass window features, looks relatively small from the outside, but inside, it is enormous, stretching right back, with up to 120 covers. We, of course, thought of *The Sopranos* the TV show but no, we were told, the theme is music so there you are, no gangster jokes please when you see the suits walking around.

We walked in without a reservation and were dealt with efficiently and courteously by the restaurant manager, Hicham, who is Italian-Egyptian and adds quite a stylish presence to proceedings. We later discovered that Soprano is the venture of the beautiful Tara O'Grady who was for many years in Blackrock at Tota's, and subsequently with Little Caesar's when they took over. She certainly seems to know the business and what people want — value, fun and escapism for a couple of hours.

The decor, as is often the case in these Trattoria Italian restaurants, is colourful and kitsch. We were sitting just inside the door with a *trompe l'oeil* Naples-style view of Killiney Bay — colourful with permanent sunshine — if only! The floor is terracotta tiled, faux marble topped ta-



Illustration: Eorna Walton

bles and a service bar and counter along on the left. Another good thing is that there is Parmesan and black pepper on all tables — so no waving for the waiter all night for another smidgeon of precious Parmesan which happens a lot — it takes a woman to think of these things!

The music was hopping and it is the sort of place that will be buzzing over the next few weeks with groups and parties. It is also very family-oriented and is open for both lunch and dinner seven days a week.

I was more than happy with my *gamberetti aglio* (€6.95) — eight decent, firm, black tiger prawns cooked in garlic olive oil with dill and strips of onion, which came in a piping hot oval dish. Two slices of country bread were on the side with which I mopped up every bit of the oil — I enjoyed every last morsel, and thought it was jolly good starter, more

and so on. Pastas €6.50 — €12.95 include *penne mafiosa*; *maccheroni negresco*; *tagliatelle marinara*. From the starter selection, Brendan chose stuffed mushrooms (€5.95). I know Shirley Conran may have said "Life is too short to stuff a mushroom" but these weren't the small, tasteless button mushrooms, rather they were two lightly-battered great big whoppers which required carving up.

There are lots of pizzas and pastas. The menu is broken into three sections — vegetarian, house, and seafood menu plus house specials and chicken specials. Pizzas run from €7.95/€12.95 with all the old favourites — salami; *quattro formaggio*; *frutti di mare*

particularly at the price. On the house special selection there are flame-grilled fillet steaks at €19.95, or sirloins for €16.95, to include garlic butter, or pepper sauce, as well as your choice of *tagliatelle*, chips, or potatoes along with salad. Lamb chops with the same accompaniments are €15.95. The chicken specials are *pollo alla diavola*, *roma* or *pollo pomodoro*, again with the same choice of accompaniments — and at €13.95/€14.95 they can't be bad!

"Are you going to have the *polla alla diavola*," I asked my better half. "No", he replied, "I always have that — I'll have the *lasagne* [€11.50]." Now, that's not a great choice for you, I thought, considering he makes the best *lasagne* in the country — why not, it costs a fortune by the time he has

piled in the best of cream, buffalo mozzarella, and top-of-the-range beef — it works out more expensive than foie gras — but it is wonderful and nothing else can ever measure up to it. He enjoyed *lasagne* with an excellent side salad and very nice fries (€2.50).

**I** DECIDED to go for the *frittura di pesce* (€14.95), though I was afraid I might be in for a pile of batter which I had experienced in another Italian restaurant the previous week. However, this time it was great, a large amount of light, crispy-battered fish and shellfish. Delighted, I chomped happily through *crispy prawns*, *calamari*, white fish and salmon pieces, with garlic mayonnaise and a thoroughly decent accompanying bowl of *al dente tagliatelle* as well as a nice salad which had mixed leaves, red onion, black olives, shredded carrot, sweetcorn, cucumber and tomato. Really excellent value — which cannot be said very often nowadays.

"You must look at the desserts," said Hicham. "I couldn't possibly eat any more," I pleaded — but I looked at the menu anyway! There was a whole list of ice creams (€4.95) — Mozart — muscatel hazelnuts and raisins; *café Irlanda*; *casata*; *bellini*; *madame butterfly* et al along with all the Italian stalwarts (€3.95) . . . but I stuck to a (decent) espresso and along arrived two flaming *sambucas* on the house.

The wine list is compact and adequate with house wine at €15.95. We had a bottle of South African, Hidden River Valley Boabab Pinotage 2001 at €20.95 which brought our total bill to €69.80 including optional service — which was excellent — I even got my hand kissed as I departed — what more could a girl ask for?

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# Get the bangers out for Halloween

Sausages are the perfect food for the week that's in it, writes **Brenda Costigan**

**'G**IVE us a dish of the bangers and mash me mother used to make," sang Peter Sellars to Sophia Loren in one of their musical collaborations. The *Penguin Dictionary* lists the word 'banger' as a sausage, or a noisy firework or a noisy old car. Surely this makes the sausage the perfect food for the Halloween weekend.

Sausages could be described as one of the world's first convenience foods. References to sausages are included in a play written in 424BC. However, European sausages tend to be mainly of the cooked delicatessen type whilst the 'banger' (which appears to have gotten its name from the noise it makes on the frying pan) is almost always sold uncooked.

In recent years there has been an explosion (if you'll forgive the pun) of different varieties of 'bangers' available, venison, chicken, herb and garlic, you name it they have it — and they come in all sizes from little cocktail ones to bumper-sized ones for the barbie.

## SAUSAGES IN SPICED WHITE WINE

The sausages are poached in white wine before being browned and cooked with apples and spices. Chicken sausages are also good in this recipe.

You will need:  
250ml (8 fl oz) white wine;  
350g (12oz) good quality sausages;  
25g (1oz) butter;  
1 tablespoon olive oil;  
1 small onion, chopped;



DECENT SKINS: Sausage heaven. Photo: Tony Gavin

2 crisp eating apples, peeled, cored and quartered or chopped;  
300ml (10 fl oz) chicken or vegetable stock;  
1 heaped teaspoon sugar;  
¼-½ teaspoon cinnamon salt and pepper;  
1 generous teaspoon cornflour, blended with a little cold water (optional);  
1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives.

Put the wine in a saucepan and bring to a brisk boil. Carefully drop in the sausages and poach gently for 10 minutes. Then lift out and drain on a paper kitchen towel, discarding any loose skins. Reserve the remaining wine. Heat the butter and oil in a frying pan and fry the sausages slowly until they have browned all over.

Meanwhile, add the onion and apples to the wine. Also add the chicken stock, sugar, cinnamon and salt and pepper. Bring mixture to the boil and then simmer slowly until the apples are tender. If liked,

through. Every now and then stir the sausages around a bit so that they brown evenly.

## COLCANNON

Halloween wouldn't be the same without a dish of colcannon. Try serving some grilled bangers with it! I like to use the traditional curly kale, though some prefer to use cabbage. The secret ingredient is a touch of ground mace mixed through the finished dish. Mace is a 'cousin' of nutmeg. You will need:

about 900g (2lb) potatoes (Roosters for preference);  
225g (8oz) curly Kale - 6-8 leaves;  
a chicken or vegetable stock cube;  
1 onion, finely chopped;  
150ml (½pt) milk;  
salt and freshly-ground black pepper;  
¼ teaspoon ground mace;  
50g (2oz) butter.

Steam or boil the peeled potatoes until tender. Drain well. Meanwhile, prepare the curly kale. Cut out and discard the big stalk up the centre of each leaf. Shred the remaining leaf finely. It may appear that more is being discarded that is being used! Cook the finely-shredded curly kale in water with the stock cube added. When it is tender, drain well. Cook the onion in the milk in a separate little saucepan. Mash the potatoes with the hot milk from the onion, adding half the butter. Season well with salt and pepper and add the mace. Add the curly kale and the cooked onion to the mashed potatoes. Stir well, put in a hot serving dish and place the remaining butter in a lump on top.

this liquid can be thickened by the addition of the blended cornflour. (Bring to the boil to thicken.) Add the sausages to this tasty sauce, heat through and serve with mashed potatoes or pasta. Sprinkle with the fresh chives.

## HONEY-BAKED COCKTAIL SAUSAGES

A very tasty way to cook cocktail sausages in the oven.

You will need:  
450g (1lb) cocktail sausages;  
2 tablespoons clear honey;  
2 teaspoons wholegrain mustard;  
2 teaspoons French mustard;  
1 tablespoon oil.

Preheat the oven to 180°C, 350°F, gas mark 4. Mix together the honey, mustards and oil and pour over the sausages in a bowl, tossing them around to coat them evenly. Tip the sausages and the juices into a tin or baking dish. Bake in the oven for about 30 minutes until they are cooked

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