

THE STAR IN THE WEST

Chef Aidan McGrath of Lisdoonvarna's Wild Honey Inn on his new Michelin star and keeping things simple.

WHAT DO GUESTS EXPECT WHEN DINING AT THE WILD HONEY INN?

In a lot of publications and food awards, we've always been categorised as a restaurant. This can have an impact on how we are perceived. We have always played down what we do. We wanted to cook and serve food we'd like to eat if we went to eat in a pub. What we do is a little unusual for Ireland. It's more commonplace in the UK. We are not a hotel. We are a country pub with rooms. Our regular customers know what to expect. They're familiar with how we've progressed and with the changes we've made since we opened. Our philosophy is simple. We source the finest and freshest seasonal produce from the waters and the wild of Ireland's natural larder – cooked simply to highlight the flavours.

WHAT DOES YOUR NEW MICHELIN STAR MEAN TO YOU?

We were ecstatic when we heard – it was totally unexpected. It was worth all the hard work. The phone hasn't stopped ringing since. However, we got the star for what we have been doing, and we'll keep things the same.



HOW DO YOU MANAGE TO WORK SO WELL WITH YOUR PARTNER, KATE SWEENEY?

Kate looks after most things outside of the kitchen. I do kitchen and DIY. She is really good at giving feedback on what we cook, and has always supported me in what I do. She's objective and clear in her thinking. This is really important. When working closely with someone in a pressurised environment, you really need to be focused and on the same wavelength. This business is tough – it can and does impact on relationships. Taking time out is important, and having the same interests helps a lot.

HOW HAS YOUR BACKGROUND INFLUENCED YOUR COOKING?

Growing up on the west coast has had its part to play – especially when it comes to cooking fish – we were surrounded by the sea. There was always fresh fish

being sold in the street. Wild salmon in summer time with new potatoes and butter and digging for cockles when there was a "big strand" and eating them raw or cooking them in the sea water on the stove when we got home. These flavours are still there and are the flavours I like to achieve when cooking today.

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO COOK WHEN OFF DUTY?

I cook the same way, really. My favourite dinner is a good roast leg of Irish lamb, and proper roast chicken. I often come up with new dishes from cooking at home. The hard part is getting it to taste the same way when I cook to order in the commercial kitchen and replicate the flavour.

WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT FAVOURITE INGREDIENT TO WORK WITH?

Fish and game at this time of year. We also use lesser cuts from the animal.

WHAT SHOULD WE COOK IN NOVEMBER?

Pheasant will be in season soon and is really easy to cook. Ask the butcher to remove the legs and split them into thighs and drumsticks. You don't need to use the drumsticks – they are really full of sinews. Keep them for the stock. The thigh can be boned out and stuffed wrapped in tinfoil roasted and sliced when serving. The breast meat is best roasted on the bone, and keep a little under done, otherwise it will be too dry. This is nice with roasted sprouts and smoked bacon. A nice stock can be made from the drumsticks – passed through a sieve, reduced and finished with cream and whisked with butter to give a light velouté.

IS THERE ANY FOOD YOU DON'T LIKE?

Not much, really – swordfish, shark and insects – they're best left for fishing bait!

WHAT'S THE MOST INTERESTING DISH YOU EVER MADE?

Anything I cook, I like. I don't cook anything I'm not interested in. The point is to get a dish perfected – all dishes are interesting in different ways.

NAME ANOTHER CHEF WHO INSPIRES YOU.

There is no one chef – the chefs I admire are all different and do different things. They all work hard and have similar stories to ours... Mickael Viljanen, The Greenhouse; Ross Lewis, Chapter One; Garrett Byrne, Campagne; Richard Corrigan, Corrigan's; Simon Bonwick, The Crown; Tom Kerridge, The Hand & Flowers; James Mackenzie, Pipe and Glass Inn; and Sat Bains, Restaurant Sat Bains.

wildhoneyinn.com

ALL IN GOOD TASTE FOOD AND FASHION COLLIDE IN SLIGO AT THE INTERNATIONAL FASHION AND FOOD SUMMIT, NOVEMBER 3-5, WITH FASHION SHOWS, WORKSHOPS, AND APPEARANCES FROM IRELAND'S LEADING CULINARY STARS, INCLUDING DANNI BARRY, KAI'S JESS MURPHY, CAFÉ PARADISO'S DENIS COTTER, ASHFORD CASTLE'S PHILIPPE FARINEAU, AND THE GREENHOUSE'S MICKAEL VILJANEN (PICTURED RIGHT WITH SARAH MORRISSEY). THE EVENT IS THE BRAINCHILD OF CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS GRAD AND SLIGO NATIVE JOANNE COSTELLO, AND WE THINK IT'S GENIUS, IIFFS.IE.

