

On the road: Galway

Drawing on pristine ingredients, from seaweed and wild herbs to shellfish, this corner of western Ireland has become a culinary hot spot. Explore it via squid noodle soup, horseradish-laced oysters and coffee with woodruff cream

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Discovering bohemian Galway City, on Ireland's wild west coast, is like stumbling across a new love: you wonder how you ever got along without them. As a food lover, however, my timing is spot on: the city, and the county of the same name that spreads east and west from it, are currently witnessing a gastronomic explosion, having been awarded European Region of Gastronomy status for 2018.

Among the chefs igniting this gourmet revolution is JP McMahon, who runs tiny, Michelin-starred, **Aniar** (aniarrestaurant.ie). Gaelic for 'from the west', Aniar is so named because its dishes are inspired solely by County Galway's fields and its rugged Atlantic coast; imported lemons and black pepper are out, vinegars and seaweed-based 'spices' crafted in-house are in. To extend flavours and seasons, chefs draw on age-old traditions of salting, fermenting and pickling.

My dinner there starts, predictably enough perhaps, with homemade soda bread, moist and dark as an Irish peat bog, served with a choice of cultured butters. But then I'm served a slip of paper bearing an ode to bread that begins "Someone else cut off my head in a golden field". An academic by background, self-taught chef JP doesn't do things the ordinary way.

Next comes a garlicky chicken heart on a stick, a baby parsnip sprinkled with dehydrated onion crumb, an eel and kohlrabi spring roll, and kelp and sea radish soup – all so-called humble ingredients lifted to inspired heights. Equally exhilarating is the poached Atlantic cod that's topped with pepper dulse and pickled pine needles, and, to end, candied beetroot with sheep's yogurt cream, wearing fermented beetroot leather like a sombrero. This is contemporary Irish food at its best.

Equally rooted in Galway's soil and sea, with another Michelin star, is Enda McEvoy, chef-owner of **Loam** (loamgalway.com). Diners sit at oak tables inside the restaurant's huge industrial space and watch their meal being cooked in the open-plan kitchen – transparency is the mantra here. That and sustainability: Enda sources veg from a local farm, and returns the waste to be turned into compost. Grow boxes, which produce herbs for the restaurant, are used as a design feature.

Like JP, Enda enjoys the challenge of limiting his ingredients to what's local. "It forces you to be more creative," he says. So there's squid noodle soup, »

LEFT: DIARMUID KELLY LIFTING OYSTERS AT CLARINBRIDGE



and oysters flavoured with cultured cream and horseradish, crowned with a cucumber granita that shimmers like the quartzite rock of County Galway's Twelve Bens mountains. Enda's masterstroke, though, is the tar-like garum that clothes my monkfish. He makes it by fermenting waste squid guts for 60 days, and its salty umami undertones are exquisite.

There's plenty to please slimmer wallets in Galway, too, including **Kai Café & Restaurant** (kaicafestaurant.com). In summer, mains might include potted ox tongue with pumpkin jam, or smoked fish with lentils and leaves. Exuberant cakes are created in the small hours by French pastry chef Fabien Dufraisse. "As the kitchen is tiny, we have to hot-stove," says Kiwi owner Jess Murphy. "Fabien knocks off when I get in."

For location, though, **Ard Bia at Nimmos**, near the city's historic Spanish Arch and rainbow-hued Long Walk, wins out (ardbia.com). Get your hands dirty with a bowl of Killary Harbour mussels, savouring the restaurant's upcycled furniture and artwork as you eat.

At hot brunch spot **Dela**, Joe and Margs Bohan serve eggs, salads and vegetables they produce on their nearby farm (dela.ie). I try the pan-fried west coast mackerel with homegrown organic leaves, mustard cream and nutty soda bread, and eye up Dela's home-brewed porter for later.

There's plenty to buy and eat on the hoof, too. Grab one of Boychik's freshly fried doughnuts, or organic veg at the centuries-old Saturday market (galwaymarket.com), or a home-baked ham sandwich from another enduring institution, **McCambridge's** café-cum-grocer

(mccambridges.com). Natalie and Eoin, whose grandfather founded the store in 1925, still run it.

For chocolate truffles, head to **Hazel Mountain** which crafts its own chocolate from beans bought direct from the growers, and also makes a chocolate tea from the cacao pods (hazelmountainchocolate.com). There's more chocolate at the **America Village Apothecary**, a bar-café-store where Claire Davey makes chocolate bitters (americavillage.com). She uses local plants to make tonic syrups and tinctures, too, which she'll pair with food if you wish – try her raw vegan cardamom, rose and chocolate cake with a filter coffee served with woodruff-scented cream.

Nearby, **Sheridans** has a reputation for reviving Irish artisan cheeses (sheridanscheesemongers.com). Owners Seamus and Kevin Sheridan started selling farmhouse cheeses at the Saturday market, then set up a shop that now has four branches across Ireland. In its first-floor tasting room I try County Galway's standout cheese, **Killeen**, a gouda-style variety handmade by Dutch-born Marion Roeleveld using the milk from her own goats (killeenfarmhousecheese.wordpress.com). It's good – slightly floral when young, and caramelly heaven in its mature form. "People are often scared of goat's cheese, but they're pleasantly surprised when they taste this," says Emilia Furey, who runs cheese and wine tastings at Sheridans.

Heading down pedestrianised Quay Street, throbbing to the voices of pavement drinkers and buskers, I dive into Galway City's iconic blue and yellow **Tigh Neachtain** pub (tighneachtain.com). Run by the »



ABOVE: KEEM BAY SMOKED MACKEREL AT KAI CAFÉ & RESTAURANT. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BABY PARSNIP SPRINKLED WITH DEHYDRATED ONION CRUMB, A GARLICKY CHICKEN HEART ON A STICK, AND EEL AND KOHLRABI SPRING ROLL AT ANIAR; RAW VEGAN CAKES AT AMERICAN VILLAGE APOTHECARY; MACKEREL, SALAD AND SODA BREAD AT DELA; TEACH NAN PHAIDI CAFÉ ON INIS MÓR; KILLEEN CHEESE; BREAKFAST AT THE STOP IN GALWAY; HAZEL MOUNTAIN CACAO TEA; THE LONG WALK, GALWAY; A CLARINBRIDGE OYSTER





same family since 1894, its warren-like ground-floor bar is crammed with books, nautical charts and peat fires. Arrive at opening time to down your Guinness next to a cameo of Napoleon Bonaparte in one of the box-pew-like snugs whose high wood-panelled sides originate from a convent. Other drinks include 130-plus whiskies and the pub's own craft beers, brewed by Galway Hooker (named after Galway's small pitch-hulled sailing boats). There's no TV – instead, in the corner, a silver-haired pianist is intoning *Galway Girl*. Step upstairs and you're in **The Kasbah Wine Bar**, where you can watch the action on the street below while digging into a sharing board of Burren smoked salmon with honey and treacle bread, and a glass from its global wine list (kasbahwinebar.ie).

I head south along Galway's fretted coast in search of some of the producers of the food I've been enjoying. First stop is Clarinbridge, where Galwegians head at weekends to feast on oysters at **Moran's Oyster Cottage** (moransoystercottage.com). It's also the original site of Galway's annual **Oyster Festival**, now held in Galway City (galwayoysterfestival.com). At Brandy Harbour, the name a nod to its 17th-century smuggling days, I join Diarmuid Kelly. Along with his brother, Diarmuid now runs the oyster farming business set up by his father in the 1950s (kellyoysters.com). They cultivate rock oysters all year round, but the best are the wild, rounder natives, harvested from September to April. As we wade through the seaweed, Diarmuid plucks a native from the crystalline waters and shucks it open. It's meaty, almost metallic. "Chefs talk about terroir. We talk about merroir," says Diarmuid. "The oysters from this bay have a unique taste."

My final destination is the wind-blasted Aran Islands, south-west of Galway City. Silver limestone slabs, like giant wrapped chocolate bars, cover much of their surface, although over the centuries inhabitants have

clothed them with seaweed and sand to create a patchwork of tiny fields. On Inis Mór, the largest island, Gabriel Faherty uses the milk of his goats to make silky cheeses (arangoatcheese.com), some infused with seaweed that's harvested by **Blath na Mara**, run by another local, Máirtín Ó Conceainn (blathnamara.ie). Máirtín, his daughter Jenny, and her husband David, gather and dry anything from sea spaghetti and kelp, to dulce and carrageen.

But it's Inis Meáin, the least visited Aran Island, that most surprises. Ascending its stonewalled lanes from the ferry, I spy what at first glance looks like a designer pillbox hewn from local limestone. In fact, it's a boutique inn, **Inis Meáin**, the creation of local boy Ruairí de Blacam and Cork-born Marie-Thérèse (inismeain.com). Inside is a stunning restaurant with wall-to-wall windows ensuring every diner devours not just the food but the landscape that spawned it too (for those facing inwards, there's a mirror). Don't expect show-off cooking – each of dinner's four courses has just two elements: say, squid and tomato, or homegrown broccoli and hollandaise. It's pure and pared-down so that you celebrate each ingredient – which pretty much sums up what's happening in this wild and beautiful corner of Ireland.

HOW TO DO IT

Return flights from various UK airports to Shannon, an hour's drive from Galway City, start from £30 (ryanair.com). Doubles at The Stop in Galway, run by two artists who produce breakfasts packed with local produce, home-baked cakes and breads, cost from €100, b&b (thestopandb.com). For more information see ireland.com. Follow Clare on Instagram and Twitter [@larderloutUK](https://twitter.com/larderloutUK).

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: THE ISLAND OF INIS MEÁIN; THE INIS MEÁIN RESTAURANT