

## Richard Corrigan: Return of the prodigal

With three London restaurants and a Michelin star to his name, Richard Corrigan has gone back to his native Ireland to feed the people of Dublin.

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Richard Corrigan in Dublin Photo: Laura Hynd

Richard Corrigan blows into Bentley's Townhouse in Dublin at breakfast time like a refreshing blast of winter wind. He arrived the night before from London, exhausted, on a quick visit to his oyster bar and grill, which opened in July last year. 'I have been in the kitchen in Corrigan's since it opened in November,' Corrigan says, meaning his new restaurant in Mayfair. 'Here in Bentley's they have the smallest kitchen – it is amazing what they do – but there the kitchen was built for Nico Ladenis, a three-Michelin-star chef. What do you think a three-star chef's Mayfair kitchen is like? It is enormous! It's bigger than the restaurant – we are walking miles!' He pats a noticeably fitter stomach and orders scrambled eggs.

This is very Richard Corrigan. Engaging and funny; never, ever dull. Food, politics, gossip, jokes; refreshingly for a chef he loves to listen as well as tell. Logic and intelligence are at the heart of his plans; for the food in his restaurants, the all-important suppliers – farmers, fishermen and growers; for his adopted country (Britain) and his birthplace, Ireland. If Corrigan sees something and thinks it could change for the better, he wants to do what he can.

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Bentley's Townhouse in Dublin is, for want of a better word, the new branch of his London restaurant, the original Bentley's Oyster Bar and Grill in Piccadilly. The menu focuses on the freshest shellfish and fish, cooked simply to classic recipes, and grills of well-hung, grass-fed Irish beef. He has taken a few days away from his three London restaurants to check on the Dublin eaterie. Aside from Bentley's and the new Corrigan's in London, there is Lindsay House in Soho, the restaurant where he made his name.

Corrigan is also an enthusiastic ambassador for Irish food and is curious, while in Dublin, to visit specialist food shops, including some of the old-established high-street butchers. We take a walk through the city, away from Bentley's in St Stephen's Green towards Wexford Street, once the meat district in

Dublin. 'I was born near here in Coombe Hospital,' Corrigan says, heading into Morrissey's Family Butchers. The shop is bathed in artificial pink light, casting a fairyland tint over the meat on display. There's a whole pig carcass suspended high on a bar behind the counter, beside a hind quarter of well-hung beef.

The pig's eyes are closed and it is smiling in death, as they always do. The pig farming industry in Ireland is not happy at the moment, though. It is just weeks after the pork crisis in Ireland. Irish farmers are still reeling from embarrassment at the revelation that pig feed from a manufacturer, Millstream Power Recycling in County Carlow, had been contaminated with dioxins. The company supplied 47 farms in the Irish Republic and nine in Northern Ireland, prompting a recall of pork products that extended to British supermarkets. The Irish government acted swiftly to show the industry is clean again.

Corrigan has strong views on the 'traceability' of meat and immediately asks the butcher, Hughie Morrissey, where he sources his meat. Morrissey explains that he is buying from an Irish farmers' co-operative. This is a poor area of Dublin, all working-class people,' he says. 'We sell a lot of brisket and lap [breast] of lamb. There used to be 27 butchers in this area, each with its own abattoir at the back. Now there are three. Tesco has opened up the road and all the abattoirs have closed,' he adds.

'It is still nice to see inner-city people support a high-street butcher,' Corrigan says, adding that these days he finds it more economical to buy meat direct from farms for his restaurants, not from traders. 'You are just giving your money to middle men; try it,' he insists. He is impressed by Morrissey, who hangs his beef for 28 days for extra tenderness and flavour. 'Your homemade bangers look very artisan,' he says, complimenting their handmade appearance as they hang, still in strings, in the window.

Corrigan left Ireland in 1982 when he was 18. He took with him a love for Irish ingredients that has always been evident in his cooking. After a period working in Michelin-starred restaurants in Amsterdam he arrived in London, where his first great influence was Stephen Bull, a clever but notoriously edgy chef whose exploration of authentic Mediterranean food was making big waves.

A few experimental ventures followed for Corrigan, some shortlived, though all useful. But then he opened Lindsay House in Soho in 1997, a four-storey Georgian townhouse where to be let in you had to ring the doorbell. With the freedom to express every stored idea, he impressed every critic from the moment it opened and won a Michelin star. This year the lease on the old building expires and, having launched Corrigan's, he is content to close Lindsay House in May to concentrate on new ventures. But in

all of them, the Irishness is potent: dark wheaten bread served with sweetcream butter the colour of primroses; salmon smoked by Frank Hederman in County Cork; grass-fed black Angus beef and wild, native oysters; plus raw milk cheeses made by Bill Hogan and 'charcuterie' made in Schull, West Cork. His admiration for these good things is powerfully expressed in *The Clatter of Forks and Spoons* (the title taken from James Joyce's *The Dead*), Corrigan's fascinating new book that combines his life story with recipes.

Early on in the book, he writes about 'the farmer in me,' recalling his childhood growing up as one of seven children on a 25-acre bog farm in County Meath. The Corrigans were poor. His father drove a lorry part-time to make ends meet but quality of life was not in doubt. The family grew vegetables in the peaty soil and fruit in a glasshouse; apples and chestnuts were picked from the orchard and the children helped feed and care for the chickens, ducks, pigs and cows. They caught fish, trapped rabbits and sought out wild honey, eating it with Mrs Corrigan's home- churned butter and freshly baked bread.

'The kids in school called me Bog Man,' Corrigan writes. 'Two and a half miles down the road they had electricity and were eating Angel Delight for tea, but we and our neighbouring smallholding families didn't have the cash for electricity, until about 1973.' Even Corrigan's wife, Maria, has trouble believing it all. 'She asks me if I grew up in the 1920s,' he laughs.

However hard, the experience has imprinted toughness in Corrigan, and a politically charged spirit that combines individualism with compassion, like his father, 'a socialist with a farmer's heart.' Eventually, at the end of the 1970s, a shortage of money forced the family to sell up. The children were suddenly like the others at school, living in a bungalow with a garden, yet feeling totally out of place. Corrigan's parents died in their sixties ('life was relentless and that ages you') – he still wishes he could have sent a cheque to thank them for giving him a childhood that gave him farming DNA and keeps him grounded, even now.

These days his food has a lower centre of gravity, too. His interest in the kind of complex gastronomy that wins Michelin stars and earned him awards at Lindsay House has been replaced by simple lunches of smoked fish and poached eggs; the freshest, iciest oysters; Dover sole, bisque and steak tartare. Fuss is gone – he applies straightforward ideas to honest ingredients with an occasional burrow into exotic. He loves Thai spicing and Spanish or Tuscan ingredients, for example, and some peculiarity: there is occasionally a layered foie gras and smoked eel terrine on the Grill menu at Bentley's that is to die for.

Returning to Ireland and opening Bentley's has been a mixed success. The restaurant is heaving with people, but there has also been some hostility from the Dublin restaurant trade to the returning son who was born in the city. Would Dublin have preferred a French über-chef to open up, rather than a reappearing émigré? 'Probably,' he says – but he thinks it will be all right. The hundred or so lunchtime guests, enthusiastically ordering their starters on a January Tuesday in a recession, seem to agree. As far as their contented faces tell, Corrigan can come home to their land of good food, any time.

## GREAT IRISH INGREDIENTS

**Artisan cheese** Sheridans Cheesemongers ([sheridanscheesemongers.com](http://sheridanscheesemongers.com)), with shops in Dublin, Galway and Waterford. Neal's Yard Dairy in Covent Garden and Borough Market, London ([nealsyarddairyshop.co.uk](http://nealsyarddairyshop.co.uk)).

**Grass-fed Irish beef** Jack O'Shea, 11 Montpelier Street, London SW7 (020-7581 7771; [natoora.co.uk](http://natoora.co.uk)).

**Smoked fish** Woodcock Smokery, Gortbrack, Castletownsend, Skibbereen, West Cork (00 353 283 6232; [woodcocksmokery.com](http://woodcocksmokery.com)). Belvelly Smokehouse, Cobh, Co Cork (00 353 21 481 1089; [frankhederman.com](http://frankhederman.com))

**Pork** Crowe's Farm, Gurtussa, Dundrum, Co Tipperary (00 353 87 824 7394; [crowefarm.ie](http://crowefarm.ie)).

**Cured pork** Frank Krawczyk's West Cork Salami, Dereenatra, Schull, Co Cork (00 353 282 8579). Woodcock Smokery and Belvelly Smokehouse, as above.

**Dublin butchers** Morrissey's Family Butchers, 12 Wexford Street (00 353 1475 5467; [morriseysfamilybutchers.com](http://morriseysfamilybutchers.com)).

Bentley's Townhouse, 22 St Stephens Green, Dublin (00 353 1638 3939; [brownesdublin.com](http://brownesdublin.com)). Corrigan's Mayfair, 28 Upper Grosvenor Street, London W1 (020-7499 9943; [corrigansmayfair.com](http://corrigansmayfair.com)). Bentley's Oyster Bar & Grill, 11 Swallow Street, London W1 (020-7734 4756; [bentleys.org](http://bentleys.org)). Lindsay House, 21 Romilly Street, London W1 (020-7439 0450; [lindsayhouse.co.uk](http://lindsayhouse.co.uk)).

'A Clatter of Forks and Spoons', by Richard Corrigan (Fourth Estate, £25), is available from Telegraph Books for £23, plus £1.25 p&p (0844-871 1515; [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk) )