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# THE FLAVOURS OF HOWTH

Exploring the domain of King Sitric

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09 MAR 2015: Alan Beshoff related a strange tale. A few times each year his shop receives an order for fifty pounds of live lobster. At the appointed time, a person arrives, pays for the lobster, walks the hundred yards or so to the end of the pier, and releases the lobster into Dublin Bay.



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In fact, several people in the village of Howth, located less than 30 minutes outside of Dublin, noted that the Irish had an uneasy relationship with fish and seafood. Some relegated fish to ‘a poor man’s diet’ and therefore, meat and potatoes were the favoured choice at dinner time. Róisín (pronounced Rosheen), my ‘Fabulous Food Trails’ guide, noted that her grandfather was typical of the older generation. When asked, he didn’t know exactly what he had eaten, it was just some kind of meat with potatoes.

On the other hand, a new generation has started to exercise their taste buds and experiment with fish, seafood, fusion and creativity when they cook at home or go to restaurants.

And food seemed to be the main theme of my visit to Howth.

After a breakfast of Irish smoked salmon and eggs, I drove north of Dublin to visit Malahide Castle and Gardens. It’s a beautiful estate where the Talbot family lived for 800 years. We toured the castle

rooms and salons including the Great Hall where in 1690, fourteen Talbots got together for breakfast but none returned for dinner. They had all lost their lives fighting in the Battle of the Boyne; the war that ultimately determined the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland for the next 300 years. Outside the castle, the formal gardens overflow with rare trees and plants collected by Lord Milo Talbot on his journeys around the globe from the 1940's until his death in 1973.

From Malahide I drove the short distance to the village of Howth, arriving just before noon, and headed straight to the King Sitric Hotel to see about an early check-in and a bite for lunch. I was greeted with warm smiles by Declan and Sue. They showed me my comfy room on the second floor, where I plunked down my laptop on the small table to check my email. But I ended up sitting there, mesmerized by the views of the Bay.

Eventually I came downstairs and ordered a bowl of seafood chowder that arrived hot, thick and full of haddock, cod, smoked salmon, whitefish, crab, carrots and potatoes. Declan tempted me with a dish of crab claws "caught in front of the hotel" and butter-garlic prawns from about 10 miles away. My 'quick bite' turned into an expo of flavour, smiles and hospitality...but we were only getting started.

Soon after, I met with Róisín and we began a fascinating - and tasty - stroll around the town.

Right beside the hotel, in Balcadden Bay, she noted that there were once so many boats fishing for "little darlings" (herring) that you could walk

from boat to boat all the way out to Ireland's Eye, a small island 1.2 km away.

We walked to the path leading to Howth Head, where hikers can embrace vistas of the ocean and the cliffs. (Howth is thought to be a Norse word meaning "head"). And then we ventured to the site of the original Howth Castle, built on Tower Hill overlooking the bay. Today a Martello Tower guards the promontory and affords great views of the harbour, the three piers and the island.

It was here that King Sitric (Sigtrygg Silkbeard Olafsson) the Norse King of Dublin in the early 11th century, recognized the significance of the lookout as well as its proximity to Dublin. Ultimately he was forced to swear loyalty to Brian Boru, the High King of Ireland. To affirm his fealty, Sitric married Boru's daughter and Boru married Sitric's mother.

Nearby, the ruins of the 14th century Howth Abbey occupy the place that Sitric chose for the construction of a church in 1042.

### Culchies, Wallabies and Flats

It was at our next stop that I started to learn about Culchies, Wallabies, Flats and Captain Bligh (of Mutiny on the Bounty fame). We were guests of The House restaurant where they specialize in "Farm to Fork" foods. Seasonal dishes are featured on the menu as is fresh fish and seafood, with the philosophy that 'frozen' is simply not acceptable. We sampled crab with chilli and grapefruit, smoked mussels marinated in smoked lemon and then smoked salmon with beetroot and apple relish. The House (named after the fact that the infamous Captain Bligh lived here in his days as a naval engineer) is typical of the artisanal cuisine

movement that is slowly replacing the old meat and potatoes mentality in the country.

A brief stop to visit Ray at Collier Butchers revealed that he keeps his cattle on nearby Lambay Island where they share the land with 32 red-necked wallabies (the Australian kind). Apparently the convivial atmosphere contributes to the contentment of the cattle and the tender, tastiness of the beef products.

And then it was on to Nicky's Plaice (plaice—get it?) where the owner, Martin McLoughlin uttered those seven words that changed our lives (at least for that day).

“Do you want to see the smoker”?

We followed him to the back where he opened the doors of the smoker to reveal the mouth-watering smell of freshly smoked mackerel. Tasting followed, and let's just say that it was a taste-bud-heavenly experience. And then we went one delectable step further to sample the smoked Bass: thick, delicately flavoured, warm from the smoker, and so unbelievably good.

It was here, during a discussion of alcoholic beverages that go well with seafood, that I admitted to enjoying a few drinks of Paddy whiskey the night before. I was immediately branded a 'culchie' which was laughingly explained as a label for anyone not from Dublin (where apparently more refined tastes demand higher quality whiskeys). I also caught wind of the phrase “you're just a blow in”, indicating someone who has “blown in on the breeze” from another country. I stand firm that Paddy whisky was OK.

At Beshoff's Market Kitchen a few doors away, Alan Beshoff treated us to Flats—which are the flat-shaped native oysters; thick and tasty. He suggested eating them with just a pinch of black pepper. So good.

I finished my eat-in several hours later, with a wonderful dinner at Aqua Restaurant. Again I had Flats, followed by grilled lobster and a glass of Domain Fevre Chablis. The sticky toffee pudding kept calling out my name, so that not only completed the meal but also ended a pretty perfect day.

Howth is a real treasure to add to your Ireland must-sees. It's a short drive from Dublin or a 20 minute DART ride, and well worth the time. If you can schedule an overnight then you can, like I did, stay up late and listen to the waves with their enchanting tales of Howth, past and present. It's an experience like no other.

## Ireland



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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