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Marie Claire Digby
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information, please contact
yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie,
brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.

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How Aimsir hit the jackpot

The Co Kildare restaurant, at Cliff at Lyons, won two Michelin stars just months after opening. But this project had been in the planning for a long time, writes Marie Claire Digby

Michelin stars
Monday, October 7th, 2019, The Hurlingham Club, London
The great and the good of the British and Irish restaurant scene, more than 400 of them, are assembled at a swanky private members’ club in southwest London, nervously awaiting the start of the Michelin awards ceremony.

Among the last to arrive in the packed auditorium are a handsome young couple whose lives are about to change forever. As the famously clunky awards show unfolds, recipients of the new stars are called to the stage, and Ireland - North and South - has done well. But, still sitting quietly at the back are Cornish chef Jordan Bailey and his Danish wife Majken Bech-Bailey.

And then the moment comes when the room erupts, and a clearly shocked Bailey and Bech-Bailey make their way to the podium, both trying, and failing, to hold back tears. “I don’t know what to say. I was not expecting that ... It means so much,” Bailey manages to say.

The couple, who are jointly at the helm of Aimsir, a 24-seat restaurant and bar on the Cliff at Lyons property in Co Kildare, have gone straight into the Michelin Guide to Great Britain and Ireland 2020 with two stars. It’s a feat that is not unprecedented - Clare Smyth of Core did it in the 2019 edition, and Claude Bosi of Bibendum the year before. But nobody has ever, in the history of the awards, achieved it just 4½ months after opening.

It is an incredible achievement, to debut at that level, in that short a timeframe. But in reality, this project had been in the planning for quite some time.

How it all began
Thursday, June 7th, 2018, Love One cottage, Cliff at Lyons, Co Kildare
There have been rumours circulating in the restaurant industry about an exciting new venture being opened in Co Kildare by the former head chef at Oslo three-star restaurant Maaemo, and I am here to meet the couple behind it. Jordan Bailey strides across the courtyard, casually dressed in shorts, with a hand extended in welcome. Over glasses of elderflower cordial with a blowsy pink rose floating in it - a foretaste of the magic that Majken Bech-Bailey will bring to her non-alcoholic drinks pairings - the couple tell me their story and reveal their plans for Aimsir.

They are a charming pair, basking in the afterglow of their wedding in Cornwall two months earlier, when they walked down the aisle in the same seaside church where Bailey’s parents and grandparents also married. “My nan sings in the choir and my grandad took care of the church lawns. I knew if I was ever getting married, it would have to be there,” Bailey says.

Their romance began four years earlier at Henne Kirkeby Kro, the restaurant in Denmark where Bech-Bailey was working front of house. Bailey, who was at that time at Restaurant Sat Bains in Nottingham, arrived for dinner and left with his future wife’s telephone number.

After a long-distance relationship blossomed, they joined forces at Maaemo in Oslo. “We worked together for four months before Esben [Holmboe Bang, chef and owner of the restaurant] knew we were a couple. We are very professional when we are working,” says Bech-Bailey.

In the middle of 2017, Bailey decided he had achieved what he wanted to at Maaemo, and needed a new challenge. Job offers, from as far afield as Singapore and Shanghai, soon followed. But after a meeting with Charles Oak, project manager for Cliff at Lyons, and a visit to the property, where he was shown around by Barry and Gerrit O’Callaghan, owners of the Cliff hospitality group that also includes the Cliff House Hotel and Cliff Townhouse, a deal was done.

When we first meet, the couple have been in Ireland for six months, and are putting the finishing touches to a very polished plan - already at an advanced stage - for Aimsir. “It is going to be ambitious, I think that’s the word that sums it up,” Bailey says. “We want to give people one of the best meals they’ve ever had, something new, something interesting.”

Central to that is their intention to use only produce that is indigenous to Ireland, and its coastline, a concept that has taken them on an ongoing grand tour of Ireland’s leading artisan food producers, growers, fishermen and butchers.

They have another trick up their sleeves too. The pass, where each dish will be plated and garnished before being delivered by the chefs to the diners, will be located in the dining room, rather than being a physical
barrier between kitchen and front of house. They hope to be open by September, they say, once the building work and interior fit-out is completed.

But that building work doesn’t quite go to plan...

Delays, delays, delays

Wednesday, November 7th, 2018

Aimsir’s opening date has been pushed out to March 2019, but a series of preview evenings, open to the public, has been arranged. We are back in the sweetly-named Love One cottage, for a press preview of the Elements of Aimsir pop-up, where groups of 10 will sit around the dining table and get their first taste of what is to come.

Bailey is joined in the cottage’s well-equipped, but very normal domestic kitchen by Tom Downes, who was also on the Maaemo team and has been hired as chef de partie. Out front, Bech-Bailey is demonstrating her perfectly honed front of house skills - the perfect pitch of professionalism and easy, relaxed warmth - alongside her newly signed sommelier Cathryn Steunenberg, formerly of Chapter One and Ashford Castle.

The small team send out 11 servings of exquisite food, from tiny delicate snacks to more substantial plates, dessert and petits fours. In what will become a signature move, the meat course - wild mallard on this occasion - is preceded by the animal’s heart, or a portion of it, transformed into something unexpected and unbelievably delicious.

“Does he understand the Irish palate?” pings a message that lands during dinner, from a chef friend eager to know more about what is planned for Aimsir.

Foraged, pickled and preserved foods nod towards Bailey’s Nordic experience, but his first menu, and every one since, kicks off with a Ballymakenny Violetta potato filled with Boyne Valley Ban cheese, pickled Drummond House black garlic and garlic scapes. So yes, oh yes he does, is the answer to that question.

I eat my first ever oyster, a dainty Flaggy Shore specimen poached in fermented buckwheat butter and Highbank Orchard apple balsamic, and marvel at the harmonious, beautifully balanced dishes that follow.

This is going to be big, even bigger than we anticipated, is the consensus among the cabal of food writers gathered around the table.

Final preparations

Tuesday, April 30th, 2019

It is the last day of April and the builders, well a good many of them, are still on site. Aimsir is far from ready to greet its first paying customers, who are due through the doors in just over a week. Before that, there is a press preview and a series of soft openings for colleagues, friends, family and suppliers.

There may be a thick coating of dust everywhere, but the bones of Aimsir have been revealed, and are stunning. A dramatic burnt-larch-clad entrance opens to a stylish and comfortable bar with a wall of glass looking out to the generously planted garden, with its orchard and raised beds.

A corridor - more a runway really - leads from the bar to the restaurant is lined with cabinets behind which wines are chilling, and meat and fish is ageing. The pickles and preserves are also on display here, a giant botanical jewellery box of bottles and jars glinting in the subdued light.

“This is the dream,” Bailey says, surveying the dining room, with its midnight blue walls on one side and gold-flecked beige on the other, bespoke Irish oak furnishings and smoked oak and limestone floors. The kitchen - they call it the “cooking suite” - is partially exposed, visible through glass from counter level up. Six generous circular tables are dotted around the room, which is dominated by the two handcrafted oak work stations. From one, Bailey and his team - with their tweezers - will put the finishing touches to their dishes; from the other Bech-Bailey and her team will orchestrate the front of house and drinks service.

Nothing has been left to chance in these final few days before opening. “We did a big tasting on Saturday night that went on until very early Sunday morning; we didn’t finish until 5.30am and we started at 6pm,” Bailey tells me.
Life-changing

Wednesday, October 9th, 2019

"It was a strange feeling," Bailey says of going into their first dinner service after the awards ceremony. "Physically, nothing had changed and we did the same things as was early on a Monday morning and I was still in bed at home when Majken came running in and woke me, fairly violently, with excitement at the news."

In the dining room you won't be left guessing what each dish is though – that information is relayed by the chefs, who deliver the plates to diners. By the end of the evening, you'll have met practically all of the team.

Aimsir's menu is seasonal, but there are some things that seem destined to become cornerstones, such as that epic potato snack; the soda bread made with heritage grains, served with raw milk butter; and a petit four of toasted koji tart with molasses and Teeling whiskey cream. All three have been on the menu since the very beginning, back in the Elements of Aimsir pop-up days.

Start talk

Wednesday, October 2nd, 2019

The food scribes are back in Kildare again for a taste of the autumn/winter menu – Aimsir is generous with its invitations – and this time the conversations revolve around the upcoming Michelin awards. Several Irish journalists have been invited to attend, which is unusual, so there is much speculation about the possible reasons for this.

The team is on its first night back after a short break. The bosses spent it in Mexico. And will they be following that with a quick trip to London on Monday, I ask? The answer is non-committal. Michelin like to keep everyone wondering.

Dinner is another 18-destination voyage of discovery – there are some familiar dishes, but lots of new ones too, and the prodigious sourcing now extends to identifying the boat, and its skipper, responsible for landing the fish course. Take a bow Capt Seán Og Ward of the Elaine Marie.

The megrim sole, fished off the Donegal coast, is "gently steamed in a fig leaf with slices of acidic green strawberry, brown butter sauce, salted green elderberries and herbs from the garden."

Dinner is just as accomplished as it was in May, but there is a different feeling in the dining room, and the bar. It's as if the team own the space now, rather than merely occupying it. Service has settled into an easy routine, that like the best hospitality, seems effortless.

A bit of a blur

Monday, October 7th, 2019, The Hurlingham Club, London

"We were both genuinely shocked," Bailey says after the Michelin stars have been presented and the tears of joy have been wiped away. "What everyone saw was true emotion and reaction from us both. We had nowhere to hide. The first thing I noticed was our pumpkin dish on the TV screen on stage and then after that, it all went a bit blurry. We were both physically paralysed, and just overcome with emotion. Our bodies started to shake uncontrollably. We had to be lifted up off our seats by the people around us, including Paul Cunningham and Garrey Dawson, Majken's mentors from Henne Kirkeby Kro."

It transpires that the couple have known they were in the running for an accolade for a month, but not what level it would be at.

"We received our invitation via email. It was early on a Monday morning and I was still in bed at home when Majken came running in and woke me, fairly violently, with excitement at the news."

They celebrate with dinner at Holborn Dining Room and join the rest of the Irish gang for celebratory champagne at Bentley's.

Life-changing
we did the previous week, other than a couple of new dishes, but it did feel different."

"The easiest way to explain the feeling is to compare it to the feeling I had when Majken and I got married. It's a massive life-changing milestone in your life, there are celebrations and you feel different somehow, but when you get back to your normal routine, nothing has actually changed."

And what's next, are three stars in sight? "As long as we stay extremely ambitious as a team and constantly try to improve from one day to the next, then I think we are on a good path... If we can achieve this in five months imagine where we will be in five years." For Bech-Bailey, the best part of the journey they have been on since arriving in Ireland in January 2018 is the warm welcome they have received. "We are not Irish but the support we have had from the industry and our guests has been incredible. There is such a sense of family in Ireland! I want people to feel [they're] a part of this restaurant and this comes from how Ireland has embraced us and welcomed us."

Tables at Aimsir are sold out until the end of the year; January 2020 reservations will be released on November 1st. aimsir.ie

Aimsir's juicy drinks

I was able to drive away from one of the best tastings so far this year, because I hadn't consumed a drop of alcohol all morning. Majken Bech-Bailey is in charge of the non-alcoholic drinks menu at Aimsir. It is a revelation, a series of fascinating, complex, grown-up non-alcoholic drinks that makes "going dry" a pleasure.

"We don't do peach or coconut juice," she says. Everything here is produced in Ireland. "If you look at wine, it smells and tastes one way on its own, another with food. I asked myself how can I recreate this in a juice. We never serve just one juice, like an apple juice, there is always more - each juice has different flavours, colours and textures - it has to be the same experience as having a good glass of wine."

"At the moment I do a lot of home-made kombuchas, fruit juices and home-made teas, but you cannot just make a simple tea and cool it down; you need to add something more to create something new. I try not to limit myself: I walk around the garden and ask myself what crazy thing can I try now."

She never commits exact recipes to paper, as each ingredient changes during the growing season. She starts from scratch each time, as she knows exactly how each drink should taste. The reaction from diners has been very positive. "Customer reaction has been amazing. People walk away thinking this is as good as a wine pairing, that is what I want to create with it."

On arrival, guests are served a glass of "short-pagne", based on Highbank (non-alcoholic) Driver's Cider. Next we try the "beer", which is served from a soda siphon to create a head and comes with the bread course. It is made from hawthorn, rosehip, nettles and fresh hops.

"Normally we serve a very caramelised beer from Lock 13, a lighter version of red ale, with the soda bread. The brewer brought some fresh hops in and we really liked the effect; you really get that fresh hoppy taste, almost like a beer. The rosehips bring acidity, the hops lift it and give acuity, so it is not too sweet, more heery and fruity."

Next up is a non-alcoholic akvavit or schnapps. "Jordan Bailey, the head chef at Aimsir" came up with a dish of smoked mackerel with green strawberries and nasturtiums and a little bit of fresh apple juice. In Denmark it is very traditional to have akvavit with smoked fish, so I wanted to create a drink that tasted a little bit like a good schnapps. It is very refreshing and herby, with a little bit of pickle juice, then same green strawberry, heather, marigold and dill."

I am then handed a large wine glass, filled with what looks like white wine. "I want to create a nice glass of white wine with soft acidity, a sweetness, like if you get a soft lightly baked Chardonnay, it has fresh peas, watercress, kombucha and a little gooseberry juice. We serve it in a Burgundy glass; it reminds me a little of a skin-contact wine."

She then brings out the port decanter, to have with the cheese. This is made from bilberry juice, (very, very small bilberries the couple pick in the Wicklow mountains) and a little bit of elderberry juice to add some sweetness, and sometimes a little honey. It tastes not unlike a good Ruby Port, with light tannins from the berry skins. For a long time, non-drinkers have been left feeling short-changed when eating out. A few restaurants have made an effort in recent years, but Aimsir has brought soft drinks to a whole new level. - JOHN WILSON

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