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Dining Out

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Dining out during the 1980s in Ireland could be summarised gastronomically by prawn cocktails, Chicken Maryland, Black Forest gateau and bottles of Blue Nun or Mateus Rosé. All this changed with the Celtic Tiger when the Irish public was introduced to Caesar salad, tomato and fennel bread, tapenade and Chardonnay. From 1989 to 1993, Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud was like a lone beacon of consistency in the Irish edition of the Michelin Guide. However, in 1994, five Michelin stars were awarded on the island of Ireland. Change was afoot. Many young Irish chefs and waiters emigrated during the 1980s although some, such as Kevin Thornton, Michael Clifford, Ross Lewis, Robbie Millar and Paul Rankin, returned during the late 1980s and early 1990s with knowledge of nouvelle cuisine and fusion cuisine gained in the leading restaurants of London, Paris, New York, California and Canada. They brought a new energy and confidence to the Irish restaurant industry on their return. Both Rankin and Clifford trained with the Roux Brothers in London, and Thornton with Paul Bocuse in Lyon. In 1988, Clifford left White's on the Green in Dublin to open his own restaurant in Cork. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the opening of exciting new restaurants in Dublin such as The Wine Epergne (Kevin Thornton) and Clarets (Alan O'Reilly), both of which produced fine dining in difficult economic conditions. They were joined by Ernie Evans of Towers Hotel in Glenbeigh, who opened 'Ernie's' in Donnybrook. During the Celtic Tiger years, clusters of award-winning restaurants appeared in Dublin, Cork, Kerry and Belfast, with individual restaurants emerging in a number of other counties

around Ireland. A vegetarian restaurant, 'Café Paradiso', opened by Denis Cotter in Cork, was considered to be among the country's finest dining establishments. Restaurants run by a chef/proprietor were becoming the norm, though not all were financially successful. The demise of Colin O'Daly's The Park in Blackrock opened an opportunity for him in Roly's Bistro, which became a mecca for Irish diners during the economic boom years. One factor which led to the growing popularity of dining out in Irish restaurants, and the rising status of Irish chefs, was the growth in food writing in the national press from the 1980s. Restaurant reviewers such as Helen Lucy Burke in the Sunday Tribune became influential in the industry. New publications such as Food and Wine Magazine also profiled Irish chefs, reviewed restaurants and presided over annual award ceremonies, which helped transform chefs from unseen labourers into minor celebrities. John McKenna, writing in The Irish Times, reported in 1996 that Ireland had the most dynamic cuisine of any European country. Factors influencing this new vitality included the rising wealth of Irish citizens, which made dining in restaurants a regular pastime rather than an occasional treat, and also the changing tastes of a public who were more widely travelled than any previous Irish generation. In 1996, the year Michelin awarded two stars to Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud, Thornton's Restaurant in Portobello received its first star. In 1998, another Michelin star was awarded to Conrad Gallagher's Peacock Alley in Dublin. Gallagher's brash self-confidence and his use of the media, is emblematic of the Celtic Tiger era. His meteoric rise to fame and fortune was matched by his equally wellpublicised fall from grace. In 1999, the chief executive of the Restaurant Association of Ireland (RAI) declared 'we have a dining culture now, which we never did before'. In 2001, Kevin Thornton became the first Irish chef to be awarded two Michelin stars. In the first years of the new millennium, Michelin stars were awarded in Dublin to L'Écrivain (Derry Clarke) and to Chapter One (Ross Lewis), which had both held Red 'M's from the mid-1990s. Two new Michelin stars were awarded in 2008 to Bon Appétit

(Oliver Dunne) in Malahide, and to Mint (Dylan McGrath) in Ranelagh. Both Dunne and McGrath trained in Ireland's best restaurants, as well as in London with Gordon Ramsay, Tom Aikens and John Burton Race. The food of these award-winning Irish chefs is often described as 'new Irish cooking' in that it champions local, seasonal, often artisan ingredients or food, and presents them with their own individual flair. McGrath's Mint restaurant became the first high-profile closure of the recession. However, many believe that the recession was a positive development for Irish food culture and restaurants, in that it pushed Irish chefs to be more creative and to do more with less. Dining out in Ireland actually continued to rise during the recession. In January 2011, Le Guide du Routard, the travel bible for the French-speaking world, praised Ireland's restaurants for being unmatched the world over for the combination of quality of food, value and service. The Celtic Tiger played a large role in this transformation of dining in Ireland.