

2012-05-16

Chef Liam Kavanagh (1926-2011)

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Recommended Citation

Mac Con Iomaire, M. (2012) 'Chef Liam Kavanagh (1926-2011)' in *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*. Summer, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 4-6, DOI: 10.21427/d7c17m

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famed New York sensation, Shake Shack, has found a home away from home. Trading in the hordes at Madison Square Park for throngs of Kuwaitis and expats alike, this burger joint hardly seems out of place—good news, perhaps, for Chicago’s Potbelly, which is set to open in the near future. Epicurean ambassadors hailing from Europe include both Paris’s Ladurée and Fauchon, with their airy *macarons* and over-the-top French frippery, as well as Belgian organic table Le Pain Quotidien, found on street corners everywhere from Mumbai to Madrid.

The result of all this whirlwind franchising is a foodie’s microcosm of the world—an unexpected oasis in a petite desert nation. Cultish followings have emerged for restaurants, suggesting that success hinges as much on brand recognition as it does on taste. The gastronomic efflorescence is centered almost entirely in and around malls—an image that might be hard to conjure in the United States, where malls are more likely to be associated with yellow arches and greasy “Chinese” noodles. But Kuwaiti malls are social epicenters, in which dining can’t be left out of the equation. Add to that discerning taste and a penchant for things foreign, and you get a restaurant scene that stays fresh and away from the rays of the blazing sun. Kuwait’s malls are now tickets to the tastes of New York, Paris, and London—all without the jetlag.

Trend-Shopping in Restaurants

PHYLLIS RICHMAN

We are still awkward with the twenty-first century: Try saying, “The two thousands.” It sounds more like a social club than a time period. Nor

has the era forged its own style. The baby boomers are grandparents, and the last century used up such terms as *modernism* and *postmodernism*. A dozen years into this era, it doesn’t even have a nickname.

The place to look for an up-to-date catchphrase, I propose, is in the world of restaurants. There the changes are rapid, the impact is widespread, and dining is a realm that is actually improving.

I thought about this as I wandered into a new Washington, D.C., restaurant one Sunday afternoon. This was the fifth location for its restaurant group. (The nonchain chain is a continuing ideal.) While it was on a street crowded with new restaurants, the restaurant was known to already have two-hour lines (a trend beloved by restaurateurs, obviously). The bar was full this afternoon, though.

The dinner menus wouldn’t be available until 5:00 P.M., but we could linger at a table with a tray of oysters and two-digit “craft” drinks (another trend to cheer proprietors more than diners). The welcome was warm, the dining room was quiet, and the enthusiastic waitress offered to ask in the kitchen what oysters were available.

At least half an hour later she returned to our bare table, smiling and bouncy, apologizing that she had been waylaid by a staff meeting. (This must be what’s called the New Casual.)

Of course, the restaurant served small plates, and certainly it boasted local ingredients. Nevertheless, dinner was the classic success story of superb ingredients simply cooked. (Old-fashioned goodness never goes out of style.) And once our waitress was on duty, she showed that she knew her job and loved it.

Not so different from a decade ago, I thought, until I idly eavesdropped on the next table.

“I was an underwear model, too,” announced the waiter to the two young men whose drink order he was taking. “Big and tall,” he added.

Back in the twentieth century, giving one’s name was enough.

If this foretells a trend, I’d call it the New Transparency.

Chef Liam Kavanagh (1926–2011)

MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRÉ

Liam Kavanagh spent sixty years working as a chef in Ireland, England, America, and around the world on Cunard cruise liners. His generation was the last direct lineage with the culinary orthodoxy of Escoffier, and his life coincided with dramatic changes in fine dining during the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Dublin, Liam secured a scholarship in 1942 to train as a chef. College training in those days was very basic; the real learning depended on the quality of the establishment in which the young chefs were placed. Liam’s formative placements were in Dublin’s Central, Dolphin, and Shelbourne Hotels. His real break came after World War II, when he and his friend Bill Ryan were sent abroad to gain international experience. They spent eighteen months working with sixty chefs in the Café Parisienne, otherwise known as the Grill Kitchen, in London’s Savoy Hotel, under Chef Abel Alban, who had been an assistant to the late Auguste Escoffier. The restaurant did about 240 covers a night; the only item that was not served using silver service was the fried egg at breakfast.

On leaving the Savoy, Liam returned to Dublin’s Central Hotel as sous chef to Armand Hoffman. He then joined the Cunard Shipping Lines and along with Bill Ryan spent



Above: Liam Kavanagh (right) and Bill Ryan (left) at the Savoy Hotel, London, 1948.

COURTESY OF THE KAVANAGH FAMILY

three-and-a-half years at sea. Liam's first ship was the *Queen Mary*, sailing between Southampton and New York. Both young men then joined the *RMS Caronia 2* for a world cruise. Shipping records show that Liam started on December 11, 1951, as First Assistant Hors d'Oeuvrier. By June 4, 1952, Liam had become First Assistant Sauce Cook. The *Caronia 2*, also known as "The Green Goddess," was the world's top cruise ship; its clientele were all millionaires. One trip brought the ocean liner to the North Cape and Iceland. Liam recalls mostly European chefs in the kitchen, with a Jewish chef running a separate kosher kitchen. Ice carvings, intricate buffet work, and caviar were in abundance.

Liam later worked on the *RMS Queen Elizabeth* in the Veranda Grill before returning to Dublin's Gresham Hotel under the renowned head chef Karl Uhlemann. Uhlemann's Prawn and Lobster Cocktails were famous, thanks to his Marie Rose sauce, made from cold, strained *sauce américaine* mixed with mayonnaise, sherry, brandy, lemon juice, and cream. Liam left the Gresham to move to America, where he would live for six-and-a-half years.

Liam's first job there was in New York City's Victoria Hotel. He then spent a year in New Jersey with a man named Rod Keller, working in two of his restaurants. Liam described the difference between America and Europe thus:

Tough work, hard work, a completely different style of cooking, but they [the Americans] got from A to B quicker than we did. That's the way they worked. I basically admired the way they worked. They had always on their mind a productive level and had their costing well in control. They actually showed me how to control a kitchen properly.

Liam returned to New York City for the opening of what he described as an "amazing" restaurant in Rockefeller Center: The Forum of the Twelve Caesars. In an oral history he recalled some of the new dishes he learned to make there:

They had three hundred and sixty-five items on the menu. It was an incredible restaurant. It gave me a new insight into cooking, completely. They had wild boar on the menu, they had wild lobsters, you know, in tanks. They had trout live, they had pheasants cooked in clay. The baked potatoes were baked in ashes, charcoal ashes; that's how they worked. They got snails, French snails, and we coated them in a choux pastry and cooked them and served them with a sauce made from spinach—creamed spinach with Pernod, which gave it a beautiful taste.

Back in Dublin, Liam became larder chef in Restaurant Jammet, where the classical French influence of Escoffier was still felt. The Jammet family also owned the Hotel Bristol in Paris, and André Jammet went on to open La Caravelle in New York City. During this period, Liam met his wife, who followed him to New York when he returned again in 1959. There, for nearly two years, he worked as *chef tournant* in a French restaurant on Madison Avenue called Le Valois, before joining the St. Regis Hotel, where he was fish chef and also learned about Russian cooking.

In 1963 Liam returned to Dublin as sous chef in the Intercontinental

Hotel, the first international hotel chain to open in Ireland. Various head chef positions followed, first in the Royal Marine Hotel in Dun Laoghaire (1969–1971) and later in the Forte International Airport Hotel (1971–1981), where Liam applied the systems he had earned in America to running his kitchens. Eventually tiring of weekend and night work, in 1981 he took a daytime position in industrial catering as head chef for the insurance company Irish Life, where he produced seven hundred to eight hundred lunches daily until he retired in 1989. Two weeks after finishing at Irish Life, he began a new career teaching professional cookery part time at the Dublin Institute of Technology, which he truly enjoyed.

Liam Kavanagh's death on October 20, 2011, only a short while after celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday, closed the curtain on a long and action-packed life. Liam was one of the last old gentlemen of Irish catering, but his influence and spirit live on through his friends and the many Irish chefs he has trained and nurtured. For a complete oral history with Liam Kavanagh, please visit <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=1&article=1011&context=tourdoc&type=additional>.

Food Conferences

“**Food Conference: Perugia**,” an international conference on the last one hundred and fifty years of Italian food, will take place June 8–9, 2012, in the Umbrian hill town of Perugia. The sesquicentenary anniversary of the unification of Italy has reignited debates about unification, and this conference will consider whether Italy's alimentary traditions are real or invented. Speakers including Massimo Montanari, John Dickie, Carol Helstosky, and Allen Grieco will debate the history of the Pizza Margherita, the misery behind the much-vaunted *cucina povera*, and the Mediterranean Diet's popularity. The conference is open to the public. Sessions will be about one-quarter in Italian, three-quarters in English. For more information visit www.foodconference.it or e-mail Zachary Nowak at znowak@umbra.org.

The Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, University of Toronto, announces a conference on “**Foodways: Diasporic Diners, Transnational Tables and Culinary Connections**,” to be held at the University of Toronto from October 4–7, 2012. This conference seeks to address questions surrounding the dynamics of the food we eat, the ways in which we eat, the meaning we give to eating, and the effect of eating in a transnational world. Recognizing that culinary culture is central to diasporic identifications, the focus is on the

place of food in the enduring habits, rituals, and everyday practices that are collectively used to produce and sustain a shared sense of cultural identity. For more information, visit www.utoronto.ca/cdts/.

GLIDE'12: Consumed announces the third Global Interaction in Design Conference (GLIDE) to be held virtually on November 7, 2012. GLIDE is a biennial, virtual conference in collaboration with *Iridescent: Icograda Journal of Design Research* that disseminates cutting-edge research on topics related to interaction between designers and global communities. The purpose of a virtual-only format is to bridge cultural and geographic divides in an eco-friendly way.

GLIDE'12: Consumed will promote research and critical thinking on international issues surrounding food, nutrition, and health. Due to global industrialization, the way humans interact with food systems and production has become of critical importance, requiring citizens of the world to consider the introduction of new methods and technological systems that will enable global cultures to remain healthy and viable in the foreseeable and unforeseeable future.

For more information see glide12.org or contact Michele Y. Washington at glideconference@gmail.com.