

# EATING

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Of all of the transformations brought on by prosperity, none has been so dramatic, so downright *revolutionary*, as how Dubliners deal with grub. Gone are the days when food was nothing more than a biological necessity to be endured: today, the city is brimming with self-appointed gourmands who know their tagines from their terrines. Food – how it's eaten, where it's eaten, even how it's talked about – has been the drug of choice for many Dubliners over the last decade; for them you aren't so much *what* you eat as much as *where* you eat.

And where is pretty much everywhere. The city is awash with all kinds of eateries for almost every taste and nearly every budget, each vying for a clientele no longer willing to accept shoe leather for steak or boiled-to-death vegetables – the shadows of Dublin's culinary past, where to complain would be unseemly and ungrateful. Now everyone's a food critic, and this once dormant dining town has become a culinary bear pit where restaurateurs paying exorbitant rents are in a perpetual dogfight for the patronage of a clientele that no longer feels awkwardly grateful crossing the hearth of the latest themed epicurean fantasy.

Staying in business was tough enough until late 2008, but since the crash it's been near improbable, especially for those restaurants toward the upper end of the scale. Within a year, several of the city's best-known restaurants had closed, with many others facing an uncertain future: some of the ones we've listed below may well have gone by the time you visit; we've endeavoured to include only those that stand a better-than-even shot of making it through these difficult times.

But it's not all bad news, for diners at least. Restaurateurs have rolled their sleeves up and have re-imagined their menus to suit the shrinking budgets of their punters. Prices have come down, but the real difference is in the menu itself, with lots of enticing recession-buster specials now available to ensure that you will keep coming back – which is why we've noticed the dramatic return of the wholesome, filling and generally affordable burger to menus that a couple of years ago wouldn't deign to descend to such unimaginative lows.

## SPECIALITIES

Although many old Dublin staples have been consigned to the scrapheap of culinary history, some have earned their longevity while others are kept around for the sake of the tourists.

Perhaps the most feared Irish speciality is the fry – the heart attack on a plate that is the second part of so many B&B deals. It's really three meals in one – who can say no to a plate of fried bacon, sausages, black pudding, white pudding, eggs and tomatoes, washed down with lots of tea or coffee and usually accompanied by a basket of toast? But hysterical health fears have seen the fry disappear from the menus of most Dubliners and, with only a handful of exceptions, your best chance of a fry is in the hotel breakfast room.

The most Dublin of dishes is coddle, a working-class concoction of rashers, sausages, onions, potato and plenty of black pepper. Another specific to the capital is gurr cake, which 19th-century bakers made out of stale bread and cakes mixed with candied peel and dried mixed fruit. Because it was very cheap, it became popular with street urchins 'on the gurr'

from school. The term 'gurrer' entered the Dublin dialect to describe rough tearaways. Bacon and cabbage – once the epitome of bad, flavourless Irish cooking – is making a comeback, but its rich and delicious reincarnation proves that there was never anything wrong with the produce, just the person boiling it to death.

The most famous Irish bread, and one of the signature tastes of Ireland, is soda bread. Irish flour is soft and doesn't take well to yeast as a raising agent, so Irish bakers of the 19th century leavened their bread with bicarbonate of soda. Combined with buttermilk, it makes a superbly light-textured and tasty bread, and is often on the breakfast menus at B&Bs.

Scones, tarts and biscuits are specialities too. Barm brack (from the Irish for 'speckled bread') is a spicy, fruity cake long associated with Halloween. Various charms are traditionally baked in the brack, and the one you get decides your destiny for the following year. Discover the ring and you'll get married, bite into the penny and you'll be wealthy (which is some consolation for the cracked tooth); the pea denotes impending poverty while a