

The Trubadours

Pubs & Beers in Ireland

by Gary Corbin and Laura Guimond

This is another article in a series about the breweries, pubs and beers that we encountered in our May, 1996 trip to Britain and Ireland.

Ireland: It's not just (Guinness) stout and pale continental lagers anymore – Ireland has red ales (sweet bitters w/roasted malt for color & flavor) and all the British beer you could desire.

More importantly, Ireland's pubs are magical, the Irish people are the friendliest on earth, and in between pints (that is, mornings, afternoons, and evenings) there is a beautiful, lush, dramatic countryside to be seen. We fell in love with Ireland at first sight – and with its beers on the first sip.

The Beers

Stout

Guinness Stout – Maybe it's trite to say it, but it's true: There is just no comparison to the Guinness served fresh in Dublin's pubs; the stuff we get here is, by comparison, a stale, bland bucket of gasoline. The Guinness we had in Davy Byrne's pub (see below) was flavorful all over the mouth, fresh as a spring flower and a joy to behold. It's dark brown (NOT black), clear, with a thick creamy head that is so long-lasting, it will last your whole beer long, no matter how slowly you drink it. Medium-bodied (surprise!), with a roasty aroma evident over even the worst bar smoke, the flavor is a delicate balance of sweet maltiness and roast bitterness with lots of hop bitterness and a roasty dry finish. Home stout makers take note: there is no hop flavor or finish to speak of in this beer!

Beamish Stout – One of Guinness's two main competitors, it's a great stout – and it's made by some of the friendliest brewers on the Emerald Isle. Beamish's thick, creamy, long-lasting tan head sits pleasantly atop a dense black/opaque liquid. It is medium-bodied, has little or no hop aroma but has definite roastiness in the nose. The roast bitterness mixes with a noticeable malt sweetness and lots of hop bitterness, with a roast bitter dry finish.

Murphy's Stout – “The other” stout, quietly the second largest seller in Ireland, Murphy's has its loyal advocates, and our Grandma Murphy is no doubt one of them. But (sigh) it's just not Guinness. (And – the ultimate sin – they didn't give us a brewery tour, whilst the other two did – although we had to pay for the privilege at Guinness.) Black/opaque with a creamy tan head, Murphy's has a roasty and slightly malty aroma. It's the maltiest in flavor of the three, with moderate hop and roast bitterness, medium-bodied, with a roasty/sweet finish; very rounded and balanced, and not particularly dry.

Irish Red

“Red” beers are trendy Irish bitters served on nitrogen to give it the “Guinness” head (and to compete with the “real ales” and micros). Red in color from the addition of a small amount of roasted or black malt in the mash, they tend to be just a bit sweeter, fuller-bodied, and less bitter – but every bit as hoppy – as an English pale ale. CAMRA (the CAMpaign for Real Ale) objects to these “nitro” ales since they compete so successfully with cask ales, but they may be fighting the wrong battle. Reds are “crossover” beers – they attract erstwhile Bud and continental lager drinkers into the world of good, full-flavored beers.

Smithwick's Bitter – made by Guinness and pronounced “smith-ecks” – is an extremely common tap handle to spot (especially in Dublin) and very popular. It's easy to see why: deep copper to brown, thin creamy long-lasting head, with apparent floral, citrusy hop aroma. Full-bodied, sweet, malty, some caramel character balanced by hop

bitterness, strong hop flavor and dry hoppy finish. In the bottle, Smithwick's is more carbonated, with a thicker head, stronger hop aroma and more esters (citrus, pear/blueberry).

Beamish Red – as we wrote in our July article, Beamish Red is new on the market. We believe we were the first Americans to try it, right there in the Beamish tasting room. It is bright red in color, with an aroma strong in both hops and malty sweetness, with some banana esters. The beer is full-bodied, with a strong maltiness in flavor. Caramel flavors are evident. Bitterness is strong but does not dominate the malt, and the beer has a full hop profile. The finish is malty sweet with a strong dose of hops. Ask for this beer – it was our favorite among the Irish Reds.

Kilkenny Irish Red Ale – Reddish/gold in color, medium long-lasting nitro head, with an estery, buttery aroma low in hops. Full-bodied, sweet, with a malty/caramel flavor, moderate bitterness and hop flavor, with both sweetness and hop flavor in the finish. (We liked this one almost as much as the Beamish.)

Caffrey's Irish Ale – Deep gold, creamy nitro head that takes 1-2 minutes to settle, but not a lot of carbonation in the beer itself. Hoppy nose, lots of banana and citrus esters. Medium- to full-bodied, sweet but more than compensated by hop bitterness and full hop flavor. Full, flowery hop finish and residual sweetness.

The Pubs

We visited many a pub in Ireland – too many to describe in this article. Here are the highlights:

Dublin

Our first Irish pints came in Dublin's famous **Davy Byrne's**, dubbed a "moral pub" by James Joyce. (If you have this year's Irish Pub calendar, Davy Byrne's is featured in August.) One of the many hangouts of Dublin's many literary giants at the turn of the century, the pub is now crowded with Irish yuppies (did I mention that we got there on Friday at 7:00 PM?) just looking for a friendly pint. We enjoyed our first pints of Guinness, Smithwick's, and Beamish Stout with an American expatriate friend while watching the fellow at the next table perform some incredible card tricks (and win the attention of the young Irish lass sitting with him).

Davy's had features common to many Irish pubs. Aside from being (by American standards) incredibly smoky, they have a "snug" – a small side room where women were shunted off to drink so as not to be seen among their cigar-smoking, hard-drinking men in the main bar.

Another feature: they *know* that most of their customers want pints of Guinness; they *know* that it takes three minutes for a pint of Guinness to settle after being poured; and they know that darn few people *really* want to wait for their beer. The solution? "Just in time" service -- just keep pouring enough pints that they settle out just in time to be sold and consumed. (Clever bartenders also keep an eye on their clients' glasses and anticipate the need for the next round. These people *really* know their beer.)

Johnny Fox's is "the highest pub in Ireland," claim the owners. The pub is located on the top of a mountain in the Wicklow range in Glencullen, about 20 minutes south of Dublin by car. The food is good (but limited in selection for vegetarians); we had onion soup and a cheese and salad plate (which in England would have been called a "ploughman's lunch"). Johnny Fox's is now the proud owner of an Oregon Brewer's Festival T-shirt (1995) which should be on display next time a Brew Crew member visits.

We liked this Johnny Fox's so much, we went twice, the second time to see the two-part show in the large back room: the house band performed Irish folk songs (of course, the crowd helped them out on occasion). The night we saw the show, a U.S. marine celebrated his last night out as a bachelor with his unit – he was due to marry an Irish woman the next day! Naturally, the band played "Wild Rover" as his platoon lifted him on to the table and bade him sing along.

Between sets, a local troupe trained and choreographed by a member of Riverdance performed Irish kaelie dancing, a folk tap-dance featuring a lot of high kicking at high velocity while the upper body remains stiff and straight. We could see that both the music and the dancing were clearly influential in the development of country & western music and square dancing in the U.S.

Duke's is another of Dublin's "literary" pubs, and in fact was the first stop on our fun and informative "literary pub crawl." (What else should we have done on a Sunday night?) This is where we learned that, according to one of Duke's famous literary patrons of the past, Brendan Behan, "An Irishman would crawl across 20 naked women to get to a Guinness." (Certainly we learned some other very literary things, but that's the only one we wrote down.) Other fine pubs on the crawl included **Neary's**, a huge and highly decorated pub in which the tables completely encircle a 20-foot-square bar staffed by at least six people, and **The Old Stand**, this one consisting of several rooms richly decorated with mementos of Ireland's past.

The **Guinness Brewery Hop Store** is a wax museum, and while it's well done, you don't get to see anything close to a "real" brewery, and it probably can be skipped – if you could live with yourself later for doing that on purpose. On the other hand, for the £3 entry fee, you did get two half-pints of stout at the end of the tour ... you and 3,000 of your closest tourist friends. Then you exit through the souvenir shop – how convenient!

Southern and Western Ireland

The Spaniard, in the beautiful south coast town of Kinsale, County Cork, lies outside of downtown but is worth the trip if you have a car. (If you don't have a car in Ireland, go get one, or learn how to hitchhike – yes, it's still safe there.) This is where the locals go to escape the tourists. An Irish friend living in Portland had recommended the place, and as a result, they now sport a Festival shirt on their wall. The bartender, John, was a very friendly sort who filled us in on Irish pop music, but his accent was so thick we could hardly understand him (and vice versa). Though the pub is tiny, they manage to squeeze in a dartboard and some side tables that allow privacy.

Dick Mack's, in the touristy western coastal town of Dingle, is famous for having impromptu music jams by artists scheduled to perform elsewhere in town later in the evening. Its several small rooms are chock full of memorabilia and posters chronicling the development of this burg. Like many Irish pubs, it furthers the curious tradition of displaying collected insignia badges donated by visiting policemen; in this pub, I was pleased and surprised to find one from Springfield, MA, where I grew up.

No one was playing music there that night, but they were able to direct us to **The Small Bridge**, where John Brown and Eion Duignan sang Irish ballads and played guitar and Irish bagpipe (elbow-powered, rather than mouth-powered). It was a small but friendly venue, and in spite of the crowding there was none of the pushing and shoving we're accustomed to in analogous American settings. It was cozy – and friendly – enough that, once the musicians stopped playing, we could easily chat with them and learn more about their music and their unusual instruments.

Durty Nellie's, the "most famous" pub in Ireland, sits just below the Bunratty Castle (worth a tour) in Bunratty, near Limerick. Although crowded with tourists, it had an authentic, old-Ireland feel to it, and the "tossted cheese" and Guinness were just fine. They, too, now sport an OBFest T-shirt behind the bar, and an OBC member will sport one of theirs, thanks to the friendliness of their young bartender.

Northern Ireland

Gracie Neill's, in Donaghadee, County Belfast, "the oldest pub in Ireland", has been in continuous operation since 1611, a decade before the Pilgrims ran out of ale near Plymouth Rock. This pub has two rooms – the old part, about the size of a walk-in closet, and a new, large yuppie bar in back (actually it has its own "upscale" entrance on the other side of the building). The only reason we found to go through the short doorway to the back bar is to use the rest rooms; the locals (even the bartender) insisted that the doorway between them should be filled in with bricks and mortar.

But don't get the wrong impression – they weren't at all unfriendly. Quite the opposite! The moment we walked in, a man jumped up, shook our hands, bought us a round of beer, brought us the guest book to sign, and made sure we had seats on the low, crowded bench he was sharing with his family. We thought, "this pub owner sure makes his customers feel welcome." Weren't we surprised when he turned out to be just one of the regulars, and chagrined when he left before we could buy his group a round in return! We were able to return the hospitality, however, when the bartender came for a visit to Portland in September. (Perhaps some of you met Michael at the OBC meeting at Steinbart's last month, or afterwards at Bridgeport.)

The Crown is a lovely pub in downtown Belfast, across from the Europa hotel ("the most bombed hotel in Europe"). It features snugs with swinging doors that you can shut for privacy as you sit at a table for six. The bar is long and narrow, with a huge mirror behind it, reflecting the ornate decorations throughout: painted glass, carvings, and decorative tiles. Next door, **Robinson's** is famous for its four separate pubs, only two of which were open when we visited: the main and fairly traditional Irish pub up front, and a replica of New York's Fibber Magee's in the rear, which featured live music. Since it was Sunday night, the pub – which had only opened for the day at 5:00 PM – closed at the mandatory 10:00 PM; a short night for tourists on our last night in this wonderful land.

Conclusion

The pubs and beers of Ireland would take a lifetime to visit and chronicle. We've only scratched the surface. But if there were a way to do this for a living, we're ready! As wonderful as the brews and pubs are, however, the Irish people are far more interesting and compelling, and in fact, they make the entire experience worthwhile.

A pint of Guinness takes about three minutes to be ready from the time it's poured. This would drive most Americans nuts, but it's no surprise that it's so immensely popular in Ireland. The Irish are perfectly content to wait until this drink is ready; in fact, they relish those few minutes of conversation and may choose to extend them several minutes longer – after which they still have a perfect stout to drink.

Guinness fits the Irish well – robust, full of character, down to earth, with a good, steady head on a strong body. Moreover, if patience and friendliness could be bottled, the Irish would have the Guinness of virtues. And well-deservedly rich would they be.