



The home I wish I had

Review

"Are ye right there Michael, are ye right? Do ye think that we might have to stay the night?" Stella Morris asks plaintively, wishing she could stay forever in **Doonbeg**, west Clare.

Anyone who knows me will at some stage have been button-holed by me, forcefully reminded of the beauties of west Clare, and told endlessly of the magnificent **Doonbeg**, my very most absolute favourite hotel in the country.

I have gone on and on until eyes have rolled, tongues have lolled and heads nodded off, extolling the virtues of the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in, the essential oil-rich shower goodies from the lovely Burren Perfumery up the road, the essentially oil-rich, or at least dollar-rich membership, the smashingly normal and not up-themselves staff, the always glorious weather, the peace, the quiet, the delicious smell of turf smoke and even more delicious aroma of really expensive cigar smoke.

Then there's the yummy spa, the high-end **golfers** and the low-rent surfers and the appletart-upsetting right of way the latter have across the fairways, so the cross high rollers who usually get all the breaks have to stop and wait for the crossing high-fivers off to catch the rollers as they break...

"Oh really?" say my friends, or acquaintances, or, indeed, random strangers, eyes glazed over, biting down on yawns. "Mmmmm, fascinating," they murmur, hoping to escape the semi-evangelical nature of my ranting about how the doors close perfectly, because they have more hinges than they need, and all the hinges are very expensive, and how this is a good thing and actually what **Doonbeg** is all about.

It isn't really but it does go a long way to explaining why anyone who has ever really listened to me and gone to **Doonbeg** become the same kind of ranting convert I am, a **Doonbeg** believer although hardly a home-coming queen, despite it feeling like the home I wish I had whenever I do stay.

Convinced by the extraordinary level of attention to detail evident in every aspect of this place, I feel an overwhelming need to convince others to go, witness and believe.

On my most recent visit, the sun, as usual, shone out of a clear, blue sky. I do realise that this is not always the case in west Clare but I

say this, hand on heart, I have never been to **Doonbeg** when the sun hasn't shone, for at least some of the time. As they say around here, if you don't like the weather, just wait 10 minutes.

I spent a quiet 10 minutes at the bar in the Long Room, **Doonbeg's** poshest dining option, perusing the menu over a gin and tonic, and watching the waves break in on the beach. I could have stayed there all night but the charming Tom, the pleasant American maitre'd, brought us to our table, chatted a little, just enough, not too much, and let us get on with the serious business of some extremely tasty food.

The epicureanly successful Tom Colicchio is the consultant chef at **Doonbeg**, the American celebrity chef whose Craft and Gramercy Tavern are two of New York's best-loved restaurants and who is the head judge on the US reality TV show *Top Chef*. Don't hold it against him, though, as Colicchio has also won a swagbag full of James Beard Foundation Medals - a really big deal - including the 2010 Outstanding Chef award, and his menu at **Doonbeg** is smart, sophisticated and carefully weighted in favour of local ingredients. It also has an extra twist from the confident, international ingredients cupboard that makes it all the more interesting. Chef on the ground Sebastian Schulze obviously keeps a close eye on the place, as it was all impeccable on my most recent visit.

Starting with melt-in-the-mouth buttermilk and honey rolls and some good onion and thyme bread, I had some equally melting local smoked salmon in cannelloni, sprinkled with caviar and a quail's egg, while Charlie demolished the dish of the evening, exceptionally tasty foie gras married with the slightly odd notion of banana chutney which turned out to be such an extremely good idea, and tiny triangles of homemade brioche toast with a glass of Sauternes. Sigh of recollected contentment!

A delicious tower of tender local lamb came next for me, with long triangles of smoky aubergine, delectable sweetbreads and a mint jus. Charlie's monkfish came with a requested

extra portion of periwinkle and wild garlic porridge (how could you not?) and a copper pot of the most criminally gorgeous mash. This should be eaten in the same way the French deal with ortolans, with a cloth over your head so as not to disturb anyone witnessing the almost insanely perverted levels of enjoyment of something mostly consisting of potatoes.

Drinking a bottle of sexy Mariborough pinot noir while looking out at the beautiful blue sky and the stars looking all the sparklier for it, we decided against dessert but were brought biscuits, molten with butter, by the waitress who told us they would "take the harm" out of the coffee. "We're not here for a long time, we're here for a good time," she said, perplexed as to why anyone would forego the pleasures of dessert. One of those wise Clare women you hear about.

Back in my youth, oh a long, long time ago now, along with Vincent Hanley's MT USA, the innocent days' precursor to the ubiquitous MTV, my Sundays were mostly taken up with catching up on American football (few people who know me would believe this).

I clearly remember my excitement watching Super Bowl XIX in (ahem) 1985 where the San Francisco 49ers beat my favourites, the Miami Dolphins. My hero, only one of the greatest quarterbacks ever, Dan Marino, was pitted against San Francisco's magisterial Joe Montana, in the first Super Bowl where the starting quarterbacks threw for over 300 yards.

A few years ago, on my first visit to **Doonbeg**, I was walking down a corridor when a very large, floridly handsome man came out a door in front of me and I proceeded to walk into one of those same firmly attached **Doonbeg** doors, staring after him. Did it hurt? Not a bit. Dan Marino's a member at **Doonbeg**. Have I mentioned how much I love it there? **Doonbeg Golf club, Doonbeg, Co Clare. Phone: +353 (0)65 9055600. www.doonbeggolfclub.com** ■

