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Where did all the chefs go?



CATHERINE CLEARY

While many restaurants struggle in a tough business environment, those that are still trading have to deal with an acute shortage in kitchen staff. Why?

SOMETIMES IT seems like everyone wants to don an apron and whisk up a signature dish – until it comes to doing it in a real kitchen. The production company behind an Irish version of *Masterchef* has had about 1,000 applications for the amateur competition and yet the Irish restaurant industry is grappling with a shortage of qualified chefs.

Some of the biggest names in the industry are looking for qualified chefs, including Shanahan's on the Green, the Shelbourne Hotel and the Michelin-starred Malahide restaurant Bon Appetit. Even *Masterchef* judge Dylan McGrath has been recruiting staff for his Rustic Stone restaurant in Dublin. Recently the jobs.ie website listed more than 100 jobs around the country for chefs at a variety of levels.

The skills shortage looks set to worsen, following the closure last month of the Fáilte Ireland training centre on Amiens St in Dublin. A spokeswoman says 250 people were trained last year in bar, restaurant and culinary skills. But budget cuts mean Fáilte Ireland is moving away from offering training courses.

The restaurant trade is one of the few experiencing a shortage of skilled people. Brian Fallon, the newly appointed president of the Restaurants' Association of Ireland (RAI), says it is strange when restaurants are being forced to close that the remaining ones are facing difficulties finding staff. "Part of the reason is that there's been an exodus. A lot of northern European workers have gone back to their home countries," he says.

Those workers were filling a void created during the boom times when Irish school-leavers preferred to head into the construction industry than the kitchen, he adds.

The RAI will be lobbying the Government to set up a training scheme whereby people could be taken off the Live Register and trained in restaurant kitchens to a certified qualification.

"You could have people doing four days in a live cooking environment and a one-day college placement," he says. "It would be putting the onus back on restaurants to train people."

The worst shortage is at the mid-range for chefs *de partie* and commis chefs who are required to have a level of skill and experience, but do not command the wages of a head chef.

Even the salaries paid to head chefs have dropped since the days when some star names were reputed to be on €140,000 a year. A head chef now can expect to earn between €50,000 and €60,000 with a sous chef earning €30,000 to €40,000, Fallon says.

The first rung on the kitchen ladder is notori-



ously labour-intensive and low-paid. "A real problem is that people don't have the right attitude," says Fallon. "They might not start at the wages they want to start on but there's plenty of work out there if people showed initiative."

Most restaurants would be "very open" to the idea of unemployed people who like to cook "coming along and offering to work at a reduced rate to get skilled".

Plenty of enthusiasts have signed up to try their hand at cooking on television, however. Irish *Masterchef* producer, Lynda McQuaid, said the production company, Screen Time Shinawil, has had about 1,000 applications so far. (The deadline for applications is Wednesday). Competitors must not have had any professional training and 16 will be picked to compete in the 12-episode programme. McGrath will be joined in the judging by restaurateur Nick Munier of Pichet.

Chef Penny Plunkett is recruiting for her new restaurant in the Mercantile Tavern on Dame St in Dublin's city centre. Plunkett was a chef at Patrick Guilbaud's Michelin-starred restaurant before she ran La Maison. She also worked in Charles Guilbaud's Venu before heading to the new venture.

"It's very difficult to find people. I tend to try and stick to people I know rather than go to websites. So I'll ring around a few friends and ask if they know anyone looking. That way they come recommended. If I'm looking for more casual labour, I'll put a notice in the window."

A good *chef de partie* has a secure job, she says, and they're holding on to them in this climate. "Quite a few people have left the country for New York, London and Australia. And you've a shortage of people coming in."

She said lots of school leavers who think they want to work in a kitchen drop out when they realise it's not as easy as it seems to be for Jamie Oliver. "It's physical work with long hours and at the start it's not going to be very exciting. It's peeling potatoes and cleaning the kitchen."

She has trained a lot of kitchen porters who have studied catering. "If I see any kind of potential, someone who really wants to learn, I'd have them in the kitchen for a day, see if they ask questions and if they're interested and, if I give them a job to do, they can do it."

The country's top chef's course is at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) where the BA in culinary arts is attracting large numbers of applications. Lecturer Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire says the demand for the course is huge, pushing the points up dramatically. At an open day in the college's kitchen recently, he saw 20 Leaving Cert students every five min-

Hot jobs: The restaurant trade is one of the few seeing a shortage of skilled people.
Photograph: Think Stock

utes for three hours, a rough headcount of 700 potential young chefs. The attrition rate on the course is low. "We normally take in 48 students a year and lose about six," he says.

Those who have qualified elsewhere can be allowed into the second year of the programme. "Part of our problem is the whole moratorium on staff recruitment," he said. A lecturer recently retired after 35 years teaching. "He had over 50 years in the industry and we can't fill the space."

Teaching people to cook is "one of the most expensive courses to run in the DIT," he explains. "You can't pack 300 to 400 people into a lecture theatre like in UCD." Students are being taught in small groups preparing and cooking real food. He said it was "absolute madness" to be culling training courses when the industry was short of qualified chefs.

"We're fully aware of the cycle," says Mac Con Iomaire. "I see cheffing as a young person's game. By the time you're 35 or 40, you'd hope to have your own business. Our students are coming out absolutely on the ball culinary-wise but also aware of product development, setting up their own businesses, becoming artisan producers, exporters or opening their own restaurants. There's a lot of entrepreneurship and innovation."

DIT students do unpaid internships, but 80 per cent of them are kept on in paid employment afterwards, he says. The college has sent 14 students to Britain to Heston Blumenthal's restaurant The Fat Duck in Berkshire and several more to Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire.

"It's expensive to teach people to cook. But then you get what you pay for," he says.



It's physical work with long hours and at the start it's not going to be very exciting. It's peeling potatoes and cleaning the kitchen

Montreal's love of all things Irish



Downtown Montreal: immigration has created a diverse city

HUGO O'DOHERTY

Languages matter in Quebec, a region proudly divided between French and English speakers, and now Irish is getting the chance to flourish there too

In Montreal in the Canadian province of Quebec, English and French communities mix like oil and water, together but separate, with mass immigration making the city one of the most diverse in North America. Language is pervasive here. At Concordia University, an Anglo island in a sea of French, the Canadian Irish Studies School was established in 2009.

"It's not about nostalgia, that 'my grandmother came in the famine and I want to know more about her' or something like that," says principal and chair of the school, Michael Kenneally, who moved from Youghal to Canada in 1964. "It's presented as a case study for a whole series of issues that go beyond Ireland, things like colonialism, cultural nationalism, linguistic preservation, violence, rebellion, peace and reconciliation, emigration and exile. They may be interested in those issues for another context."

Quebecers tend to see in Ireland something that they find in themselves. A Catholic hold on political and social life dwindled from the 1960s onward, and, according to Kenneally, "the badge of identity now is language and nationalism, they're the new kind of religions of identity." To mix more easily with the French majority, Irish immigrants often changed their names – Reilly became Riel and O'Sullivan became Sylvain. More recently, Canadians and Quebecers have been looking at their past as they try to understand their future.

"There's a lot of discussion about two languages, two cultures, and so they look around for models. There are people in Quebec who look to Ireland in terms of its colonial past; they see parallels to reflect their own ideologies and political points of view," states Kenneally.

If language is the new religion, then the classroom is the new church. In a nondescript corner of Concordia, the Irish language is taught by Spiddal native Aoife Ni Churraoin. With every student here having chosen to take the course, the atmosphere is very different to that found in many school classrooms in Ireland. "They're really enthusiastic about the language," says Ni Churraoin, after two hours of class that began with learning verbs and culminated in a céili. "It's very fulfilling to come out of the class, even though it's tiring."

Amy Megran and Laura Sol are two students. Megran has never been to Ireland, but her family moved to Montreal from Belfast. Ottawa-born Sol, on the other hand, has no family ties to Ireland but was enchanted after a visit. "I saw that they had a distinct culture because I visited Ireland and England on the same trip and I found that there actually was a significant difference between them, which is something that I wasn't expecting," she says.

"It's hard, harder than I thought. It's a challenge, but it's important to have at least two languages," says Amy, who is also taking courses in Irish history. The school offers a wide range of courses, with a heavy emphasis on Quebec's history in relation to Ireland.

One of those taking such courses is 34-year-old Raymond Jess from Limerick, who moved to Canada to marry his French-Canadian girlfriend. "I'm a lot more interested in Irish now that I'm older. I appreciate it a lot more," he says. "My daughter is Canadian, she speaks French and I've been here for eight years. I'd like to give my daughter something beyond shamrocks and green hats."

Perhaps the most inquisitive person in the class is 20-year-old Armenian-Brazilian Matthew Karamanukian, who thinks that Irish "sounds German a little bit". Though he has never been to Ireland, he will be finishing his course in Irish Studies at University College Cork later this year. "I want to know about every aspect that I can while I'm there. I want to dip into a whole bunch of little things and be with the people," he says.

With the school in its embryonic stages, Kenneally is planning bigger things. "We're involved in creating something that will be permanent," he states. "It's wonderful to see the students appreciate the richness and there's outreach to the community."

"The university is very pleased with what's happening and we're beginning to have an international reputation. I absolutely love it. It's like I won the Irish sweepstakes."

Kenneally's optimism is certainly reflected by the passion of the students taking courses. With so much recent emphasis on Irish immigrants moving to Canada, the school is a small reminder that the relationship is reciprocal. For many people here, Irish and non-Irish alike, the language and the country remain relevant.

SMALL PRINT

Six degrees of qualification

MOST ACTORS wait until they're famous to allow the congratulatory honorary degrees to roll in, but none of that dosing around for James Franco (below). In his creative work he's already the busiest young gun around, directing experimental short films, starring in blockbusters, making documentaries, exhibiting his paintings and publishing a well-received collection of short stories.

But it's his academic work that takes up most of his time, and he has just enrolled in yet another graduate course, this time the doctoral programme in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston. That's to go with a degree in English from UCLA, simultaneously attending Brooklyn College (fiction writing), New York University's Tisch School of the Arts (filmmaking) and Columbia University (creative writing) while commuting to North Carolina to study poetry at Warren Wilson College. Not to mention his ongoing PhD studies at Yale in English and plans to attend the

Rhode Island School of Design. While Franco undoubtedly beats other actors for simultaneous studying, he's not the only actor with several letters after his name. His current co-star in *Your Highness*, Natalie Portman reverted to her real name, Natalie Herschlag, to study psychology in Harvard while filming *Star Wars*. She finished her BA in 2003, going on to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Jodie Foster earned a BA in literature from Yale. Maggie Gyllenhaal graduated from Columbia University in New York with a degree in literature and Eastern religions, before moving to London to enrol in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. But perhaps the most surprising Ivy-league brain box is David Duchovny who studied English literature at Princeton, completing a thesis on Samuel Beckett's early novels. He went on to receive an MA in English literature from Yale and began working on a PhD until *The X-Files* got in the way.

— Una Mullally

Spies beware: invisible ink formula revealed



ATTENTION BUDDING spies, or perhaps more accurately, budding spies with a time machine. The CIA revealed its secret recipe for first World War invisible ink. Six of the oldest secret documents in US government archives were declassified recently, exposing some old-school espionage methods.

The chief method for exchanging secret messages, according to one document, involved soaking a handkerchief or detachable collar in a mixture of nitrate, soda and starch, drying the fabric and placing the material in

water. The liquid that emerges is invisible ink.

Messages can then be revealed by spreading iodate of potassium onto the page. Upon releasing the documents, the CIA said that invisible ink had been rendered obsolete many years ago thanks to advances in digital encryption.

But invisible ink is still used elsewhere – in 2008, a British man was arrested after being found with a contact book of Al Qaeda-related telephone numbers written in invisible ink.

— Una Mullally



When art becomes the target

IN 1972, Lazlo Toth swung a hammer at Michelangelo's *Pieta* shouting, "I am Jesus Christ!" As protests go, it was extremely high profile and explained away as the ravings of a madman – especially when Toth's flatmate revealed that he was "always reading the bible". Last week, another group of art attackers, with very different motivations attempted a three-prong attack on Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (above). The controversial work – a photograph of a wooden crucifix submerged in a glass tank of the artist's urine – was targeted in Avalon, France by a trio of protestors. Serrano's 1987 work has been causing controversy for over two decades and it's not difficult to see why. To many, it's an inspired take on the cheapening of revered religious iconography. To others, well... it's Jesus disrespectfully suspended in a glass of pee.

Art is meant to inspire and provoke, but most artists prefer this to be without screwdrivers or hammers.

In 1996, Jubal Brown deliberately vomited over Mondrian's *Composition in Red, White and Blue*. After ingesting blue icing sugar and gelatine, Jubal claimed he was trying to "liven it up... I found its lifelessness threatening".

Collectively, the paying public can be a more fearsome critic than any pen and ink merchant, as JM Synge discovered during the *Playboy* riots at the Abbey, but there is more at stake now, in these commercial times. When Sinéad O'Connor tore up a picture of Pope John Paul II on US TV, she couldn't have foreseen the frenzied scenes of her album being bull-dozed. It certainly hurt her sales, but did wonders for her profile.

The KLF took the amalgamation of commerce and art to an extreme aesthetic level. In 1995, they orchestrated the burning of £1 million on a Scottish island. It was an inexplicable act, not least because the band had passed their peak and torched their retirement fund. They were unrepentant – until 2004 when founder Bill Drummond told the BBC he regretted it (especially as the KLF's back catalogue remains deleted).

— Sinéad Gleeson