

**Paolo Tullio**



**EATING OUT**  
The Stationhouse Bar and Grill, Blennerville, Co Kerry

**T**here's something about the south-west that has an almost irresistible pull on me. The wild landscapes, the craggy mountains, the surging swells of the Atlantic, the gentle pace of life and the people. There are people in the south-west who have time for other people – they chat, they inter-



act, they look you in the eye. From a Dubliner's point of view, it's like stepping back into an Ireland that was.

I've got to know the Kingdom quite well in recent years and I like what I've come to know. What strikes me the most as a gastronaut is that in this part of Ireland you can get seafood. Not after an hour of looking for it, but in just about anywhere that serves food. And not just the usual menu clichés of farmed salmon and farmed sea bass from Greece, but the whole panoply of fishy goodness that comes from our immediate seas.

So as I headed down to Farranfore I was already mentally preparing myself for a seafood meal. Going from there to Tralee and then on a few miles to Blennerville, the sea came into view, a wild wind blowing white-topped breakers onto the strand. A huge windmill also came into view, the sort of windmill that you associate with tulips and Holland, perched right on the seaboard where the Atlantic gales could blow unhindered over its sails.

There's a steam railway that runs from Tralee to Blennerville that used to run right up to the windmill. Nowadays it stops about 100 metres short of it, right outside the Stationhouse Bar and Grill, which, as it happens, was exactly where I'd come to eat. The Stationhouse is owned and run by young Dubliner, Lee Bradshaw, who is a man with a mission. His mission is to transform expectations. You may look at

his bar and grill from outside and think 'ah, yes, bar food', but go inside and your expectations of bar food will be deftly altered.

Inside the door you find yourself in a comfortable bar with interesting lighting, all nooks and crannies with armchairs, brass and dark wood. At the back of this long bar is the standalone restaurant, Number 21, which, like the bar, is well lit and nicely laid out. Wooden tables and chairs and a wooden floor give it a bucolic feel, totally in keeping with its pastoral surroundings.

I was joined for dinner by friends Deirdre Waldren and Greg Cauty from Cork, who told me that it was just a hop and a skip from Cork, taking little more than an hour to get here. Lucky them; it's not such a doddle from Wicklow.

The menu in Number 21 is extensive, longer and more varied than many restaurants. It's the sort of menu you'd find in trendy Dublin eateries where meaja types congregate and basil pesto dominates with balsamic reductions. Here's some of the starters: Italian fish soup of salmon, cod, hake, calamari and tiger prawns; spicy Italian sausage

**DINING IN STYLE**

If Aer Arann wasn't there, you could easily spend six hours in a car getting to Kerry from Dublin, which does make it remote. But then, that's half its charm.

You can dine posh in Kenmare, in the Park or in Sheen

Falls and in Killarney in Aghadoe Heights. You can also enjoy great bar food around the coast – Causkey's in Eyerias, O'Neill's in Allihies, the Moorings in Portmagee and now the Stationhouse in Blennerville.

hot pot with warm breads; bruschetta of roast bell pepper and cherry tomatoes with mozzarella; chilli, prawns and calamari on garlic bread, and marinated pork ribs and belly.

No doubt you've spotted it: there's a touch of Italy in this list. There are salads and pasta dishes to choose from and for main courses there are steaks, burgers, chicken dishes and happily lots of fish. Hake, cod, sea bream and black sole, as well as a mixed seafood plate of calamari, prawn, salmon, cod and mussels.

Like the menu, the wine list is more what you'd expect to find in a restaurant than a gastro-pub. About 40 wines spread across the new and old world are also well spread across the price spectrum

from under €20 to over €50 for those with deep pockets. We had the Agnus Dei Albariño 2005 at €27.50, which went very well with our choices.

Naturally I was irretrievably drawn to the Italian fish soup for my starter, which came served in a preserving jar. I can't tell you why, but I can tell you that it was delicious. I also got to taste Greg's marinated pork and Deirdre's bruschetta, both of which were well made and presented nicely.

For main courses Deirdre had the black sole, Greg had the sea bream and I'd picked the hake. The sole was served whole, on the bone, was cooked perfectly and had a firm texture. Greg's sea bream came wrapped in chorizo and was served on a bed of wilted vegetables with

whole grain mustard, a red onion relish and baby potatoes. My hake was baked and served with king prawns, pesto mash, red pepper sauce and rocket. These were all very well made dishes and the combinations of flavours on the plate worked well.

We didn't have desserts because just as we'd finished our main courses the band struck up in the bar. Three Latinos – two Italians and a Brazilian – were playing pretty amazing music, a kind of salsa-jazz fusion and we just had to get close to it. I did bring an espresso with me – a thin, watery, headless concoction that not even two spoons of sugar could rescue.

Sitting there listening to the music it struck me again how our expectations have changed. Here, in deepest Kerry, I'd been fed as I might have been fed anywhere in Europe, the music was South American and I smiled quietly – a cosmopolitan Ireland has truly arrived. A bill for €142.50 for the three of us was great value.

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# Stop at this station