

Alpine idyll in heart of Tipperary

CHUGGING up steep narrow roads surrounded by dense forests, my first glimpse of Aherlow House Hotel was the outline of mountain lodges with their distinctly pointy roofs – add a thick blanket of snow and it could have been Switzerland.

Having once had the unpleasant experience of a five hour drive from Newtownards to Cork, the idea of driving to my Irish alpine paradise was not appealing.

Instead I simply drove to Belfast Central train station and boarded the Enterprise to Dublin Connolly station where I transferred to Dublin Heuston station by the Luas tram and boarded the express train to Limerick Junction – the closest station to Aherlow.

Fifteen minutes later I was sipping a hot toddy beside the cosy fire in the Hunting Lodge Bar at the hotel. The house was originally built by Robert Massy Downey Saunders in 1928 to replace the former landlord's residence at Ballinacourty House, which was destroyed in a fire during the Irish Civil war.

In its varied life, the house has served as a private guest house in the 1930s, then as a hunting lodge before being transformed into a hotel in the 1970s.

I stayed in the one of the 29 guest rooms in the main hotel, however there are also 14 self-catering lodges which were built in 1999. The lodges can accommodate up to eight people and each boast two double and one twin bedroom, all ensuite. Having been promised a view in the daylight, I had high expectations when I opened my curtains in the morning – and was certainly not disappointed.

The scene that greeted me was like something from a postcard, the lush green Aherlow glen stretched between the Galtee Mountains and wooded Slievenamuck; a sprig of wispy cloud floated artistically through the middle of the vista as if ordered there by local tourism chiefs.

Outside was the definition of a fresh crisp morning as I set off to visit Con Traas' apple farm.

Some 1.5 million fresh apples are sold out of the farm shop to a local population of just 15,000. Con's parents moved to Ireland from the Netherlands in the 1960s to take on the apple farm. Con has added to their legacy by diversifying into making juices and jams with the other fruit they grow, including strawberries, raspberries, plums and sweet cherries.

Like with most farms, things have been difficult recently due to the cold weather. Con explained that the cold affects the insects which means a lack of pollination. Fruit is specially stored in oxygen low rooms on the farm, and cooking apples for example, can be kept for nine months.

While at the supermarket, I usually go for the more popular apples such as Granny Smiths and Coxes. Con opened my eyes to other variations such as Elstar, a yellow and red apple which was absolutely beautiful to eat.

He grows 15 varieties of apples which are sold and then 45 that there may be just one or two trees of, even some old Irish varieties such as Cherry Pickers.

He employs 15 staff and typically takes on another four for the harvest, including professional pickers who travel the world picking fruit.

Juices provide Con's biggest income and we were treated to seeing an apple and raspberry drink being made. Following juices, apples are his next biggest income. Most of Con's customers are local and British supermarkets and cider companies. He currently supplies the occasional pallet to Germany for Irish produce hampers and sometimes to the United States.

He shocked the group by telling us that 95 per cent of apples sold in Ireland are imported, Con had to import himself from Belgium this year just to keep a supply of apples in his shop, following a poor harvest.

Next it was back to the Aherlow House Hotel for dinner, which was promised to be apple themed.

As someone who loathes pork – the most obvious apple themed main course – this filled me with dread, however the menu created by Aherlow House Hotel head chef Jose Vega was a show-stopper.

We started with Apple and Parsnip Cappuccino with Cider Foam, which may sound a little strange but was in fact delicious and warming following a brisk walk in the cold grounds. Next came a Game Terrine with Granny Smith apple chutney and home made sultana baby brioche, which prepared well for the next course of cured organic sea trout in beetroot and pear cider with whole grain mustard emulsion and oyster beigne.

But the main course was my favourite; as a keen fan of Masterchef, I was excited to try guinea fowl done three ways. The breast was served poached and roasted, beautifully moist, then a confit leg and a crispy wing, accompanied by fondant potato, red cabbage and tarragon jus.

Although full to bursting, I couldn't resist the dessert of chocolate tart with cherries and vanilla ice cream, followed by goats' cheese and tea with petit fours.

The following morning, we had to take a walk through Aherlow's beautiful grounds before we could summon a healthy appetite back up to enjoy the generous breakfast laid on by the hotel.

And then it was with a sense of sadness, we left our picturesque retreat, but vowing to return.

It may be a long way to Tipperary but it's a journey well worth making, boasting incredible natural beauty and even Ireland's own little bit of Switzerland. **REBECCA BLACK** reports



Resembling a scene from the Alps, Aherlow House Hotel nestles on the side of the mountain in Tipperary



One of the picturesque orchards at The Apple Farm in Cahir, Tipperary

FACT BOX

- Aherlow House Hotel and Lodges are in the Glen of Aherlow, Co Tipperary. Tel: 062 56153.
- Rates start from €54 per night online at www.aherlowhouse.ie. They are currently offering a Valentine's Day special which includes one night bed and breakfast with an evening meal starting at €89 per person, or two nights bed and breakfast and one evening meal in February starting at €119 per person. A winter warmer offer is also available during February and March which includes one night bed and breakfast plus an evening meal from €55 per person.
- Travel by train from Belfast, Portadown or Newry to Dublin with month return tickets starting from €20 online. From Dublin Connolly train station travel by Luas to Dublin Heuston station. Return fares from Dublin Heuston to Limerick Junction start from €14.99 each way.

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