

# An Irish foodie fantasy

FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA, THERE'S FARE FOR ALL TASTES. BY GIGI RAGLAND

*"Our shells clacked on the plates.  
My tongue was a filling estuary,  
My palate hung with starlight:  
As I tasted the salty Pleiades  
Orion dipped his foot into the water."*  
—Seamus Heaney

The lines of this Irish poem capture the essence of my memory feasting from platters of freshly shucked oysters pulled from the coastal waters of County Clare just hours before. Could there be any other morsel that so utterly tastes of the sea? Living in landlocked Colorado, whenever I miss the ocean, I dine on oysters. The tang of salty sea water combined with the first briny bite wraps my taste buds in a wave of happiness.

An oyster sampling at Flaggy Shores Seafood and Oyster Trading Company, located on New Quay Pier near the Burren, a world renowned Geopark site, was a great start to the new, guided "Epic Ireland Food Tour" offered by Vagabond Ireland. The tasting was complemented with a tour and talk on the lifecycle of oysters and oyster farming. Next: the "shuck off," where my group of six learned how to shuck oysters. The best part? Some of us were really good at it. And we ate them—all.

You'll still find potatoes, hearty stew, and brown bread around every corner. And of course there's tea, and lots of beer. But in the past decade or so, the plates of Ireland have been filled with a gastronomic variety of edibles. Says tour founder Rob Rankin, "We wanted to disrupt a common perception of Irish food as limited or bland. Irish flavors can be striking and surprising. It's not all bacon and cabbage!"

Vagabond Ireland, keen to support the food evolution, has kept up with innovators who have come together to elevate the public perception of food. They are leading efforts to integrate wild, chemical-free, and fermented foods, as well as sustainable seafood, heritage animal breeds, dairy



**FOODIE FANTASY** ANY FOOD TOUR OF IRELAND MIGHT INCLUDE: OYSTERS, ABOVE; SEAWEED HARVESTING, TOP RIGHT; AND BEAUTIFULLY PLATED IRISH CUISINE.

products, and fruit/vegetable varieties into stores, restaurants, the home kitchen, and ultimately onto the plate. "Our concept for the tour was not just a journey through Ireland's geography, but a journey through the history of Irish food right up to the present moment (and beyond). Our goal was to highlight the wonder of traditional Irish cuisine. That includes the clean oceans and the fertile soil and pasture," adds Rankin.

In addition to gorgeous landscapes of Ireland, the six-day small group tour includes a good dose of Irish Craic (fun) and active outings. Departing from Dublin, guests ride in comfort aboard a custom-outfitted 4x4 that winds the Wild Atlantic Way from Clare to the Ring of Kerry, on to Dingle and scenic Sleat Head, then over Moll's Gap to Kenmare, reaching West Cork into the Beara Peninsula, through the mystical mountain valley of Gougane Barra then finally end-

ing up in Kinsale, the unofficial gourmet capital of Ireland. Needless to say, it's a full six days exploring lesser known, locally sourced immersive activities that are full of Irish adventure.

Guided foodie activities include a seaweed foraging workshop on the Ring of Kerry; herbal and hedgerow foraging in the green hills of Clare; an edible garden tour in West Cork; a sheep farm visit; a seaweed harvest walk along Derrynane beach; craft beer sampling; a water buffalo farm tour producing mozzarella cheese; and, of course, the oyster shucking tour.

The food activities require a bit of physical effort; there's hiking involved—even surfing, kayaking, and horseback riding along beaches, if desired.

You are not just sitting on your shamrocks on this food tour: You will be out in the green lands and blue seas of Ireland, relishing not only the food on your plate but getting up close and personal with the cherished environment and people that bring it there. **OLW**

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