

# THE IRISH



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*Craig McGuire explores the dichotomy of celebrating the pub as a central part of Irish culture and lifestyle while recognizing that the abuse of alcohol has become a serious matter in Irish society.*

## Alcohol



*Photos By Peter Foley*

When outspoken Irish President Mary McAleese criticized the “stupid, wasteful abuse of alcohol” in her country during the Re-Imagining Ireland conference in Virginia earlier this year, she sparked a firestorm that still smolders on the Emerald Isle.

From the pubs to the polls to the pundits, McAleese was soundly thrashed for her opinions. Even those who agreed with her blasted McAleese for criticizing the Irish on foreign soil.

Apparently, in a country of only 3.8 million people but with more than 10,000 pubs, the Irish take their drinking very seriously.

Where most countries have a bar or club scene, Ireland has pub culture, one that has been exported to virtually every city, town, and village in the world. From the Wicked Monk in Brooklyn to Paddy Foley’s in Tokyo, O’Malley’s in Shanghai to the Sean Og in Berlin, clearly the sun never sets on Irish pub culture.

Whether you are in South Africa or on the south side of Chicago, chances are you will have little trouble “having good craic” over a few pints down the local.

But nowhere is the experience more potent or prevailing than in Ireland, where the pub transcends the culture and stands as the communal center of everyday life.

“It doesn’t matter whether Irish pub culture is good or bad, it just is,” said John E. Donohoe, an addiction and intervention specialist in Rathfarnham, County Dublin. “When you’re in the heart of Ireland and you want to be entertained, you really only have two choices. You either sit in your room and watch the television, or you go down to the corner pub.”

There is a reason why bar owners the world over try to recreate the allure of the Irish pub: it is the quintessential setting for human interaction. Just walk into a pub anywhere in Ireland, and you will see why.

The warm glow grips you as you enter, the pub packed to the rafters. There’s a pint in just about every hand, others strewn across the polished oak and golden brass bar.

When you call for a pint, it is assumed you want a Guinness, the famously creamy stout Arthur Guinness first began brewing in Dublin in 1759. The match is on the big screen, a spirited jig can be heard above the gentle roar of the revelers, always speaking their minds, always taking turns picking up a round.

It is a simpler place where you know where you stand and where everyone is equal until proven otherwise.

From Dublin to Donegal, the major Irish cities are awash in contemporary pub culture, similar in many respects to what you probably find in your own local Peggy O’Neils.

But it is in the small sleepy towns blanketing the lush green countryside that you find the essence of the authentic provincial pub experience. It is here, in the warm snugs and smoky inner sanctums where the Irish have spent hundreds of years perfecting the art of conversation.

The Irish pub was always more than just a local watering hole. Entering and shutting the world out behind you, you realize this is the one refuge where we all have a place for the price of a pint.



“Very little has changed since I first stepped into a pub 47 years ago as a lad of 16,” Donohoe reflects. “I will say you don’t quite see as many people falling out drunk as you used to. They stay open longer, let them in younger, let in the women, and they serve food now. But other than that, we’re getting as drunk now as we ever did.”

It may sound strange to Americans, but until this latest generation, unescorted women were essentially banned from pub life.

Philomena Connors, a young professional woman who grew up in Ireland, but lives in New York working for technology multinational conglomerate Sungard, recently returned home for a visit.

“In the cities, the trend seems to be for groups of girls to go out and spend the night getting drunk,” Connors said. More striking for her, though, was the fact that single women in the rural Irish town where she was raised can now feel comfortable visiting the pub unescorted, something that was frowned upon by many in that ultra-conservative environment just a decade ago.

*“There are clearly some measures that are needed, but one of the larger problems is the issue of responsibility in this country. No one wants to take responsibility for their actions.”*

These days, the Irish as a whole are drinking more than ever, according to Irish Health Minister Michael Martin, who reported Ireland’s per-capita consumption of alcohol increased by 41 percent between 1989 and 2001.

To put that into perspective, consider that the average Irish adult drinks approximately 3.2 gallons of pure alcohol each year, spending some \$1,400 on beer, wine and liquor annually, according to the 2002 World Drink Trends survey. (Keep in mind that these statistics include visitors that have flocked to Ireland in increasingly large numbers the past 10 years.)

For all the noise she has made, McAleese does not have the executive power to enact legislation to change Ireland’s drinking ways. But Irish Minister for Justice Michael McDowell succeeded in having the Intoxicating Liquor Bill 2003 adopted in June by the Dail, the Irish government’s legislative body.

Among the Bill’s provisions are a proof-of-age card requirement in pubs for people under 21, stricter penalties for pubs that sell to drunken people, allowing the Gardai to enter pubs in plain clothes to enforce regulations, bringing closing time back to 11:30 on Thursday nights from its previous later time, and banning entertainment after last call.

The legislation is a reaction, in part, to a flurry of sensational media reports focusing on the devastating effects on Irish society by alcohol abuse. This is the dark, “sinister,” as McAleese called it, side to the Irish and their relationship with alcohol.

Left: Irish President Mary McAleese caused controversy when she criticized the “stupid, wasteful abuse of alcohol” in Ireland.



And always the media is there to fan the flames, as was the case with the violent alcohol-fueled attack on Barry Duggan in the heart of Dublin earlier this year that stunned the Irish people.

It was not so much the assault itself, but more the perceived senselessness and severity of the brutality which was played up in the Irish media.

Cycling home at 3 a.m. on the morning of April 13, Duggan, a 30-year-old librarian originally from Co. Sligo, who himself admittedly had had a few drinks, reportedly bumped into three men and was viciously beaten to the ground, his unconscious body then dragged and dumped in nearby Lemon Street.

Shocked witnesses to the vicious assault described the attackers as “wild animals,” and the Gardai stated that the attack was probably perpetrated by drunken party-goers.



Rushed to the intensive care unit at St. James’s Hospital in Dublin where he was placed on life support, Duggan eventually recovered.

But it was not what the attackers did that pushed the story onto the front pages of Ireland’s newspapers. Rather, it was what the assailants allegedly said in the aftermath of the incident.

The following day, the three men, caught on outdoor video – former Davis Cup tennis players Seán Cooper, 23, from Stillorgan, County Dublin, and Stephen Nugent, 21, from Kinsealy, County Dublin, as well as a third unidentified man – voluntarily surrendered to the Gardai and, according to the *Irish Examiner*, said that they could recall little of the attack, the result of an all-day drinking binge after watching Leinster’s European Cup win.

The men have refuted Duggan’s version of events, they have yet to be formally charged, and the investigation is still ongoing. The Duggan case is one in a string of high-profile incidents to spark outrage involving alcohol and street violence, domestic abuse, suicide, drunk driving tragedies, and a host of steadily escalating social ills.

Alcohol industry proponents argue, though, that the Duggan case and others like it are not representative of the millions of Irish people who regularly enjoy alcohol responsibly.

Leaders like Tadhg O’Sullivan, the executive director of the Vintners Federation of Ireland, a major industry trade group comprised of some 6,000 businesses, say they are tired of defending themselves because of the senseless, irresponsible acts of a handful.

For instance, O’Sullivan was recently verbally attacked at a pro-alcohol industry rally by a woman vociferously blaming the industry for the behavior of her 13-year-old daughter, whom she found drunk on the side of the road at 3 a.m. the previous morning.

“I was absolutely unable to get through to her that her daughter’s inebriated condition was her responsibility, and



not ours," O'Sullivan said. "I've raised five children, and I'll tell you not one of them could be found on the side of the road in a ditch, drunk in the middle of the night. And if they were, I would have known I was to blame. "There are clearly some measures that are needed," O'Sullivan conceded. "But one of the

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larger problems is the issue of responsibility in this country. No one wants to take responsibility for their actions."

So just how deep does the Irish people's relationship with alcohol go? How much is hereditary and how much is environmental?

While it has yet to be scientifically proven, many specialists on addiction say the Irish, as a people, have a genetic predisposition to alcoholism.

"In my personal experience, of the hundreds I have counseled, I have yet to come across a single alcoholic that did not have alcoholism in their bloodline," Donohoe said. "Have they found a genetic link? No. But I'm sure they will."

While other addiction experts agree there is a genetic link, they stop short of branding it exclusively Irish.

"In general, I would say definitely there is a link, the strongest of which I see between father and son," said Kristin Fahey, a certified addiction counselor in Savannah, Georgia. "If a man struggles with alcoholism, almost always his son or sons will be predisposed to the disease."

However, there are certain inherent cultural factors that increase the propensity towards alcoholism among the Irish.

"I grew up Irish Catholic on the south side of Chicago and in my family, all of the males, every one, were heavy drinkers (we didn't call them alcoholics back then) and most of the women too," said Eugene A. Hughes, a recovered alcoholic and nationally certified addiction specialist from Hemet, California. "Remember, traditionally Ireland was a relatively poor country with a lot of social problems, all of which drive some people to drink."

Still, not everyone in Ireland is drinking these days.

The Pioneer Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart, an organization sponsored by the Catholic Church, has 150,000 members that abstain from drinking alcohol. However, nobody said it was easy.

"Ireland's society revolves around the pub culture, so you have to have an extremely strong character to swim against the stream," said Ray O'Connor, assistant to the chief executive of the Pioneers. "Today, the pub culture is stronger than ever. We have more disposable income. Moral standards are low. And, they are drinking younger and younger."

Unfortunately, O'Connor does not feel the Pioneers will ever come close to the peak in popularity the organization enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s with nearly half a million members.

"The pressure to drink is just too strong and morals are too low today," O'Connor said. "Therefore, I think

we will continue to see our numbers dwindle in the years ahead."

True, the Irish seem to have embraced pub culture as never before and are headed down to the locals in record numbers. But the pub owners are quick to point out that the overwhelming majority of their patrons are decent, law-abiding citizens out to unwind over a few pints with family and

friends. They also add that the statistics that show a stunning increase in consumption usually neglect to reflect an almost 20 percent population spurt.

At the same time, based on statistics compiled by the World Health Organization (WHO), rising alcohol consumption, abuse, and the associated social problems are by no means confined to Ireland, with scores of countries, including the U.S., battling similar epidemics.

But unlike many of these countries, Ireland has become somewhat of a drinking destination for some short-term visitors, attracting thousands of British "Stag" and "Hen" parties every year.

In fact, the problem has grown such that major establishments, like the internationally renowned Temple Bar in Dublin, have taken to turning away these large groups of drunken celebrants because of the havoc and wreckage they leave in their wake.

Regardless of mitigating factors and commiseration with other countries, Minister Martin said the reality of alcohol abuse in Ireland represents a painful and growing burden on an already overtaxed public health care system.

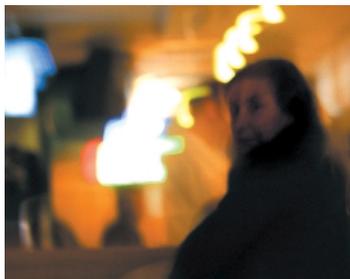
For instance, alcoholic disorders represent the main cause of admissions to psychiatric hospitals, and thousands of deaths each year are directly attributed to alcohol-related illness, accidents, and other events, such as suicide and auto crashes, said Dr. Ann Hope, National Alcohol Policy Advisor in Ireland's Department of Health.

And, according to a study reported by the Associated Press at the end of May, 25 percent of all admissions to emergency

departments in Ireland last year were alcohol-related, with 13 percent of patients arriving "clinically intoxicated."

But most experts do not attribute the current rise in consumption, and the associated social problems, to traditional alcoholics, or even to casual drinkers.

Rather, experts such as Dr. Eibhlin Donlon-Farry, a substance abuse and addiction specialist, said it is the "binge drinkers" that are to blame. Medical practitioners define binge drinking as "the consumption of five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion." (www.health.org, 2003).





Educated at University College Dublin (as well as Hunter College and Adelphi University, both in New York), Donlon-Farry witnesses the devastating effects of binge drinking every day. As a psychotherapist at the Aisling Irish Community Center located in the predominantly Irish American neighborhood of Yonkers, NY, he counsels a steady stream of recent Irish immigrants.

"In recent Irish migrants, the behavior has carried over from Ireland," Donlon-Farry said. "Many of these young people, between the ages of 18 and 25, started drinking in Ireland and continue with a binge-style of drinking alcohol over here."

Because they usually indulge on weekends or special occasions, Donlon-Farry said binge drinkers do not even perceive the problem, considering it more sporadic, and therefore acceptable, as opposed to endemic and perpetuating.

Among the members of this emerging culture of cyclical binge-drinking in Ireland, in the U.S., and elsewhere, heavy drinkers and alcoholics become indistinguishable, Donlon-Farry said. "Those who are heavy drinkers deny the extent of use and will say, 'I can give it up anytime,'" Donlon-Farry explained. "Those who are alcoholics have the perfect cover when they are surrounded by a drinking culture. The extent of their dependence becomes unnoticeable."

As a coroner from 1972 to 2001, and now a General Practitioner in Crossmolina, County Mayo, Dr. Michael Loftus is as well acquainted with the devastating effects of alcohol in Ireland as anyone.

"I've seen the violently destroyed, decapitated, and dismembered bodies after they are pulled from what's left of their cars after horrific accidents," Loftus reflected. "I've seen more suicide victims and spoken with more families than I care to remember. And I see that it's only getting worse."

Now, as a General Practitioner, Loftus is also an eyewitness to the other side of alcohol abuse, the domestic side not covered in the media as often as the bloody rampages and brutal car accidents.

"I've been a GP for 40 years now, so I see not only the physical and mental horrors visited on the parents from the abuse of alcohol, but on their children, and now on their children's children," he said.

Remarkably, even Loftus, despite the seemingly unending litany of tragedies he has witnessed over the years, is not in favor of abstinence, but rather moderation, education, and government intervention.

"I don't mind people taking a drink, I mean we're Irish, we drink, it's a part of social interaction in Ireland," Loftus said. "But more people need to know alcohol is a potent and dangerous drug."

## A GLOBAL PROBLEM

Indisputably, the problem of alcohol abuse is not specific to Ireland.

Maristela Monteiro, the Coordinator of the World Health Organization's Management of Substance Dependence Department located in Geneva, said Ireland rose to the fifth place on the WHO's global rankings regarding alcohol consumption, measuring the last decade.

However, she quickly added that it is always difficult to compare countries on consumption of anything, considering the wildly diverse array of mitigating fac-

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tors, such as age deviations, traditions, economic conditions, demographic anomalies, and many more.

For example, while using WHO's data it may appear statistically accurate that consumption in the U.S. declined by more than 1% from 1990 to 2000, to 9.08 liters from 9.18 liters, and in Ireland it increased more than 39% to 15.8 liters from 11.35 liters.

However, can you actually legitimately compare a nation of four million to a nation of nearly 300 million?

"This data should be viewed as a reflection of a growing problem in many countries, and not to just single some out," Monteiro said. "As in Ireland, but also the U.S. and other countries, the burdens are coming not from the dependent alcoholics, but from people getting intoxicated.

"These are mostly our young people, below 18, and our relatively young people, from 18 to 35, taking risks and realizing horrific consequences," Monteiro said. "There is no time for finger pointing. We need to work with the young people, increase awareness and education programs, and intervene in high-risk situations. This is the time for action." □

