

Celtic Sips and Swizzles

Written by Written by Karen Loftus

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If you're looking for a little culture with your cocktail or a spiritual experience with your pint, you're in luck. Ireland has plenty of intoxicating spots full of poetry and prose.



The Irish have long been known for the drink. Be it beers or whiskey, they know how to distill it, serve it and celebrate it. I couldn't think of a better place to sip, swizzle and celebrate my birthday than back on the old sod.

My grandparents distilled gin in a tub, ran a speakeasy during The Prohibition and ran many a pub in Philadelphia. My grandfather was from the North and my grandmother from the South of Ireland. I was playing family fair and hitting them both.

I wasted no time when I arrived. Hugh Rice, the guide of the North and the Clinton's official guide, met me at the gate in Belfast and off we went along the rugged Causeway Coast complete with stops at hedge schools, a graveyard visit and a quick run over the ocean on the bouncy Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge. The endless views with the cobalt blue black sky made me feel like I was on the edge of the earth. "You are!" says Hugh. "In the North, you can experience all four seasons in a day." We were in season three by the time we reached Bushmill's in County Antrim.



Bushmill's, the oldest licensed distillery in the world was in top form, celebrating its 400-year anniversary. After the elaborate distillery tour, we were offered our whiskey of choice. I went with their 12-year-old single malt, a special edition sold only on site. Matured mostly in sherry casks, it was a lovely complement to the homemade Shepard's pie made daily at their restaurant.

In honor of my aging, they offered me a spot of the special 400th Anniversary blend, which was blissfully smooth, containing 95% malt and 5% grain whiskey made with 30% crystal malt.

I had a perfect night at the nearby Bushmill's Inn, an evocative spot, frequented by the serious global golfers hitting the greens at Portrush, is equally as old as the distillery and pitch perfect in the charm department. After the best Irish breakfast imaginable, complete with fresh bread, I headed to Belfast. The train drops you off in city center, steps from the famed Europa Hotel, the most bombed hotel in all of Europe, as it was the media's epicenter during the "troubles".

Belfast is bustling with brilliant pubs full of local character and old world charm. The Duke of York and Kellys Cellars are two of the top and The Crown Liquor Saloon across from Europa is the most famous. It was designed with a series of cozy snugs, small private rooms, designed so women could sneak in a wee pint back in the day. It's a museum worthy space with its tile floor, tin ceiling, etched glass, scalloped lamps, and inlaid marble mosaics.



There are several inspired spots in Belfast for sips and swizzles. Venture out of city center the old world lounge at the Culloden Hotel (supposedly home to Van Morrison). It's perfect for tipples or tea, overlooking lush grounds and ocean views. If you're a city slicker, The Malmaison Hotel's dark and edgy warehouse-like, James Bond meets rocker spot is a trendy hot spot.

The crown jewel of the Celtic cocktail culture is by far, The Merchant Hotel in Belfast's historic Cathedral Quarter right around the corner from The Malmaison Hotel. This stunning five star hotel, once the Bank of Ulster is home to the world's most expensive cocktail, the Mai Tai. This

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spirited beauty warrants its \$1,500 price tag as it is made with Wray and Nephew's 17-year-old Jamaican rum with its 75% cask strength.

The tall tale told is that Trader Vic, creator of the Mai Tai, made his first famed drink with this Rum. It was so popular that Wray and Nephew ran out of their stock. The Merchant has one of their original bottles. The rum was made in a pot still, giving it loads of character and depth, heavy on molasses with a great nose of ripe banana, orange, toffee, nut and vanilla. Hayden, the lovely bartender says, "Its a deep golden color that reminds me of golden syrup."

The Mai Tai isn't the only star at The Bar. Sean Muldoon the Potation Manager is an impassioned genius. If you have a love of the classics and you want a deeper knowledge of the cocktail culture, carve out time to spend a leisurely afternoon with Sean and Hayden. Their knowledge is extensive, craft unrivaled and attention to detail inspired.

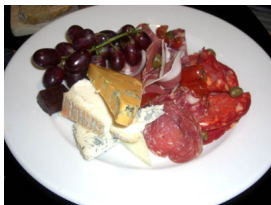
No expense is spared at The Bar from silver straws, Reidel glassware, hand crafted ice and simply the best spirits. Sean credits his mentor, from New York's well known Milk and Honey, Sasha Petraske, "Every single principal he does, we do here."

Check out The Merchant Hotel Bar Book (Sean's doing). She's a beauty broken down in to morning (Punches, Eggnog, Fizzes, Toddies & Tonics), afternoon (Swizzles, Sangrias & Punches) and evening (Highballs, Slings & Sours) options. There are plenty of liquid pearls of wisdom in the glossary.

Each month Sean hosts The Connoisseurs Club, with the world's top mixologists, from the Cocktail God, America's own Dale De Groff to UK's Peter Dorelli (The American Bar) and others. Check the schedule, as it's well worth a trip over.

After my starter champagne, their perfect Mai Tai and another gorgeous classic, The Jack Rose, I slipped in to The Great Room, (appropriately named) formerly the bank hall, for an elegant lunch. Yes, the beverages were breakfast.

Once imbibed, I hopped a train to Dublin where I immediately popped in to Fallon and Byrne, an Irish version of New York's Dean and De Luca, but better. It's off of Grafton Street in a fabulous old building with several foodie filled floors complete with an international gourmet shop, a buzzing coffee bar and lovely restaurant.



I found my liquid nirvana in their cozy wine cellar with over 7,500 bottles of 650 different wines sourced from every known and unknown region imaginable, from the classic French Bordeaux's to the big reds from Portugal's Duoro Valley and a mix of Lebanese wines. F&B's David Gallagher meticulously chooses this extensive and eclectic mix. Wines range from 7.99 to 7,000 Euros and are best paired with their artisan cheeses, cured meats and an incredible sense of decadence.

Sticking with a decadent demeanor, I checked in to sumptuous Shelbourne Hotel, awarded Ireland's Best Hotel and Best Cocktail Bar in 2007. My Father's Irish cousin, fond of the jollifications as she calls them, met me for dinner at their Saddle Room restaurant. We fell truly, madly, deeply for our sommelier Tidor Zoku who had a stunning knowledge of wines. He paired not one, but two wines with each course, beautifully prepared by chef John Mooney. Loved the local lamb!

The can't miss for an authentic feel, flavor and traditional music is Temple Bar area, which is teeming with pubs and musical options and the Temple Bar itself. It's how you'd imagine Dublin would be, spirited, ambient and a wee bit mischievous. For a nightcap, pop by Venu Brasserie where Gareth will handcraft a cocktail to your liking.

No trip to Dublin is complete without a stop at the Guinness plant. I was ashamed to admit that I had never had a Guinness as I was more inclined to sip or swirl a cocktail or wine rather than pony up to a pint. What better place than the (250 year old) historical plant itself to be baptized by Guinness, as many find it to be a religious experience. It's a quick trip over on the hop on hop off bus. As I sipped my ice cold frothy one, overlooking the emerald city, with the plant's top floor 360-degree view, I couldn't help but wonder, what took me so long? It was pure perfection.

The craic (fun) continued; as did my liquid tour with a walk through Merrion Square and Stephen's Green Park and a final swing back in to The Shelbourne's super sexy No. 27 Bar and Lounge. It's a regal room with an elaborate bar that serves over 600 Mojitos on any given Friday. With the Celtic Tiger (Ireland's economy) in top form, the sharp dressed queue on weekend's wraps around the block. I was hard pressed to get a wee seat late on a leisurely, uncommonly warm and sunny Sunday.

The bar under the careful direction of the bar manager Matthew Sheath, offers a mix of past and present with a definitive nod to the classics as well as a modern twist, in which guests are invited to make their own signature cocktails on site. Each evening a winning cocktail is picked and featured for all to sip. With a wide variety of spirits and ingredients, there are 7,776 possibilities.

I continued to honor the God, of Guinness as I capped off the evening and the liquid trip with one of The Shelburne's own Guinness Mojitos. Bliss!

If only my grandparents could see me now. They'd be so proud. Cheers!

For more info on the Causeway Coast, Belfast & Dublin: www.causewaycoastandglens.com, www.belfastvisitor.com, www.visitdublin.com

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Recipes courtesy of Hayden Lambert & The Bar at The Merchant Hotel

The "Mai Tai"

20mls Appleton Extra-, which is an eight to ten year Jamaican rum

20mls Myers Dark rum

10mls Orange Curcao

25mls Fresh lime juice

10mls Orgeat- French Almond syrup

5mls Bon Bon syrup

and a little water otherwise it becomes a little to syrupy

Shake with ice and strain into a ice filled rocks glass.

Garnish with a lime wedge and a mint tip.

To make the worlds most expensive cocktail use 40mls Wray & Nephew 17yr Jamaican rum @75%abv which is cask strength, instead of the combination of two rums.

The Jack Rose

35mls Applejack bonded proof. Has a high abv.

25mls fresh lime juice

15mls Homemade grenadine

5mls sugar syrup

Shake and strain into a 3oz coupette glass, or just a small cocktail glass.

Garnish with an apple slice.

Smile as it is one of the greatest drinks created.

If Applejack isn't on hand use calvados.