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Microbreweries in the Land of Guinness

By JESSICA MERRILL

RECENTLY, a couple of tourists walked into a postcard-worthy pub in the West of [Ireland](#), complete with a fieldstone fireplace, and asked for two pints of Guinness. Nothing unusual there: Guinness is practically the national drink of Ireland and a Guinness or two is an expected way to cap off the day, or, in some cases, start it.

But the woman behind the bar — Fionnuala Garvey, who runs the pub with her son, Niall — patiently explained to the two visitors that maybe they wanted to rethink their order. The Bidly Early, the pub they had just entered, is in fact a microbrewery.

From the blank looks she got in return, she might have said that the Bidly Early was out of beer.

Mrs. Garvey thought for a minute, then she picked up a menu and pointed to the back. "See, we brew our own beer," she said. "If you like stout, we have the Black Bidly, or we have the Red Bidly or Blonde Bidly, a lager. ... Or, we have Guinness?"

"N-o-o-o! Two Black Bidly please," they said, finally comprehending. And just like that, two more people were initiated into the world of the Irish microbrewery.

None of Ireland's big stouts, Guinness, Murphy's or Beamish, are Irish-owned today. Guinness (along with Smithwick's Ale and Harp lager) is owned by the British beverage conglomerate Diageo, Murphy's by [Amsterdam](#)-based Heineken and Beamish by the British brewer Scottish & Newcastle. Budweiser and the Danish beer Carlsberg typically round out taps in Irish pubs from [Dublin](#) to Doolin.

But craft beer does still exist in Ireland — helped in part by a tax break for small brewers that the Irish government put into effect in 2005 — and the best way to find it is to go straight to the source. On a recent trip to Ireland, my husband and I sipped our way across the country, sampling smooth stouts, crisp ales and bold lagers, all made by small, independent brewers.

Our tour kicked off in Dublin at one of the country's largest microbreweries, the Porterhouse, then ended at the Bidly Early in Inagh in County Clare, conveniently located on the way to the Cliffs of Moher. In between, we indulged our palates with hops and malts in the city of Cork and a few small-town destinations, like Carlow and the pretty seaside village of Kinsale. We discovered plenty of good beer, but we also stumbled into quirky settings and ancient buildings that have been restored and converted for a new use. Most were quiet pubs or tasting rooms, off the tourist map though not exactly on the local circuit either.

The Porterhouse is one of Ireland's brewing pioneers. Two cousins, Liam LaHart and Oliver Hughes, started brewing in 1996, and today the Porterhouse encompasses several brewpubs around Dublin, the original in

Bray and one in [London](#). When we walked into the Porterhouse in Dublin's trendy Temple Bar neighborhood and saw 10 beers on tap, it felt as heartwarming as the sound of an Irish band striking up "Danny Boy. "

"You don't serve Guinness, do you?" I asked the bartender behind the sleek copper bar. "No, but we still get plenty of people in here who ask for it," she laughed. Then, she handed us a sampler tray of seven of the Porterhouse's stouts and ales. There was Wrasslers 4X, a hearty stout made to the recipe for an Irish beer brewed in the early 1900's; a biting oyster stout brewed with fresh oysters; a lighter plain porter and a rich chocolate stout that tasted more like dessert than beer.

A 10-minute walk along the River Liffey from the Temple Bar is another brewery, Messrs. Maguire, in what was once an 1808 tavern and a rope purveyor run by one William Maguire. It's less ambitious than the Porterhouse, but with its original rose ceiling and dark nooks and crannies, Messrs. Maguire is still a nice spot to enjoy a dose of character along with a fresh pint: plain (stout), rusty (ale), haus (lager) and weiss (wheat).

From Dublin, we headed southwest to County Carlow, once a local malt-growing region, where the O'Hara family, the owners of the Carlow Brewing Company, is continuing the brewing tradition. Housed next to the town's old stone train station in the former goods store for the railway, Carlow looks like a whistle-stop cafe.

Instead, it's where the O'Haras (the brothers Seamus, Eamon and Michael; their sister, Siobhan, and Seamus' wife, Kay) produce a creamy, full-bodied O'Hara's Stout, Curim Gold Wheat beer and Moling's Red ale. The day we popped in, Michael O'Hara, the head brewer, was brewing a fresh batch of stout, and the smell of malt swirled in the air.

"We wanted to have a building with character because we were trying to revive an old tradition," Kay O'Hara said as she walked us through the rustic stone brewery, pointing out where the old train tracks used to be, before leading us into a polished tasting room. Seamus and Eamon started the brewery in 1996 and found a niche by exporting beer to places like the [United States](#). Now, Seamus O'Hara said they were starting to see more awareness from the Irish.

"People have traveled a lot more, people have opened up their minds a lot more in terms of what they eat and drink," Mr. O'Hara said.

The Franciscan Well in Cork is located on the site of a 12th century monastery and well. You can spot the brewery by its pleasing sign (a cheery friar holding a pint). The brewer is a former New Yorker, Russell Garet, who produces complex beers like Rebel Red amber ale, a creamy Shandon Stout and a fruity Blarney Blonde. Franciscan Well's beers are poured at some pubs in Cork, but it's worth the walk across the River Lee to the brewery for its outdoor courtyard scattered with picnic tables and a view into the brewery.

Further south is the Kinsale Brewing Company, located in the heart of the port town of Kinsale. The brewery hosts tours in the afternoons and has a pleasant tasting room and a outdoor courtyard for sampling their stout, lager and ale. The town hadn't yet geared up for the high tourist season when we visited in early April. The brewery, too, was quiet, so Barry Kiely, the owner, poured three beers and took a seat with us.

"What we tried to do was reconnect to three centuries of brewing tradition," Mr. Kiely said, growing animated when the topic of Ireland's brewing heritage arose. He jumped up, saying, "I should show you" before disappearing out the door.

He came back holding a floor plan dated 1854. It was for a brewery called the Williams Brewery in the area of the Kinsale brewery. He pulled out another document, this one a historical account of a stop Sir Walter Raleigh made in Kinsale in 1617 before voyaging across the Atlantic. According to this paper, Raleigh stocked up on Kinsale-brewed beer before hitting the high seas.

"This town used to produce tons of beer," Mr. Kiely said with a wistful smile.

It's nice to see history starting to repeat itself.

If You Go

Biddy Early Brewery, Inagh, County Clare, 353-65-683-6742; www.beb.ie. Red Biddy ale is made with a locally grown wild herb, bog myrtle, in place of hops. Black Biddy stout is made with carrigeen moss, used to fine the beer, a process that causes solids to drop out.

Porterhouse Brewing Company, 16-18 Parliament Street, Dublin, 353-1-679-8850, www.porterhousebrewco.com. The brewery offers the widest selection of beers among [Ireland's](#) microbrews. As many as 10 beers are on tap, including seasonal specialties like a rich chocolate stout.

Messrs Maguire, 1-2 Burgh Quay, Dublin, 353-1-670-5777. On tap are a plain stout, a fruity ale, wheat beer and a Czech-style pilsner, along with a seasonal rotation.

Carlow Brewing Company, the Goods Store, Station Road, Carlow, 353-59-913-4356. Carlow Brewing makes O'Hara's Stout, Curim Gold and Moling's Red. Curim is said to be a traditional Celtic-style beer once made in the region, and the red ale is named after the Book of Moling by sixth-century Celtic monks in South Carlow.

Franciscan Well Brewery, 14 North Mall, Cork, 353-21-421-0130; www.franciscanwellbrewery.com. Franciscan Well serves a range of local favorites (Rebel Red, Shandon Stout, Blarney Blonde, Rebel Lager and Friar Weisse), complemented by seasonal specialties.

Kinsale Brewing Company, the Glen, Kinsale, 353-21-470-2124, www.kinsalebrewing.com. With a new brewer on board, Kinsale is trying to bring new beers to taps, but currently serves lager, stout, ale and wheat.