Glamour in the garden

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“Dress shabbily and they remember the dress; dress impeccably and they remember the woman.”
—COCO CHANEL

GOWN & COUNTRY
From the charm of Ballyfin, Ireland to the modern cuisine at Wilmette’s newest eatery, Firefly, here’s an insider’s peek at the best of foreign travel and local cuisine. Unexpected adventure awaits around every corner in Ballyfin.
The Downton Abbey TV series is coming to an end but the Downton Abbey experience lives on for guests of Ballyfin Demesne, a fully restored aristocratic estate turned boutique hotel in the green hills of County Laois, Ireland.

WORDS BY ADRIENNE FAWCETT
Lady Caroline and Sir Charles Coote spared no expense when they built Ballyfin 60 miles outside of Dublin in the early 19th Century, and their motto, “cost what it may,” was reincarnated nearly 200 years later when Hinsdale businessman Fred Krehbiel and his Irish-born wife, Kay, purchased the estate and restored it into a 5-star boutique hotel.

Hotel isn’t exactly the right word for Ballyfin, which has 20 bedrooms and feels more like a fully staffed, gloriously decorated, private country house. And that’s Ballyfin’s mission. “We want you to experience what it was like to receive hospitality in a grand Irish house 200 years ago—as if you were visiting an aristocratic friend in the country,” says Jim Reynolds, the Irish archeologist and landscape designer who helped bring Ballyfin back to life.

I had an opportunity to spend four days at Ballyfin last spring when bluebells carpeted the meadows and runoff from the Slieve Bloom Mountains cascaded briskly through waterfalls. The first thing I noticed upon arriving was the similarity to Downton Abbey—a long driveway ending at a stone mansion where the domestic staff was lined up to greet me. The second thing I noticed was the woodsy smell of a turf fire, reminding me of the many trips I’ve made to my mother’s home country.

But the smell of peat was the only thing at Ballyfin that reminded me of Ireland.

Ballyfin provides a glimpse behind the chintz curtain of an Ireland that was out of bounds to most Irish people for hundreds of years: the privileged life of Anglo-Irish aristocrats who ruled the country for Great Britain until Ireland became a Free State in 1922. “The only Irish who would’ve stepped foot in Ballyfin during the Coote’s time would’ve been the domestics,” said Lionel, Ballyfin’s very Irish butler.

After 1923, the Coote family returned to England and sold Ballyfin to the Patrician Brothers, who ran it as a Catholic boarding school for 75 years until the Krehbiels came along and restored the estate, hired a multi-national staff and opened the hotel to anyone looking for a luxurious respite.

Lionel is an Irishman whose accent makes ordinary words sound lyrical. He sometimes rides a horse to work from his cottage just beyond Ballyfin’s front gate, and upon request he will give you a tour of the grounds in his “pony and trap.” It is a great way to see the 600-acre estate, including gardens filled with flowers, vegetables, and fruit. Everything has a purpose much as it did when Lady Caroline ruled the roost—the vegetables are used in salads and soups, apples picked today are prepared for tomorrow’s juice, and flowers topple over vases throughout the house.

Speaking of Lady Caroline’s roost, there’s a henhouse that once held peacocks but whose residents now produce Ballyfin eggs—with yolks so orange they look like, well, oranges.

Ireland is a walking country and Ballyfin delivers with several miles of paths that meander by gardens and meadows, forests of oak and cypress, ponds, a lake, follies and a grotto. My favorite was a waterfall surrounded by dewy moss in the woods. It looked the sort of place fairies might live.

Rain is as constant as the greenery but wet weather didn’t deter me from spending time outdoors, and at times I hoped it would rain harder so I could curl up by the fire with a cup of tea and books from Ballyfin’s incredible collection.

Another thing about the rain is that Ballyfin has an ample
supply of wellies, brellies and raincoats for guests.
Outdoor activities include fishing, croquet, archery, tennis, and falconry. The chef’s staff will prepare a picnic to enjoy at the charming "picnic house," or coffee by candlelight in the grotto, a cave-like structure from the 18th century that long-ago was a spa with a cold shower in one room and a fireplace in the next. “It was used to invigorate and refresh,” says Reynolds.
Speaking of refreshing, Ballyfin offers massages, facials, and other treatments, all of which help invigorate much like the old grotto’s shower—only much warmer.
Inside the house there is much to experience, including 18 Coote family portraits purchased in England from the family’s current patriarch. The entrance hall’s intricately patterned floor is made of antique Italian tiles; and antlers from a 10,000-year-old Irish elk hang above a doorway. The Rotunda has a marquetry floor made of rare woods that provides a charming story about historic preservation. Over the decades that Ballyfin was run as a school, the marquetry kept chipping so that by the time Reynolds and his team arrived at least 25% of the floor was missing.
But not gone.
“Mrs. Barry was the housekeeper for the Patrician Brothers at Ballyfin for 30 years and she kept the chips in boxes in the attic,” said Lionel. “Any other housekeeper would’ve probably lit the fire with them the next morning, but Mrs. Barry—now she had good taste. She knew to keep them.”
The house is a preservationist’s dream, an art lover’s dream, a gourmand’s dream and a decorator’s dream, too. The bedrooms are outfitted for kings.
Every room includes paintings, portraits, statues and other period artifacts, impeccably sourced by Reynolds and his team. Some 35 pieces of the Coote porcelain dinner service and dozens of silver serving dishes from the 18th and 19th centuries have found their way back to the house.
Speaking of finding their way back, many Ballyfin guests are former students of the boarding school or Irish nationals who relish the opportunity to experience the estate in all its glory, not as schoolboys or domestics but as guests treated as dignitaries in a proper Irish country house.