


REVIEW
CATHERINE CLEARY

Food that feels served up by an algorithm

There's a boy wearing red armbands among a collection of photographs on the wall in Leon. He is swimming on his back, with a pair of oversize goggles on upside-down under his head of tight copper curls. There is no name or context. But he looks as Irish as a Brunch beside a glass of red lemonade. I will call him Finbarr and guess he's on his mid-1980s laethanta saoire.

A few years later Finbarr got the train to Dublin, walked down to this basement, ditched the detested Dingo jeans his mother bought him and slid into his first pair of second-hand Levi's, magically morphing into the coolest teenager on the planet.

Leon makes me sad. Where there was once a rail of musty second-hand jeans, now there is set of tables where we eat our cardboard boxes of healthy fast food and disposable containers of hummus. Leon is in the former Eager Beaver on Temple Bar's Crown Alley, the second-hand shop that sold everything from tweedy jackets to scratchy Aran knits with melamine buttons.

Leon is a chain that works hard to tell you it has heart. So there are niftily designed posters with the names of the four Irish provinces in Irish. There's even an attempt at some Corkish on the poster about their Cork-sourced eggs: "It's that simple, boi," the poster tells us. Patronising cultural appropriation or the work of someone who's undergone cringe bypass surgery? You decide.

The big wheel keeps on turning, grinding away the Waltons and the Irish Yeast Companies and the Eager Beavers and spitting out a Leon. The chain was born in Carnaby Street in London 15 years ago by smart entrepreneurs John Vincent and Henry Dimbleby with chef Allegra McEvedy. It was named after Vincent's father. Democratising healthy food was greeted with great love and lots of kudos for their sustainability. The businessmen had big plans from the get-go. Two years ago a private equity firm invested in Leon to

The Temple Bar iteration of Leon, a UK healthy fast-food chain, makes me feel sad



Leon, 17 Crown Alley, Temple Bar, Dublin 2;

Tel: (01) 255 552

Music: Fine.

Food provenance: Those provincial posters don't give any names.

Facilities: Nice design but the floor was grubby.

Wheelchair access: Yes.

Vegetarian options: Good.

THE VERDICT: Sorry Leon. The Oirish iteration of this cookie cutter global brand made me sad.

"support further global expansion plans", according to the restaurant's Wikipedia page.

So what's it like? It's fast. It takes more time to scan the menu options than it does for some of the food to begin arriving on to the tray. The staff are kind and friendly and they offer to drop our hotboxes down. There are some seats at street level but much of the floor space is dedicated to the grab-and-go crowd, because investors don't really want less lucrative bums on seats.

Downstairs past a new olde brick

wall with the Leon orange painted on to it there's a windowless room that is souppishly warm with comfortable booths and lots of dark wood.

There are biodegradable plastic forks, which have the word "compostable" on them. The hummus and pea salads arrive in separate vegware cardboard containers with plastic lids. Everything gets tipped into an under-counter bin. As we sit there a staff member takes the full bag out and replaces it with a black sack with the words Waste.ie printed on the side. I live in hope it's going to a compost pile some-

where but either way our lunch has just unleashed a lot of single use waste into an already overburdened world.

That hummus is fine, lemony and smooth. Pay extra and you get some anaemic flatbread the consistency of damp cardboard to go with it. The best dish is the chilli chicken, with the chilli in a separate container. The chicken is juicy and flavourful, like it's been brined and then chargrilled on a barbecue.

I get the sweet potato falafel, which are bland and mushy, baked rather than deep-fried and everything milled to a soft consistency like they've been made by a diligent parent with a food processor trying to hide the vegetables from a fussy eater. They come with a tasty brown rice salad with ribbons of red pepper and minty fresh mint leaves and a pea and cabbage coleslaw. I go back up to get coffee and get given a disposable coffee cup. It is the only way things are served here, whether you're eating in or taking away. The coffee is nothing special. A "better brownie" and a lemon and ginger slice are served mercifully free of packaging with just some napkins. They're very sweet and I'm not sure what makes the brownie better, other than some shards of almond and a taste of orange. It might be better but it's not really anything like a brownie.

Leon is a generic experience. The food feels like the work of an algorithm, as do the jokes, like the "if it's good enough for wee Daniel" clunker on the poster about the organic milk from Donegal. I'm sure the food is healthy. I'm not sure the model of insatiable global expansion is.

When you call yourself a restaurant, I think your sit-down diners deserve a plate and some real and reusable cutlery, not least because binning everything after using it once feels like a weird way to do things. And you're sitting in a place where reusing stuff was the ultimate in cool.

Lunch for two with bakes, two kombuchas and a coffee came to €38.75.



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The best pizza in Dublin. No contest.

There's something very fully formed about Pi on Dublin's George's Street. It feels like the Irish branch of a chain incubated somewhere cooler. There are speckled concrete floors, subway tiles, a black tiled wood-fired oven like a gargantuan Darth Vader helmet and the name coming at you from the 1980s in cheesy 3D graphics. There's the black cutlery that your eyes tell you is plastic but is, in fact, hefty and real, like the gold-coloured dessert teaspoons which I predict will be pocketed by the dozen.

A bucket of cash has been poured into Pi and that's typically the starting point for yet another review (believe me, I bore even myself by now) lamenting the lack of substance behind the style.

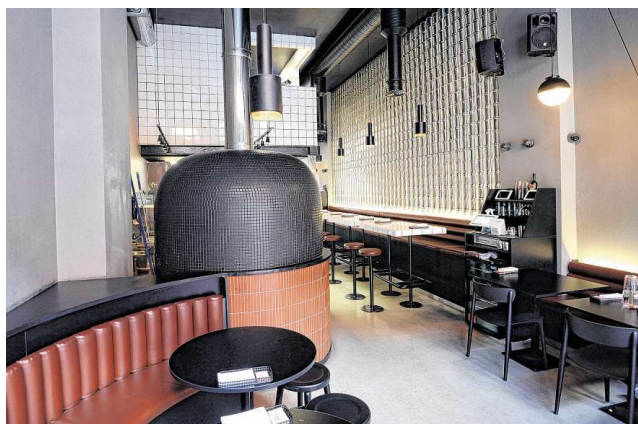
But hold those horses – it's such a joy to tell you that Pi is terrific. Bringing slow food to a bigger audience and making the favourites with better ingredients are common themes with chefs. Go fly you fledgling concepts, we whisper. But they stutter and fall and we're left with artisan-washed menus and cocktails in jam jars.

And then you get someone who just loves something and a backer who gets it. Reggie White is the pizza fanatic behind Pi. His business partner is John Savage, a son-in-law of property developer Johnny Ronan. After my visit I mine Pi's Instagram feed for information and then message White for a chat.

The 34-year-old is a former auctioneer who quit in the depths of the crash and went to train in Ballymaloe, where he fell for wood-fired pizza. Hard. He built a pizza oven in his parent's garden in Abbeyleix and worked the pizza station in his brother David's restaurant, which happened to be Flour + Water in San Francisco's Mission District, the tangy bubbling epicentre of the sour dough scene.

So Pi has been eight years in the baking. Childhood acquaintance Shane

Pi just does pizzas. To do just one thing you need to do it well. And they do



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Pi, 10 Castle House, 73-83 South Great Georges St, Dublin 2

Music: Nice but mostly inaudible as the crowd builds

Food provenance: Scant. Gubbeen and Toonsbridge are the two big names

Facilities: Lined four to ceiling with red rubber

Wheelchair access: No

Vegetarian options: Very good

THE VERDICT: Restaurant pizza just got great

Palmer of Scéal Bakery grew up in the same part of Laois, and White worked with Scéal to get the dough to do what they wanted it to do. In the weeks before opening they brought pizza geekery to honour level, sweating the details like which flour and tomato to use, while firing out the excited Instagram posts of people getting the keys to a sweet shop which is also a toy shop.

We arrive early on a Thursday evening, which suits a family dinner and the fact that queues form after six. It's walk-ins only. We sit at the back of the

long room which is bright thanks to a west-facing window. There's a diner in a high chair chomping on the pillowy sour dough crust and adding her happy noises to the general buzz.

This is not a pizza restaurant that does salads or sides. They just do pizzas, 12-inch pizzas. The priciest one is €16. Doing one thing seems like a fresh idea these days when a blizzard of menu options is the default setting. To do just one thing you need to do it well. And they do.

The pizzas come out of the belly of

the furnace with puffy crusts dotted with charred blisters in what's known (fun fact) as "leoparding". It makes the crust of these pizzas as good as the rest of them and gives a reason to order the dips, the only side on the menu, to make the very best of them.

There's meat on some of the pizzas but it's from the less is better school, cured and spiced tasty bits of pig, like the Gubbeen chorizo on the salsiccia with piquillo peppers, as well as the tangy heat of pickled chillies.

The funghi (not made with sliced-up dolphin as one of our lads suggests) has frondy hen of the woods mushrooms with two kinds of cheese – Grana Padano and fontina. There are fresh spinach leaves and a sage cream to add two different riffs of green flavour. It's heartening when the veggie pizza is the best (and most expensive) one on the menu. There's a vegan one here too which sounds delicious.

Our boys love the margherita option, where again nothing is dumbed down, from the truly tomatoey sauce to the higher-end cheese.

Dessert is a small steal from the brother's restaurant. A "chocolate budino with sea salt flakes" started life across the pond in San Francisco, but that's okay because it's delicious, a pot like chocolate in butter form or butter in chocolate form, whichever you prefer, with those crunchy flakes of salt drawing your tastebuds' attention to the silky sweetness.

Pi smells like a franchise. If they can scale up the idea and the attention to detail and keep it at this level across a few pizza restaurants then here's a chain you could love.

As I've frequently declared, the best pizza in Dublin is round ours, thanks to our in-house pizza geek and a recently acquired wood-fired oven. But we only do five covers, 12 at a push. So Pi is the best pizza restaurant in Dublin. No contest.

Dinner for five with soft drinks, a beer and one shared dessert came to €76.80.



REVIEW
CATHERINE CLEARY

An island of excellence

There is a crunch when we walk on sunbaked gutweed on Inis Meáin's stone shore. The slippery bathmats of green have dried and bleached to the rough white pelt of a Connemara pony. The salt crystals sound almost like hoar frost underfoot. They had that here too in this year of snow and sun.

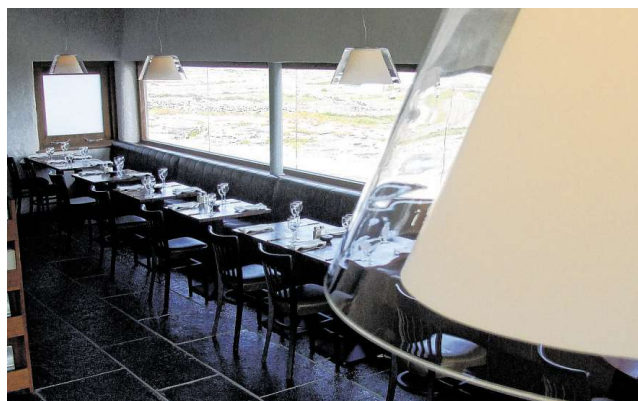
Inis Meáin is the quietest of the Aran islands and I'm visiting a friend who has been staying here for two weeks for the last six summers. Over one memorable day of islanding we'll find a blow hole where ocean froth explodes from the limestone, swim in crystal water and listen to an Italian woman at Cathaoir Synge read aloud, her small group silent as Synge's words ring out in Italian over the stone and waves he was describing.

Inis Meáin boils down elements of the bigger island where we live into one intense dollop of stone. Today its fields are drought brown. It feels like the place where weather was invented. In all this sparkling brightness the winter days, that Aran's writer in chief Tim Robinson memorably described as "brief and gloomy dreams interrupting ever intenser nights" seem unimaginable.

Chef Ruairí de Blacam grew up on the island and he and his wife Marie-Thérèse opened the Inis Meáin Restaurant and Suites 11 years ago. Five minimalist stone and glass rooms provide accommodation for diners. A stay in the suites is expensive and returning guests get first dibs on the bed nights. (They're booked up already for half of next year's season). But the restaurant is open to non-residents three nights a week. So with a last-minute email, a dash by train, bus, boat and island taxi with a detour to pick up my friends we're here.

Marie-Thérèse has time to show us the kitchen garden. The soil had to be brought over by boat and they fertilise it with seaweed. A stone wall was built around the polytunnel to keep the

Elements of earth and ocean combine in exquisitely-sourced food thoughtfully cooked



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Inis Meáin Restaurant and Suites, Inis Meáin, Aran Islands, Co Galway

Music: So blown away by the food and the view I failed to notice any

Food provenance: Exemplary. You can probably have a chat with the lobsterman in the pub afterwards

Facilities: As minimalist and chic as the rest of the place

Wheelchair access: Yes

Vegetarian options: set menu so these have to be requested

THE VERDICT: A memorably beautiful meal

storms from snatching it. The rest of their produce is grown in a bigger garden "off-site" which means roughly "two fields away," Marie-Thérèse explains. There is a henhouse with an ingenious long-handled cup fashioned by an islander to fish out the tricky-to-reach eggs.

The couple allocated a strip of precious soil to asparagus and after four years they had their first harvest this summer. There were just enough spears for lunch for the two of them. Next year there should be more. Inis

Meáin asparagus is the ultimate slow food.

Inside the restaurant has the world's best view. The rounded prow of the long, low building noses its way through the stone like a whale. Sliced through its length is a gleamingly clean (today was window-washing morning) line of glass with a wide-angle view of the unfeasibly beautiful horizon. There is a banquetta facing away from it. Chairs in felted wool face towards it. They put up a long mirror so the people with their backs to the sea can see both

kitchen and panorama.

We start with a small glass bowl of scallop from Inis Meáin Bank, which lies a mile north. These luscious treasures have just been sliced into raw slivers and dressed with toasted hazelnuts, finely diced chives and pansies that sit like butterflies on top. As an opener, it's a statement of intent: you will be tethered to this land and seascape in the simplest and most delicious way possible.

A perfect lobster tail gleaming with butter sits on a white plate. There's an aerated mayonnaise, made (presumably) with those happy hen's eggs alongside a stack of rocket leaves with nothing on them. It takes nerve to serve a vegetable like this. These leaves are as far from the limp stuff that wallpapers every sad salad plate you've ever seen. They're wider-leaved with a subtle heat, robust enough to be dipped in the mayo. I'll remember this plate long after the overworked emulsions, squeezy bottled dots and filigreed folderols of other plates have been forgotten.

There's a beetroot carpaccio, all depth of colour and sweet beety flavour with tender marjoram leaves, nasturtium petals and a ballad-worthy creme fraiche. Then there's turbot crisped in butter, flesh white as sea foam served with beans from the polytunnel and crisp skinned spuds. The finale is stewed apricots, which feel like they came from another warmer place but they're balanced with extraordinary ice cream made from their lemon ver-bena patch.

At the risk of gushing like a blow hole I love every moment of our meal in the Inis Meáin Restaurant. Elements of earth and ocean sounds like a marketing cliché but that's what's here. Exquisitely-sourced food thoughtfully and calmly cooked is something we could do more on the mainland. Islander wisdom comes from seeing your place in the scheme of things with a clear unblinking eye. Dinner for two with a glass of wine, prosecco, elderflower cordial and sparkling water came to €249.