

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONING



Richard Corrigan's rural childhood is reflected in his earthy cooking that is at once hearty yet accomplished and refined.

Eugene Costello meets a true bon viveur who loves life

The last time we visited Bentley's – back in December [review on p91], it was such an unforgettable night that we can scarcely remember it. We sat at a table in the dining area downstairs when we became aware – couldn't fail to, really – of the great man himself, chef-patron Richard Corrigan sitting at the next table, regaling a group of women with anecdotes. As the ladies left, he spied my notebook, roared "You must be Eugene Costello!" and barked (amicably) at his waiters to clear away our table as we would be joining him next door at the bar.

A big man with enormous presence,

Corrigan is not the sort of man you contradict. So it was that a few minutes later, we were perched on high stools, being hand-fed oysters by him, and allowing him to rattle through the menu on our behalf, picking out the highlights. That the wine flowed freely goes without saying; as he talked to us on a wide range of subjects – the parlous state of British journalism, the Eurozone crisis, anything, it seemed, but food, he called out to regular customers, greeting them and assuring them he'd be over imminently to say hello. And the ladies with whom he'd been eating and drinking a few minutes earlier? They were, he explained, women who worked for a charity close to his heart; ▶



he'd invited them up for a day out in London, capped with a meal on him, before heading off, full of cheer, to catch trains back home. It was more like being at a very sociable and well-connected friend's casual dinner party than the normal West End fine-dining experience. And speaking to him, it soon becomes apparent why dining chez Richard Corrigan is an experience like few others in the world of eating out...

I came to cooking by watching my mum cook and I was always fascinated by it. I grew up on a farm in Co Meath, near the border with Co Cavan. I suppose in Co Meath it was unusual in that world for a boy to be so into cooking rather than, say, hurling or whatever [hurling is the national sport in Ireland, similar to hockey]. I was always happier with a big spoon in my hand.

My first job was when I was 14, working as a trainee chef in a local hotel. It was at the Kirwin in Athboy, where I fell in love with really great local, I suppose you'd call it organic, produce. After that, I moved to the Kylemore Hotel, across the border in Cavan, then at the tender age of 17 I cleared off to the Netherlands for four years, which was a fantastic opportunity for a young farm lad to be introduced to different philosophies and the continental style of cooking.

My philosophy has always been if it walks, swims or flies, it's good to go. I've

never been squeamish about food. And growing up on a farm, sure, you're always walking into carcasses hanging in sheds so you can't afford to be squeamish.

That said, I'm squeamish about using produce that comes from an endangered species or where stocks are running low. I'm into conservation, so while I'll blast away at rabbits till kingdom come, I personally wouldn't be gone on hare myself, because hares are far less plentiful.

I can remember getting up for work in the great storm of 1987 – the Michael Fish hurricane storm, as it will always be remembered – London was like something out of a film about the end of the world, with trees everywhere and smashed up cars and alarms going off all over the place. Most people stayed at home but I couldn't wait to get to work. I love what I do and going to work is a privilege, not a chore.

I've been lucky to work with some of the best people in the business. I landed a job working for Michel Lorrain at Le Meridien in Piccadilly at 21. Michel was a genius and I



reckon to this day he is one of the best chefs I ever came across. After a year with Michel, I landed my first head-chef role at Stephen Bull in Blandford St in the West End, and then worked at Mulligan's in Mayfair. After that I came to Bentley's for a stint, before re-joining Stephen Bull on the Fulham Road, where we won a star.

2008 was a big year for us. We opened Corrigan's in Mayfair, which was a real meaty kind of place. We like to try different things, hearty things that people might not be used to – we'll do game and unusual things like squirrel, as well as all the old favourites. In September that year I took over the lease at Bentley's, a fantastic oyster bar that's been going since 1916, and because I'd worked here years earlier it felt like coming home.

I can't stand pretentiousness. At Bentley's we have a very regular crowd of customers who we love to see and who appreciate great, honest food. When bores or critics come in and start blathering on, trying to impress me pretending they know all about the difference between rock and native oysters, or boring me about some French oysters they had on holiday, I want to tell them to shut up. But of course I don't.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion. But I'd rather people came to Bentley's to have a good old bottle of wine or two; to enjoy great food and have a great evening and come back with their friends. That means a lot more to me than some idiot critic wheedling on about the quality of the oysters or whatever. Really, I'm not interested, and I don't suppose the readers are, no disrespect to you... But we had a great time when you were last in, and we'll have a great time the next time you're in, and that is when I am proud of what we do.

Bentley's is bigger than any one person. I don't own it, no one does. I'm the caretaker, if you like, the custodian. It's been here since 1916 and it'll be here long after I've gone. But while I'm here I want it to be somewhere that people will drop in to enjoy great oysters, good wine and stimulating company.

I love sitting down with my customers and sharing a bottle of wine, having a good old argument about politics, or philosophy, anything at all. We're more than just a restaurant, we're a place where customers come to enjoy life, to laugh, to debate and to participate. That is our philosophy and our outlook, and we think that is why nearly all of our customers are regulars.

Would I ever throw anyone out of my restaurant? Are you mad? I'd be more likely to be outside dragging them in off the streets! If someone annoys me, I'll sit down with them, have a drink and argue with them until they finally see that I'm right. ♦