



HOSTS WITH THE MOST

Ray Byrne and Jane English have dedicated their lives to creating inviting places for people to eat, sleep and visit. And, they tell **Mary O'Sullivan**, it's all down to well-placed newspaper ads. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

One of the many bizarre cost-cutting exercises often listed in those endless 'how to beat the recession' articles is the elimination of the purchase of newspapers. That would be a terrible mistake. Quite apart from the fact that they are highly entertaining, newspapers provide crucial information. Take the experience of Ray Byrne, who owes much, in both his professional and personal life, to not just one, but three newspaper ads. These days, Ray and his wife, Jane English, own and run the highly successful Wineport Lodge, in Athlone, Co Westmeath. It's a gourmet sanctuary on the waters of Killenure Lake, where jaded spirits not only go to have their tastebuds reinvigorated, but also to regenerate their weary bodies. It's where RTE's *The Restaurant* is filmed, and just minutes away from the couple's beautiful home.

It all started with something as simple as an ad in a newspaper flagging up an Anco course. This set the genial Dubliner on the path to a career in the world of food and, indirectly, to meeting Jane.

"After school I did a number of things, including working in London. It was the mid-Eighties and I didn't like it, so I came home. Then I saw an ad for a start your own business course. That appealed to me," says fortysomething Ray, adding that he completed the

course and it led to a job with the Traditional Cheese Company. Another fortunate by-product of the course was that he met Jane.

"I was supposed to meet a chap I knew from the course in a pub," Ray recalls. "I was late, so he amused himself talking to Jane, with whom he had grown up in the Midlands." When Ray turned up, the pal introduced him to Jane. That was 1986, and they've been together ever since.

When they met, Jane was studying genetics at Trinity and Ray was working for the cheese company. Jane felt her work was going nowhere and Ray began to think that he could be doing something more exciting than selling cheese.

"I was going into kitchens to get to the chefs to flog them the cheese," Ray explains. "People in kitchens seemed to be having a ball, there were flames coming out of the pan, there was glamour and excitement. It gave me a taste for the hospitality industry and I felt it would be better than going around in a refrigerated Hiace van."

And this is where the second newspaper ad came in. It was on the back of one of the weekend papers, and it was offering a space to let in a castle in Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath. Ray and Jane took it on, and without any formal training whatsoever they started a little restaurant called the Castle Pantry. What



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they lacked in training they made up for in resourcefulness. "I went out and bought Darina Allen's *Simply Delicious* books," says Ray, adding that he believes Darina's books have been the inspiration for many food entrepreneurs. Armed with these cookery bibles, he and Jane turned the restaurant into a profitable business. "We served nice things such as open prawn sandwiches, we used proper coffee, leaf tea, we made scones. We became famous for our scones, jam and cream," Jane recalls, with a laugh.

Pretty soon, they were employing chefs, and within a year they were serving full dinners. After 18 months, an even better business opportunity opened up for them. Jane's mother, Dorothy English, opened a sailing centre in Glasson, Co Westmeath and offered the couple the opportunity to build a restaurant and do the catering. Because

they were only renting in the castle in Tyrellspass, they jumped at the new opportunity and so, Wineport Lodge was born.

The business has changed beyond recognition since those days in 1993 when they started with just a small restaurant. They doubled its size in 1996, and then came the bedrooms. "People started to say, 'We're coming for a meal, where will we stay?' We saw a demand," says Ray. Within five years they had 10 bedrooms: now, they have 30.

Even though they built the hotel in stages, it's a very pretty and unified structure — log-cabin style outside, but contemporary comfort inside, and set in a glorious location on Killenure Lake.

In the beginning, the couple lived in the caretaker's cottage, near the hotel, but this was demolished to make room for the third phase of the hotel. Ray and Jane bought a house nearby three years ago, which they've renovated to suit their family — they have two small boys, Glenn, seven, and Robbie, five. "It was a typical Seventies cottage. We added a little bit at the back to make it more liveable and changed the rooms to make it more family oriented," says Jane. They reconfigured the space to give them a large master bedroom, an



Left
The garden was designed and landscaped by Jane's brother, Richard English, of Garden Concepts. The garden furniture is from Fernhill Garden Centre Athlone, Co Westmeath

Above
Ray Byrne and Jane English in the cooking area of their open-plan kitchen cum dining room cum living room. The kitchen units, built by Jane's other brother, Robert English, are in oak, with a walnut trim

Top right
Glenn, 7, left, and Robbie, 5, in their room. The bedcovers and picture are from SBA Home Ideas, Athlone

Middle right
The leather sofa unit in the living area is from Cempo Interiors. The lighting here and throughout the house is from Bright Ideas, Athlone

Right
The view over Killenure lake

en suite, two bedrooms, an office and playroom, and added a part-glass extension to ensure a large, light, airy kitchen, overlooking the spacious gardens.

Jane's brothers played a huge part in creating the tasteful and cosy family home. One brother, Richard, is a landscape gardener — he cultivated all the grounds around the house and designed the pavilion, which is something of an outdoor room. Her other brother, Robert, is a cabinet maker. He had done all the bedroom furniture in Wineport and so was the obvious choice to do the kitchen and bedroom furniture in the house. Interior designer Nigel Howard helped to create a home with furnishings from local shops such as FurnitYour.

The kitchen is very much the heart of the house. And the couple put a huge amount into making it a warm and interesting space, with underfloor heating, oak units with walnut inlay, a spacious island cum breakfast bar, and dining and TV areas. They have a big Waterford range with a gas hob and an electric oven but, according to Jane, there's not much cooking done on it. "It's a cooker for a cheffy person, but there's no cheffy person here," says the woman



who did most of the baking back in their first restaurant. "The main thing I cook now is porridge for the children," she laughs, adding that while she's still involved in the running of the business, they also have a superb general manager, Norma Wilson, whose brother, Harold, did all the curtains in the house and the hotel, and who has been with them since they opened.

Jane spends a lot of time looking after the boys and Ray has branched out as a hotel consultant and is also part-owner of the Ice House and Lisloughrey Lodge. He has also invested in a hotel in Malta.

"It's called the Phoenicia," he says, "and it's in Valletta. Jane's mother stayed in it and raved about it, so six of us bought it in 2007. It's the oldest five-star hotel in Malta, the equivalent of the Shelbourne."

It's working out well for Ray and his fellow investors. And, yes, you've guessed it, they first found out about it through a newspaper ad. **■**

Wineport Lodge, Glasson, Athlone, Co Westmeath, tel: (090) 643-9010, email lodge@wineport.ie, or see www.wineport.ie, www.lisloughrey.ie, www.icehousehotel.ie