

THE ART OF *hospitality*

How did a farmer's daughter find herself running TripAdvisor's 2012 number one place to stay in Ireland and number six in the world? With hospitality and heart, writes **Maria Moynihan**

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For Helen Heaton, the art of hospitality is actually very simple.

"I just think: How would I like my parents to be treated if they were going somewhere?" she says, setting down a silver coffee pot with a clink.

"They're looking for a warm, genuine welcome – and people who are genuinely happy to see them coming in the door."

If you were expecting the equivalent of the third secret of Fatima as to how Castlewood House, which overlooks Dingle Bay, was named in 2012 as the number one place to stay in Ireland by TripAdvisor – and number six in the world – you might stop reading now.

Instead, you have to go back to the beginning, to another peninsula – the Cooley – where Helen was raised on a sheep farm run by her parents, Liam and Irene Woods.

To them, she owes not only her work ethic (she jokes that her father is now semi-retired: "He only farms six and a half days a week"), but also the resolve needed to survive in business, having seen her parents lose their flock in the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001.

"I'll never forget the day we drove in and we saw the vets walking through the yard. Our sheep hadn't started to lamb," she recalls.

"I remember them putting the sheep onto the lorries and my dad was just devastated, broken. I've never seen my dad cry, but I saw him cry that day."

Fortunately, they later restocked – though with cattle – and the farm is now run by Helen's brother. The eldest of four children, she credits growing up in a busy farmhouse, where there were always visitors, with planting the seed in her head about the hospitality business.

"It was the only thing I ever wanted to do," she says simply of her decision to study at Cathal Brugha Street.

However, life took another twist when she got a six-month placement at Ashford Castle, where she met her future husband Brian – who, at this stage of the interview, emerges from

the kitchen after a busy morning preparing a sleep-in-proof breakfast spread, including porridge with brown sugar, cream and Cooley Distillery Irish whiskey, plums poached in star anise and cinnamon, the full-Irish with Ashes of Annascaul sausages, homemade scones with Bluiríní Blasta lemon curd and – perhaps most irresistible of all – bread and butter pudding.

At Ashford, Helen was on reception and Brian was on room service – though she jokes that it wasn't until she was leaving that he made his move.

"I had a little red Opel Cadet and he got plenty of spins over to Cong," laughs Helen, "and he used to hitch over to Dundalk."

HOSPITALITY WITH HEART

While Brian, who is originally from Limerick, went on to become general manager at the Davenport in Dublin, Helen became sales and marketing manager at the Nuremore Hotel in Carrickmacross, which was a base for the Irish soccer team under Jack Charlton and later, Mick McCarthy.

"The owner of the hotel even built a football pitch for them to train on," she recalls, adding that she was especially fond of McCarthy.

But encounters with soccer legends aside, the couple's desire to run their own business burned brightly. The opportunity came up when Brian's parents – who had moved to Dingle to run their own B&B – told them about a site for sale right next door. So in 2005, they opened their 12-bedroom boutique guesthouse, with the first visitors due little over a week after the builders moved out.

"I remember washing our new delph at 4am one morning because I couldn't sleep," says Helen.

"It was a huge thing for me – give up your house, your job, your family and your friends and move to the other side of the country.

"As the opening day grew closer, we were really nervous about whether we had done the right thing. But then the day came and we haven't looked back."

Why would they? As well as the



Helen and Brian Heaton of the award-winning Castlewood House in Dingle.



WIN

COMPETITION

To win a two-night luxury break at Castlewood House, staying in a deluxe room overlooking Dingle Bay, with breakfast served both mornings, answer the following question: What major award did Castlewood House win in 2012?

Send your entry to Castlewood House competition, *Irish Farmers Journal*, Irish Farm Centre, Bluebell, Dublin 12, by Wednesday, 5 February, or enter online at www.farmersjournal.ie/competitions. T&C: Prize valid until May 2014, but not applicable for bank holidays or Easter periods. Prize is for two people sharing.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Answer: _____

☐ Tick the box if you do not wish to be contacted in relation to further events, promotions and competitions from the *Irish Farmers Journal*.

TripAdvisor accolade (in the immediate aftermath, they spent eight hours a day just answering email enquiries), they have been Michelin recommended since 2007 and featured in Lucinda O'Sullivan's Little Black Book and the Georgina Campbell, Bridgestone/

McKenna, Alistair Sawday's and Frommers' guides.

And even since the recession hit, they have continued to reinvest in the business, which has helped keep bookings strong.

"When everything went kaput, I

think a lot of four- and five-star hotels started cutting corners and guests noticed it," says Helen.

"When that happened, we decided we're going to go the opposite way. We put more stuff into our rooms, we upgraded all our bathrooms, we even got better slippers.

"Because, otherwise, I think if you're used to a certain standard and you arrive and it's different, you feel cheated."

While they employ six staff, Helen and Brian – who have one son, Craig (8) – remain resolutely hands on, though that can range from helping guests who have locked their keys into their cars, to aiding and abetting in planning marriage proposals.

"But we love what we do," says Helen, "and I hope that radiates in everything we do."

- Castlewood House reopens for 2014 on 14 February, weekend and midweek breaks for two from €180 in February and March. **CL**