


Why hotel breakfasts are the best meal of a holiday and where to find the best Irish ones

Home-cooked ham, doughnut walls and porridge with Baileys and chocolate. Ciara McDonnell wakes up to the best Irish hotel breakfasts



Breakfast at Ballymaloe House

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 When I was a child, we went to stay for a weekend at my Aunt Mary’s family hotel. “This is your home from home,” I remember her telling us as we pitched up, with our pyjamas and good outfits packed in weekend cases. The rooms were lovely, and dinner that night was divine but it was breakfast I remember most.

Sun streaming in the windows, we were ushered to a table laid with three special settings for my brother, sister and me. Egg cups filled with little chocolate eggs, china plates and crystal glasses just for us. I couldn’t have been more than six at the time, but I can still feel the fizzing thrill of just how special I felt.

Earlier this week, an extremely giddy group of people responded to a [Twitter post](#) I wrote, asking about the best hotel breakfast in Ireland. I wanted three things: multiple options, heavy on the carbs, please; a reliance on Irish produce; and the inclusion of decent breakfast dessert courses.

As soon as the responses came flooding in, I knew that I had met my tribe. From the most luxurious breakfasts on offer in Ireland to small establishments dedicated to hours (yes, hours) of time spent breakfasting, the common thread was attention to detail. And I get it.

I believe there is nothing more illuminating about a hospitality establishment than how they roll out breakfast service. In the wee hours of the morning, the breakfast team sets the tone for the day.

Glistening sausages jostling for space, curls of rashers peeping out from under a brass hood and vats of scrambled eggs. Doll-sized pastries piped with frangipane and studded with berries and sliced pan to make toast in the special conveyor belt toaster. Lonely half-moons of grapefruit swimming around a crystal bowl beside pixie glasses of juice, each with their own paper hat. When it comes to breakfast service, it’s the little things that matter.

A number of years ago, the mark of high-end fabulosity in a hotel dining room was a pancake station. In 2022 there is one item that sets the tone more than any other — a bone-in cooked ham wheeled to your table and carved in thin slivers onto your breakfast plate by serving staff. This performative aspect of hotel breakfast can be found at Ballynahinch Castle, [Adare Manor](#), Ashford Castle and many more.

Porridge is no longer just porridge. You can get whiskey drizzled on your oats at the Granville Hotel in Waterford, author of the Aisling series, Sarah Breen, told me. And whiskey is just the beginning. Baileys

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is the current porridge topping of choice for hotel breakfasters in Ireland, with swirls of Irish cream liqueur being offered in many establishments — often with a sprinkle of chocolate or cacao nibs.

At Adare Manor, it's not just the ham that keeps people booking back in, it's the whole experience.



Pastries from Adare Manor.

Here I defer to Irish Examiner writer Jennifer Stevens, who pointed to the “Adare Manor Doughnut Wall” as a reason alone to reserve a table.

Not only does Adare have a food offering to rival any of its competitors, but it has all the bells and whistles too, including a Juice Sommelier. As you are sitting at your crisp linen-clad table, overlooking palatial gardens and enjoying food that would quite frankly make you weak at the knees if you weren't sitting down, a Juice Sommelier wheels up to your table with four kinds of juice and multiple Champagnes, and offers to concoct the best accompaniment to your meal.

Our own Joe McNamee weighed in with his opinion too, offering the [Mustard Seed](#) in Limerick as his breakfast location of choice. “It's simple to the point of elemental, with very few courses but each one perfect, a precise little menu of wonderful Irish produce cooked with love, care and attention, supplemented with grace notes from their own gardens.”

[Gougane Barra Hotel](#) was mentioned time and time again as a place of excellence when it comes to breaking the fast. Run by chef Kate Lucey, the menu is small but perfectly formed, sourced locally with something for every palate. Kate's scones and brown bread were cited to be supremely delicious and her porridge raised humble oats to mythical levels.



Pancakes with chocolate sauce at Gougane Barra Hotel.

Publisher Kristin Jensen suggested that Ballymaloe House is hard to beat, and she is not alone. Generous, traditional and perfectly cooked, the breakfast tribe love the timeless nature of Ballymaloe, the addition of freshly caught fish and fresh herbal teas plucked from the kitchen garden.

In Clonakilty, [Dunmore House](#) offers guests a reason to return time and time again. The menu is varied and seasonal, with stalwarts like a fabulous fry, delicious banana bread and brown bread so good you'd consider storming the kitchen for the recipe.

Still in Cork, Hayfield Manor is a favourite — as a treat. For service and food that you know is going to be worth every penny, multiple members of the breakfast tribe told me that they book in for breakfast

only a few times a year as a family outing — and never regret it.

Out west, Renvyle House in Connemara was given the seal of approval by many repeat customers, most citing its Plaice Hollandaise as a must-try when it's on the menu.

All breakfast people should make the pilgrimage to Cavan at least once to indulge in the banquet offered at Neven McGuire's McNear House and Restaurant. Simple food executed faultlessly, this is a multiple-course adventure through all the delicious breakfast produce that Ireland has to offer. Begin with Irish Mist-laced porridge, but don't stop there. From his house bread to smoothies to perfect eggs, the McNear breakfast may not come with a giant ham, but it illustrates everything that is good about a hotel breakfast. It is generous, delicious and will send you away with a smile on your face.

In Kerry, the Park Kenmare and Parknasilla were earmarked as luxe locations to begin your day, but the Kingdom has one jewel in its crown that shines more than any other.



Eggs benedict at Castlewood House in Dingle.

[Castlewood House](#) in Dingle offers breakfast that is so good it makes people downright emotional.

Run by husband-and-wife team Helen and Brian Heaton, the menu offers a staggering amount of options cooked to order, and every morning is accompanied by the ultimate breakfast dessert: bread and butter pudding.

"It was so good I will never forget it," a reader told me. "Hands down, the best breakfast in a B&B or hotel that I have ever had."

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