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Step Back in Time at Castle Leslie

By **JEROEN BERGMANS**

The champagne is flowing again at Castle Leslie, a fairy-tale 19th century estate in Ireland's County Monaghan. After languishing for years in a crumbling state of neglect, the place has reclaimed its former role as a playground for well-heeled eccentrics and sophisticated bohemians.

The Leslie clan can trace its lineage back to Attila the Hun and was granted what was originally a 45,000-acre (18,000 ha.) estate by King Charles II as thanks for helping to keep Oliver Cromwell at bay. Sir John Leslie built the castle itself in 1870, and invited all his pre-Raphaelite artist friends — including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin and Frederic Leighton — to stay.

Through marriage, friendship and patronage, the Duke of Wellington, the Roosevelts, Wallis Simpson and Winston Churchill (whose christening robes are still on display) made up the Leslies' inner circle and were frequent guests. But by the '60s, inheritance taxes had eroded the castle's fortunes, and its complexion began to change. Desmond Leslie, an experimental musician, set up a nightclub in the grounds. Called Annabel's on the Bog (named after the famous society nightspot in London's Mayfair), it attracted the likes of Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull.

Then the Troubles came to Northern Ireland, which borders on County Monaghan, and the great and the glamorous stayed away. But in the mid-'90s, the current lady of the manor, the sprightly Samantha (Sammy) Leslie, started to renovate and reinvent this historic estate, gradually transforming it into a stunning country getaway. Last summer she opened a cookery school, where award-winning chef Noel McMeel runs quirky courses like Guilt-Free Cooking, Food & Erotica and Men Only. And earlier this year she launched an exclusive club that offers members unlimited stays, visiting rights to Leslie "outposts" in

France and Italy, and reciprocal arrangements with other clubs, such as London's Groucho Club. The 35-bedroom hunting lodge houses a Victorian spa with steam boxes and organic treatments, and at the \$14.8 million equestrian center a mechanical horse helps break in any novices.

But the castle itself — and its colorful past — is still the main attraction. Request a tour with great-uncle Jack Leslie to hear tales of its illustrious guests, and see if Sammy is around for a chat. After all, it's her passion that brought the rambling Castle Leslie and its vast, landscaped grounds back to life. www.castleleslie.com