



**Eating out**

**JORIS  
MINNE**

**CONOR'S BAR AT THE LODGE**  
Castle Leslie,  
Glaslough, Monaghan.  
www.castleleslie.com

***Castle Leslie was a blast... Happy memories of a happy birthday***

**T**he chaos of a family party can be a cheery thing. Somebody will get lost on the way, another will forget the date and time of the event and one or two will moan about having to attend at all. The key is to remain light-hearted and jovial.

When more than a dozen of us gathered to mark my mum's 90th in Castle Leslie's Lodge it was a miracle everyone arrived at the right place on time. I was about to congratulate my jovial self on leadership skills when I realised I had overlooked the powers of the goddess of sabotage. My sister.

While the table for 13 was ready for the allocated 2pm kick-off, a ray of sunshine broke through the leaden clouds to bathe Castle Leslie's beautiful parklands and gardens in warm spring light, prompting the sister to insist we delay matters and have an aperitif outside first.

Nothing would do but we'd all have to sit down. As I went looking for a manager to apologise and explain that I had lost control of the mission, it dawned on me that his team too was under pressure in other parts of the big hotel restaurant with First Communion.

In fact, my anxiety subsided as I realised they may have even trickier customers to deal with right now and didn't care if we were seated on time or not.

In retrospect, however, I clearly misinterpreted this. It wasn't chaos at all, it was hospitality, discreet and subtle. Staff must have made a quick judgment that the only strategy was to go with the flow.

Going with the flow meant re-arranging chairs and tables, bringing champagne (Taittinger, chilled) and tolerating the whims of three generations with a smile. Which they did charmingly and patiently.

An hour later we were ready to go inside and order. There is a touch of eccentricity about the place, just enough to prevent it from being stuffy like some other country houses. The room we were allocated — there are many surrounding Conor's Bar — was decked out like a shrine to dairies of the past with all sorts of old paraphernalia, museum quality exhibits and a beautiful big rough wooden table perfect for 13 people. The Snaffles restaurant which is also part of Castle Leslie is a posher affair, I'm told, but frankly, we were happy here. This room was big enough for people to walk past us to the bar without feeling they were intruding.

And then the food completed the merry picture. Wholesome and hearty stuff including chowder, white onion soup, garlic tiger prawns, fritto misto, tempura'd monkfish and Caesar salad as starters gives you an idea of the welcome lack of pretensions.

My Caesar salad was not a classic — it was better than that. Smoked chicken pieces vied with battered deep fried anchovies among the sourdough crostini and bacon crumble. This was a super generous Caesar where everything you love most about it is amplified. The purist will tell you that anchovies should only appear in the dressing. But tell the purist to wait outside as you enjoy the crunchy lush mouthfuls among the cos leaves.

A pan fried cod (*right*), something I normally avoid on the grounds that life's too short to be eating boring old cod, is perfect. Not only is it big, its meat pearly and flaking apart effortlessly, it is sexed up with a mild kind of Romanesco, samphire, a couple of large prawns, asparagus and new potatoes. Delicious.

Elsewhere over-cooked fillet and sirloin

steaks are delivered but no complaints made as the meat is so good anyway, you could throw it into a steelworks smelter for half an hour and its flavour would still survive. Castle Leslie was a blast, deceptively high quality, its patient and confident staff flexing with the mood and demands of its wayward clients. Happy memories of a happy birthday.

**THE BILL (SAMPLE)**

2 courses .....	€31
3 courses .....	€36
Bottle Picpoul .....	€29

