

Since I was in the west of Ireland and I'm always saying that you get good seafood there, I thought I should go off in search of it. What I've always enjoyed about the west is that just about anywhere you choose to stop you can find well made seafood. That's sadly not the case on the east coast, and it's long been a puzzle to me why that's so. It may be tempting providence, but over the last thirty years of exploring this island, I can't think of an occasion when I've been unhappy with a seafood plate in the West. Even in the simplest of roadside pubs or in tiny cafés, I've been presented with properly cooked fish. Not only properly cooked, but more often than not, so fresh you'd have sworn that it had leapt from the sea onto the plate.

I met up with John Mooney in Galway, and since he's in the wine business and travels around a lot in the area, he was the perfect guide for the sort of thing I was looking for. 'What exactly are you hoping to find?' he asked. I told him that I wanted something simple, the sort of place that a casual traveller in the area would be delighted to find, a place where good seafood was taken for granted, where it wasn't haute cuisine and most importantly, where the prices didn't make you eyes water. Value for money was the sort of thing I wanted. 'I know the very place,' he said, and we drove out of Galway on the Spiddal road.

It's been a while since I was on this road, and I could have been forgiven for not recognising it, because it's become amazingly built up with rather grand houses. It wasn't long before we came to Barna. 'We've arrived,' said John. Barna is a small town by the sea, and at the traffic lights John turned down towards its little harbour. 'There's a good restaurant down here on the pier,' he said, 'but it doesn't open for lunch. We're going to Donnelly's.' After a brief look at the harbour we went back up the little lane towards the traffic lights and parked at the top of it. Donnelly's is right on the corner, next to the lights.

We entered from the back, going through the carpark, and walked through a new extension to take a table by the window overlooking the main road. Donnelly's is a pub, its interior is full of old enamel advertisements for cigarettes of bygone days; Wills 'Weights' and Players' 'Navy Cut' are two that I remember. The effect of these old adverts and the bric-a-brac around the walls is to create a cosy, old-world feel. It was warm, friendly and welcoming - all things that immediately set you at your ease and make you settle in and relax.

The menu is heavily weighted towards seafood, although under the heading 'Old Favourites' you can find chicken and duck dishes, and there are of course, steaks. But we were here for the seafood, and there was plenty of it on offer. Apart from the dishes that you might expect to find like crab claws, smoked salmon and seafood chowder, the menu also listed more imaginative dishes - like the ragout of poached mussels with Basmati rice or the timbale of marinated crayfish.

Because he's eaten here many times, John chose the hake Mornay to start with, one of Donnelly's signature dishes. That's the advantage, I suppose, of knowing the menu well. A good chowder is always a pleasure to find, so I picked that. To follow John had the hot seafood selection, which was salmon, cod and scallops in a white wine sauce. I couldn't resist the timbale of crayfish, which came in a basil and lime mayonnaise.

Donnelly's has a decent wine list with four pages of well-priced wines. House wines are priced at a modest €17.50 and there are plenty in the €20 - €30 range. There's a few more expensive wines, but they're good value because of the reasonable mark-up. For example there's an Amarone from Bolla at €38. We decided on a light easy drinking 'lunchtime' wine and picked the Macon Lugny from Cholet at €22.50.

When the starters arrived I could see at once why John had picked the hake Mornay. This isn't a complicated dish, but it was well executed and presented very nicely in its own little porcelain dish. I was well pleased with my seafood chowder, mainly because it wasn't composed solely of salmon, which is what I often find when I order it. This one had a full mix of ingredients and consequently a full and complex taste.

The main courses were both faultless, John's plateful was enormous - certainly no one could leave here hungry. My crayfish were light and delicate and the basil and lime mayonnaise had a pleasing tang to it, which went well with the crayfish. The last time I saw crayfish on the menu was in South Africa, so it was nice to find them offer in Ireland.

Neither of were hungry enough for desserts - trust me, the portions here are big - so we finished up with a couple of espressos, which were better than I'd have expected. The bill was just over €50. Donnelly's may be a pub, but the food on offer is restaurant standard, and as seafood, a deal better than most on the east coast. If you find yourself motoring around Galway, a trip to Donnelly's is worth the detour.