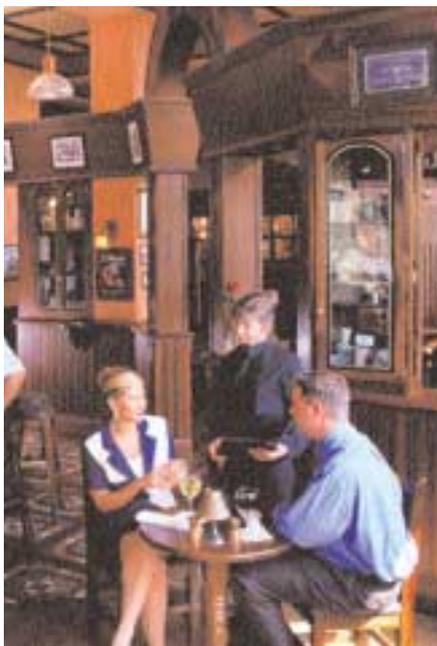


CUISINE

Irish Ayes

Form a *craic* habit



At an Irish pub, the company is as important as the food and drink.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MCCABES IRISH PUB

McCabes serves up a good selection of Irish whiskeys and pub fare mixed with a bit of diversity that suits downtown Naples.

There is but one way to measure whether a pub is “true Irish.” It is not to be judged by the mahogany of its bar, or the Dublin accents of its staff. Do not grade it just by the fish and chips or the knick-knacks on the wall. Nor by the jig that is lilting from the speakers above or by the Guinness that is served with a two-pour draw.

For it is simple in this day to import the look, hire the crew, and serve the fare that is Irish. The important thing, however, cannot be fabricated. They call it the *craic* and it is not to be bought, nor prepared and shipped in across the Atlantic.

The *craic* refers to good conversation among equals and its value cannot

be overrated. Yes, to judge the quality of an Irish pub is to take in the colorful clientele that it houses. That is what truly keeps an Irish pub from being just another bar.

Southwest Florida is surprisingly flush with Irish pubs, some of which are quite pleasantly “true.” From Punta Gorda to Naples, the *craic* is everywhere and ready for another voice to join in. Our mission was to find the chosen few among the abundance and submit a report. Liver be damned.

To start on Fifth Avenue in Naples might seem rather odd, but McCabes Irish Pub fits the bill with its well-wooded Emerald Isle décor and impressive selection of Irish whiskeys. Owner Phil McCabe brought some furnishings from near Dublin and loaded the draft station with the requisite selection of

stouts and ales.

The menu is dotted with many of the hearty traditions of Ireland yet veers off the pub path with a number of global selections such as potstickers, hummus, and chicken Alfredo. The result is a well-done Irish watering hole with enough diversity to please the cosmopolitan Fifth Avenue crowd.

The atmosphere can be lively, as you would expect from such a diverse clientele. Aim for a spot along the bar to capture the true flavor of a crowd, which ranges from the esoteric to the salty.

The Bridge Plaza on McGregor Boulevard seems an unlikely stopping-off point for an Irish fancy, but one foot into Cassidy’s Pub the atmosphere definitely takes a turn for the better. All manner of Irish, English, and Scottish

By David Grant

beer memorabilia leaves no doubt that this place's purpose is primarily as a watering hole. The impressive dozen-or-so beer taps, aided by a large bottle list, lends credence to its designation for drinkers, but don't give up on the menu so quickly.

With such traditional items as Bubble and Squeak, a potato-and-cabbage dish that gathers its name from the noises it makes while cooking (and some say in the stomach of the consumer), steak and kidney pie, and a rich, sumptuous chicken pot pie, Cassidy's maintains its Irish cooking credibility, as well.

The atmosphere truly gains steam when Irish-American Club members gather, as they often do, especially when Harry Boyle is playing Irish favorites. The mood is festive, loud, and colorful—just what is expected from a real Irish establishment.

The last place on our Irish journey turned out to be truly special. The Celtic Ray Public House in Punta Gorda was built with the *craic* in mind. The building is cozy and rustic with an interior designed for conversation and community—with nary a television in sight.

The menu is small and traditional and orders are to be placed at the bar, thank you very much. The food is hearty, comforting, and substantial.

And the beer, oh, the beer is reason alone to attend. Ales, bitters, and stouts. Wheats, lagers, ciders, and lambics. All served in their proper glassware at their proper temperatures. To the unfamiliar, it is all rather charming. To those who know, it is a godsend.

The conversation was as far ranging as the beer selections, with topics from Thatcher to Thailand, from Baghdad to the Bucs, from the smoking ban to Saddam. All met with gusto and opinions and wit. My, how wonderful it is when we truly talk to strangers!

We sought the *craic* and it was found. Amid the sun and the surf a bit of Ireland has surfaced. May the conversation flow. 🍀

David Grant is the cuisine editor of Times of the Islands.

Treat Your Taste Buds

Here is a sampling of what Southwest Florida is serving up. An expanded bill of fare is available under Epicurious, page 74.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CELTIC RAY PUBLIC HOUSE

CELTIC RAY PUBLIC HOUSE: *Great Gaelic Gourmet.* You'll have to fly a few thousand miles to find anything more Irish than this. The cozy, communal setting oozes Celtic charm and history. The beer list might be the finest in Florida with an array of tap handles featuring the best lagers, stouts, wheats, ciders, Belgians, and bitters. Those who are not fans of the suds should opt for a

lambic—a spontaneously fermented Belgian beer often fused with fruit to create a sweet, champagne-like beverage that alone is worth the trip. A decent wine list is also available. The food is hearty, flavorful, and true with well-done staples such as Bangers and Mash, Breton chicken, toasties, and more. Most items are served with *colcannon*, a mixture of mashed potato, leeks, and greens that is quite tasty. The topper is that not one menu item is more than \$10. Live music three or four nights a week and lively conversation at all hours. Simply put, this is the most complete and thorough commitment to a concept that I've seen in Southwest Florida. *Slainte!* 145 East Marion Ave., Punta Gorda, 941/505-9219



PHOTO COURTESY OF PINCHER'S CRAB SHACK

PINCHER'S CRAB SHACK: *Crackin' Crustaceans.* From blues to kings to snows to stoneys, this place is all about crabs! The walls are covered with nautical artifacts and humorous pieces, the bar is full of beer, and the air wafting with Old Bay. This is what a seafood joint should be all about. Decent turns are done to all manner of seafare from fried oysters to the obligatory grouper. But truth be known, if you darken this door, then roll up the sleeves, order the Spiced Garlic Blue Crabs and a couple of beers, and settle in for one of the best pounding, picking, and pulling meals you'll ever have. When you have to work a bit for your food, it tastes better. Those who prefer a more pristine form of dining would do well to settle on the crab cakes, lumpy and delicious. 3301 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs, 239/948-1313; 12571 McGregor Blvd., Ft. Myers, 239/415-4009; 13021 North Cleveland Ave., North Ft. Myers, 239/652-1313.

— D.G.