



Baltimore chef finds the essence of Ireland

Chef John Shields dishes about relaxing getaways to the Emerald Isle

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



The exploration and discovery of new and exotic sensory realms inspires chef John Shields' zest for cooking.

The owner of Gertrude's Restaurant at the Baltimore Museum of Art uses travel to foreign shores to nourish that quest. Often called "The Culinary Ambassador of the Chesapeake Bay," Shields hosts the PBS television series "Coastal Cooking With John Shields" and has written three popular cookbooks on bay cuisine.

To say Shields is busy is an understatement, so when he has time to get away, simplicity is key. He finds that and more, in his ancestral home of Ireland. Shields has taken time to share with us his love of the Emerald Isle, a spot where he retreats to recapture his inspiration and rejuvenate his soul.

What is your favorite travel destination?

Ireland is the place I go to renew myself. My life in the restaurant business borders on hectic to insane on a regular basis, but as soon as my feet touch ground in Ireland all the stress leaves my body and life is good.

What drew you to Ireland?

I come from an Irish heritage and growing up in Baltimore that lineage was always regaled in tales and legends of our ancestors. As a child I would often dream of being in Ireland, not having a clue about any of the realities of the actual country. The longings were based on the fairy tale-like stories from my great-aunts, Josi and Annie.

What inspires you most about this destination?

I was just speaking with a friend who has relatives on the Beara Peninsula in West Cork and we talked about why we love being in the Irish countryside. There is an unspoiled beauty to the country. You won't find billboards along the roads (in fact you may be hard pressed to find road signs), or grotesque strip malls or major American-style sprawl. There is a national pride in the stunning beauty of this island that lies on the far western outskirts of Europe. It makes one understand how simple life should be.

Who do you bring with you?

My partner, John Gilligan, who happens to be even more Irish than me. His grandfather had a ticket on the Titanic, but missed the boat because of an abscessed tooth.

Do you prefer to stay in a resort, or with friends and relatives?

We usually stay in small hotels or B&Bs. They are always lovely and you get to meet a great cast of characters. We especially enjoy Casey's Hotel in Baltimore, Ireland. It's out on one of the many beautiful peninsulas of West Cork and overlooks Sherkin Island. It's all as quaint and Irish as can be, but set up with everything one expects in the way of modern amenities

What regular rituals do you follow each time you visit?

We generally land in Dublin and head straight to West Cork to relax around Bantry Bay. Great spot for exploring and hiking. Then it's off to Galway on the west coast. Nice manageable-size city with a vibrant population and a nice mix of young college students, who are intent on enjoying life. It's quite the party. It's also a perfect base from which to make excursions to the enchanting, rugged terrain of Connemara. Next part of the trip is to Athlone to visit some delightful, welcoming relatives on their farm, always enjoying a sumptuous [Irish](#) farmhouse feast. Then a quick drive back to Dublin for fine

food, museums, cafes and some theater.

Can you share a memorable or magical moment from a trip?

I drove across a small mountain range ... and on the descent came upon a magnificent view of Bantry Bay with the mountains of the Beara Peninsula in the background. We were driving along the edge of the coast on a tiny road and came upon a small cottage nestled in the hillside overlooking one of the most beautiful views imaginable — simply stunning. We backed up the car to get a closer look and there at the entrance to the steep gravel drive was a sign "Old Goat's Cottage." This was significant, as we've always joked about having a goat farm with maybe one or two goats for pets. Upon further inspection there was a for sale sign that had fallen over. Some sort of cosmic sign? Who knows, but we have been in touch with the real estate agent. More to be revealed.

Does the chef in you ever unleash itself over there?

I always make time for the farmers' market nearby in Bantry.

Do you tell your friends, family or clients about your special place or keep it to yourself?

I talked a lot about the places that are special to me in Ireland and probably bored them with too many photos.

What other destination ranks high on your travel bucket list?

I want to travel more in Spain and [Italy](#). I have visited for short times but really would like to spend a significant bit of time just hanging out and exploring. Bhutan is another exotic spot on my bucket list.

How often do you travel?

As often as possible. Probably several times a year.

How much planning did you do, and do you research it yourself or use a travel professional?

Normally we plan most of the trip ourselves which can be a lot of fun in itself. We've used a travel outfit for very customized tours to Italy and it was amazing.

Can you describe your favorite travel bag/suitcase and why you prefer it?

I have a medium-sized, beat-up red suitcase that has served me well all over the place.

What is the one item you will not travel without?

The St. Christopher medal my Grandmother Gertie gave me years ago when I took my first airline trip. Am I a bit superstitious? Well, I am Irish.

Do you have a favorite travel read or author?

"McCarthy's Bar — A Journey of Discovery in Ireland" by Pete McCarthy. One of the best travel books I've ever read. It's absolutely hilarious and right on the money. Even if you never plan to visit Ireland, it's a must read.

If you go

Ireland

John Shields' beloved Bantry Bay and Sheep's Head regions are in West Cork, along the Beara Peninsula on Ireland's southwestern tip. The province's lush, verdant valleys and mountains are abundant with such archeological treasures as circle stones and wedge graves. The tiny towns aligning its craggy coast host world-renowned cultural, arts and culinary events year-round.

Lodging

Bantry House, Bantry, County Cork 353 (0) 27 50047, bantryhouse.com. Historic circa 1750 mansion B&B with stunning sea views, lush gardens, full Irish breakfast and afternoon teas. Rates begin at \$135.

Casey's Hotel, R595 Baltimore, 353 (0) 28 20197, caseysofbaltimore.com. John Shields' beloved lodging spot offers hotel, cottage and townhouse accommodations overlooking the picturesque Ilen River estuary. Rates begin at \$50.

Dining

No. 35 Restaurant, 35 Main St., Kenmare, Co Kerry 353 (64) 664 1559, no35kenmare.com. Sample nibbles of local producers and authentic Irish fare in this historic house showcasing original limestone and stained-glass windows. Locals love the Kenmare smoked salmon served with a caper and lemon dressing and homemade brown bread appetizer before digging into the slow-cooked Kerry lamb stew. Entrees from \$13.

Attractions

Cycling or walking the 88-kilometer Sheep's Head Way Trail, thesheepsheadway.ie. Touted as "Ireland's Best Walk" it circles from Bantry to Sheep's Head, sidling rock-strewn bayside cliffs while meandering amidst the emerald countryside and tiny towns.

Bantry's Friday Market, <http://www.westcorkmarkets.com/markets.html>. You will surely bump into many weekly farmers' markets in West Cork, but this one, featuring producers of local foods, art and livestock, is a favorite among many.

Festivals, westcorkmusic.ie. West Cork's three world-renowned festivals: its international Chamber Music Festival (June) Literary Festival (July) Masters of Tradition Music Festival (August)

—*Stephanie Citron*

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