

# FRANCOIS FROM THE SCHOOLHOUSE

As we made our way across the bridge over a glistening canal, we could just hear a chatter coming from the courtyard at the front the Schoolhouse in Ballsbridge. As this years first rays of spring sunshine were cast over the gleeful sun-seekers, Totally Dublin snuck inside to hear what Head Chef, Francois Grelet, in his wonderful French accent, was up to in the kitchen.

Tell us a little bit about what is happening here at The Schoolhouse, in terms of food.

What we're trying to develop is a place that anybody can find something he or she likes ranging from good pub grub up to a fine bistro dish. So if you just want to come casually with friends you have our finger food option – not at all expensive. If you are more interested in pub-grub, you may try the Guinness pie, or if you want something lighter, we have a piece of hake, well cooked, in a more bistro style. We really try to do something for everyone – and make our dishes accessible in the bar and in the restaurant. Our idea at the Schoolhouse Bar & Restaurant is that people will come here for a good night, to eat well, and enjoy good entertainment between friends. We also do a lot of bar-beques outside and this is a big success. We do a lot of small intimate weddings because we are close to the registry office. If I was a first time customer, I would immediately think this is the right place

Being French, would you have a French style in your cooking?

I will tell you honestly, at the minimum. Obviously my techniques are French, that's where I trained and that's where I'm from, but I've lived in Ireland the last seven years so I have enough experience to understand the Irish customers quite well. For instance, Irish customers really love vegetables, that's really an Irish thing. So I always try to use as many different vegetables as I can. I think that's always something customers will appreciate. I like to use things which are easily accessible. In France for instance, we eat a lot of liver or pork stomach – I will never try it here.

Do you put emphasis on Irish produce?

Yes – I think that any chef in the world should work with local produce. If I was in China, I would use Chinese produce. This is for two reasons; firstly, I think the quality is always better, and secondly, when veg or produce travels, the quality is never as good and sometimes you don't know what exactly you're eating. We saw this with the horse meat scandal; when it's travelling too much at one moment, even with strong inspection, sometimes it's not working. In Ireland you have people like Pat Clarke [A Growing Pleasure] developing top quality micro salad and leaves, you have Gold River Farm, which is organic, but in big volume not expensive at all, even though the quality is far superior. I would say it is our job to help these people growing different vegetables, because if you don't buy it, nobody will buy it. It's a win-win situation for us, so as much as I can, I buy Irish produce – and where possible our fish is always wild.

What is your background – where have you worked previously and what's your training?

In the Loire Valley, I started as a commis chef - I stayed for six years in a nice kind of countryside, stylish restaurant, which was Michelin starred when I was there – so I spent a very long time there. After, I opened my own bistro with my wife, who is Irish, which was good. Then we moved to Ireland in 2005. I went to Skerries, at the Redbank as head chef, where I stayed for four and a half years. Then had a little experience with my own bistro, which didn't go so well, so I moved back to Dublin and to The Schoolhouse. The good thing about my time



working in Skerries is that there are local suppliers and small fishermen with small boats that I kept in contact with for lobsters, prawns, these types of products. It's good when you need something for Catch of the Day.

Do you have a dish that you would call your signature dish?

There are a few, but the hake we do here is really something I like. We do a smoked fish bearnaise that goes on top of the fillet of hake which is steamed, we put with some very lightly pan-fried, thinly chopped leek and oyster mushroom to give it a bit of texture, and we drizzle a well reduced red wine sauce on the side of that. When you eat this, what you get is the richness of the bearnaise and the smokiness, the nice texture to the hake, which is quite meaty, and then the crunchy vegetables, which are very light. I always try to work a balance when I do a dish. For me, with a good dish you shouldn't feel one thing too much in particular. For me, in your mouth you should be able to feel the ingredients, but it should all come together in a nice round flavour.

Tell us about the offer you have in the restaurant at the moment.

We have a two course menu at €22.50 or a three course menu at €24.95 – you even have a complimentary drink following your meal in the Schoolhouse Bar. The idea is that we try to market a nice meal in the restaurant for quite a decent price and then after try to have a drink in the pub, which is a very nice pub as well – there's live music for instance three nights a week.

Do you do brunch here on the weekends?

Yes, this is something I tried to reintroduce at the Schoolhouse, after it disappeared for a while. Brunch is a more traditional thing, and people will come back time and again for it. I think this place is brilliant for brunch. We try to focus on traditional dishes like scrambled eggs, eggs Benedict and poached haddock with spinach. We really try to match what the Schoolhouse is, to the food. It's an old traditional building, very well renewed, with a lot of charm.