



A BAR – by definition – is a place where drinks are served. And yet many posh hotels and other hostels are dispensing expensive glasses of wine, G&Ts, cocktails and such like make it abundantly clear that they don't want you sidling up to request your chosen tippie.

'Please take a seat and someone will take your order,' is the refrain I hear with alarming regularity.

Is this an excuse to whack a couple of extra euro to the bill just because a member of staff has walked all of five metres to deliver your drinks? Or is the bar so short-staffed that it can't cope with a guest placing their order directly with the person mixing the cocktails or pouring the champers?

One of the pleasures of drinking, particularly when it comes to fancy cocktails, is watching the mixologist at work.

They are skilful and knowledgeable people – at least we hope they are. And they like to perform, which means they appreciate an audience. Some have undergone extensive training. Many are masters of invention, creating their own recipes based on what works with a base spirit of gin, vodka, tequila, rum or whisky.

It's exciting to see them in action, at times pouring something or other from a great height or rubbing the rim of a glass with lemon or lime in preparation for a punchy margarita. And, for some of us, nothing quite beats the sound of a cocktail shaker being given the full exaggerated treatment as it's waved triumphantly in the air.

Then, there's the garnish. Perhaps a sprig of rosemary or mint here or a couple of maraschino cherries there. Peering behind the bar is a joy.

The equipment tells you a lot. A decent stirring rod is essential, so, too, is a collimated strainer, juice extractor and a tall mixing glass. Barman are often up for a chat. 'Where do you stand on the shaken not stirred cliché?' I asked an

I JUST WANT A SEAT AT THE BAR!

BY
MARK PALMER



In the mix: Watching a good barman create a cocktail from scratch is hard to beat

engaging young man the other day at a hotel in the Alps. 'Do you subscribe to the idea that shaking a martini can bruise the gin?' 'No,' he said. 'It's more that I just like the theatre of shaking.'

MY own favourite drink, by some measure, is the Negroni, which forever needs a discussion, not with a waiter but with the person mixing this iconic delight. We know a Negroni comprises equal measures of gin, Campari and sweet vermouth – a three-part harmony, a *menage a trois*, a Holy Trinity of sorts. What's really important is the type of gin and, even more crucially, the vermouth.

Good barmen will have an assortment of vermouths and not just boring old Martini Rosso. Ideally, the vermouths will come from Torino – and I love it when offered a tiny sample before the big pour.

I don't mind waiting my turn while orders from the tables are being sorted – but I do mind being asked to sit at a table for 20 minutes while trying to catch the eye of a passing waiter. Bars are convivial meeting places. They are there to encourage conversation, sometimes between complete strangers.

I'll take a seat when I'm ready thanks very much.

I WAS in Dordogne expecting honey-coloured villages, prehistoric caves, long lunches and enough château views to populate an Instagram grid.

But somewhere between wandering medieval streets in Périgueux, admiring impossibly pretty châteaux and polishing off another glass of Bergerac wine, someone casually mentioned an Irish music festival, a week during which rural France swaps accordion music for reels and jigs. I needed to know more.

Every July, Tocane-Saint-Apre becomes home to the Rencontres Musicales Irlandaises de Tocane, a week of Irish music, dance, workshops, concerts and late-night sessions.

It has been running since 1991 and, for one glorious week – this year's kicked off yesterday – this quiet Dordogne village becomes a little bit Irish.

The festival is not about huge stages, celebrity headliners or trying to compete with the bigger Celtic events elsewhere in France.

Rather, Irish dance and music teachers will make the trip over to teach workshops, while musicians will play informal sessions and visitors are encouraged to join in. Whether they can play a tune or just tap their foot along to it, everyone is welcome.

It is deliberately small too. Around 500 people make their way to Tocane each year, which means this is not one of those festivals where you spend half the day queuing for a lukewarm drink and wondering where your friends have gone. Think less Glastonbury, more village fête with fiddles, Guinness and plenty of French wine.

The village is compact enough to explore on foot, with workshops during the day, music drifting from cafés and bars by evening, and a big concert held in front of the church.

Families come too, often with young musicians in tow, giving them the chance to learn a tune, join a session and make friends before bedtime.

FOR fiddle player Sinéad Nic Cionnaith, the festival has already become a doorway into a whole new audience for Irish music.

Sinéad grew up just outside Augher, Co Tyrone, in a family for whom music was always close at hand. Her parents, Mary and Martin, encouraged her from an early age, while her older brothers Eugene, Daniel and James were already playing the tin whistle. 'Many

Her own solo album, *Faol Lán Ceoil*, draws on the tunes, songs and musicians she grew up with, but Tocane is proof that those sounds travel very nicely.

This year, Irish dancer and choreographer Laura Lundy will be among those travelling to Tocane for the first

people my age were being brought to football matches or Irish dance classes,' she says. 'For me, a deep love for music was sparked by my parents.'

She went on to learn from respected Ulster musicians including Aidan O'Neill and Ryan Molloy from Tyrone, Laura Beagon McEvilly from Monaghan and Donegal fiddle player Brid Harper.

Her first visit to Tocane came in 2024, when she was invited to teach and perform. 'I had heard nothing but wonderful things about Tocane beforehand, so I was incredibly excited to experience it firsthand,' she says.

What struck her immediately was the knowledge and enthusiasm of the French

audience. 'Even though I couldn't speak much French at the time, it didn't matter at all,' she says.

'Our shared love for the tradition created an instant connection that bypassed any language barrier.' Since that first visit, she has returned to France to perform in Paris, Normandy and Brittany, building friendships along the way.

'There is a beautiful, shared energy between French and Irish audiences,' she says. 'What stands out to me in France is the immense warmth and a deep, mutual respect for preserving Celtic culture, language and music.'

For Sinéad, Tocane is about much more than a summer week abroad with a fiddle under her arm. Festivals like this give musicians outside Ireland the chance to hear the real thing up close, learn from visiting players and find their own way into the tradition.

'Irish traditional music is inherently inclusive,' she says. 'Festivals like Tocane create a nurturing, welcoming space for musicians in France to become inspired and to develop their own style.'

time. Originally from Tubbercurry, Co Sligo, Laura began dancing as a child with the Sylvan Kelly School of Irish Dance. She went on to study Irish music and dance at the University of Limerick and now works as a performer, choreographer, teacher and part-time tutor at the university.

'Growing up in Ireland, traditional music, dance and sport are a big part of everyday life,' she said. 'It was simply part of our culture and community. What began as a childhood activity grad-



French village in tune with the Irish

This writer went to the Dordogne for chateaux, caves and wine, but what she found was fiddles, jigs and Guinness

BY
KATHERINE GANNON

Fiddle me this: Main, Dordogne has stunning scenery; Inset, crowds watch a set during the festival and the pretty town centre. Left, Sinéad Nic Cionnaith

Laura's workshops will welcome everyone from complete beginners to dancers who already know their way around a reel.

She will arrive with a plan, naturally, but no intention of running a military operation in a village hall.

'Every group is different,' she says. 'The energy of the room often shapes where the class goes.'

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caves, castles and French lunches are included on the timetable.

That idea sits at the heart of Tocane, according to Hervé, one of the festival's volunteer organisers. He has attended the event for around 30 years and has spent the past three helping to run it.

His own love of Irish music began in the early 1970s, after he discovered the work of Breton musician Alan Stivell and began playing the flute.

His first trip to Ireland came in 1973, when he travelled around Cork, Galway, the Aran Islands, Donegal and Dublin with his family.

'It was a real discovery,' he says. 'Ireland was very different then, it felt exotic compared with France, especially compared with life in Paris.'

He remembers the welcome as much as the music. Today, Ireland is even more personal as he is married to a woman from Kilkenny and visits at least once a year.

At Tocane, Hervé helps organise the Irish tutors, dealing with contracts, travel plans and the hundreds of practical details needed to make the week run smoothly.

The whole festival is organised by volunteers. 'From the beginning, the idea was to do something more simple and more real,' Hervé says. 'The purpose was to bring Irish musicians and the French public as close as possible.'

The team now tries to make the village feel 'Irish for a week', encouraging tutors and visitors to mix at meals, in pubs and during

sessions. 'It is not just about concerts,' he says. 'It is about sharing time together.'

That easy-going spirit has been there from the start. The festival was founded by local music enthusiasts Philippe Giraud and Claude Fossaert, who fell for Irish traditional music in the 1970s after hearing groups such as Planxty and The Bothy Band.

They persuaded Dundalk fiddler Gerry O'Connor to help bring Irish performers to Tocane for the first festival in 1991 and somehow the whole thing has been rolling along ever since.

Hervé has been coming for around three decades and joined the organising team because he felt it was time to do his bit.

'We work on it all year long for the next edition,' he says. That is the thing about a good session: someone always has to keep the tunes coming.

The little festival has even caught the attention of the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin, which has been collecting recordings, photographs and festival memorabilia from Tocane since 2014.

And that is the joy of it. You can spend the morning paddling down the Vézère, clambering around a prehistoric cave or pretending you live in Chateau de Losse, then find yourself listening to a fiddle session over dinner by nightfall.

I went to the Dordogne for castles and caves, I left wondering whether I had stumbled across France's best-kept Irish secret.

TRAVEL FACTS

Katherine travelled with with Dordogne Périgord Tourisme. Fly Dublin to Bordeaux from €20 each way, ryanair.com. La Charmeuse has three bedrooms and sleeps up to eight people, starting at €500 a night with a minimum two-night stay (lachartreusedesormeaux.com). Hôtel le Moulin de l'Abbaye from €252 a night (moulinabbaye.com).

HOW TO SPEND A WEEKEND IN THE DORDOGNE

Do: Paddle along the Vézère River (above) from Saint-Leon-sur-Vézère, then visit the cliffside dwellings at La Roque Saint-Christophe.

See: Explore the Cave of Tucotrac or the Cave of Villars, both are packed with history and offer interactive tours.

Visit: Château de Losse for elegant gardens, grand interiors and serious fairytale-castle appeal.

Eat: Try Cannelle et Romarin in Périgueux, Auberge de l'Ecuyer near La Roque Saint-Christophe or La Table d'Emilie in Brantôme.

