



PICTURE: David Cantwell

Behind closed *doors*

Paolo Tullio has a look at some of our very best private dining rooms

Im not giving away any secrets when I tell you that back in the 1970s and 1980s, the private dining room in my restaurant, Armstrong's Barn, was a rendez-vous for the rich and famous. Diners included Lee Marvin, John Boorman, Frederick Forsyth and, perhaps most famously, Charles J Haughey.

What made the private dining room such an attraction for these people was that it had a separate entrance, which meant that they — and their guests — could slip into the room unseen by other diners in the main restaurant.

The room was set up with one large table, which meant it could seat from two to 12. There was a switch at the table, which turned on a red light outside the door. The idea was that the light would be a summons to the waiting staff, and that was how it was normally used, but CJH used it differently. When he turned the red light on, that meant "do not disturb".

A private dining room has many uses. It can be used for illicit liaisons, for parties who want to make speeches to one another, or simply for a romantic dinner a deux.

Take illicit liaisons. A private dining room allows lovers to meet and dine together with no risk of being discovered, which is a definite plus.

People who want to make speeches, like business groups, birthday parties and family gatherings can make those speeches without the embarrassment of being overheard by strangers.

As for legitimate lovers, a private room is just the sort of place where a traditional proposal of marriage can be made, again without the curious eyes of strangers watching.

Now that I no longer have a restaurant, I've been exploring other people's private dining rooms in my capacity as a restaurant reviewer. Here are my favourites, in no particular order.

1 The Jameson Room in Chapter One. This is a very elegant room, to the right of the main restaurant as you enter.

It seats up to 14 people, but is

intimate enough for smaller groups. There is also a chef's table in the kitchen, which can seat six or eight, where you can watch the magic of gastronomy taking place before your eyes.
Chapter One, 18-19 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Tel (01) 873 2266

2 Perhaps more of a booth than a private dining room, there's a table in **Pinocchio's** restaurant where I've dined very well. You're both apart from the main dining room but at the same time included in the restaurant atmosphere. It seats four comfortably, but would work well for a twosome.
Pinocchio, Luas Kiosk, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. Tel (01) 497 0111

3 At the other end of the scale there's the top floor of **Bang** restaurant, which I've booked twice for family occasions. It's at its best if your numbers are between 20 and 30, which fills the room nicely. They will organise a set menu specially to suit your needs.
Bang Restaurant, 11 Merrion Row, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 400 4229

4 Some of the more elegant dining rooms in Dublin can be found in and around St Stephen's Green. On the first floor of the **Shelbourne** are a couple of rooms that can be booked for private parties and they're

both beautifully appointed with original features.

The Shelbourne Hotel, 27 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 663 4500

Round the corner from the Shelbourne is another of Dublin's great hotels, the

5 Merriion. Like the Shelbourne, it has private rooms that can be hired and like those in the Shelbourne these rooms are beautifully restored to full Georgian splendour.

The Merriion Hotel, Upper Merrion Street, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 603 0600

6 Staying in this part of Dublin, you can find **Pearl Brasserie** a few doors up from the Merriion. Pearl is a fine restaurant at the upper end of dining out, and it has a couple of tables that are very private, being almost like self-contained booths. For a romantic dinner a deux, one of these tables would fit the bill nicely.
Pearl Brasserie, 20 Merrion Street Upper, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 661 3572

7 Again on St Stephen's Green, **Residence** is possibly one of the prettiest houses on the Green. It's diagonally across the road from the Shelbourne, and you'll recognise it by the climbers covering the facade in greenery. Although it's a club with membership, the dining room is open to anyone.
At the front of the building on the first floor is a dining room with only a few tables and a view over the Green. A

for-two table here is pretty close to a private room, and for impressing a beloved it's perfect. A fine room, excellent food and good service.

Residence, 41 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 662 0000

8 The Pig's Ear is Stephen McAllister's restaurant and it has a Michelin Bib Gourmand to recommend it. If climbing stairs doesn't bother you, there's the Mirror Room on the third floor that seats a maximum of 10 people. There's a great view over Nassau Street to Trinity College's cricket grounds. You'll be able to work off the effects of the good food by climbing a lot of stairs.
Pig's Ear, 4 Nassau Street, Dublin 2. Tel (01) 670 3865

9 Well outside Dublin, in the south of Co Laois, is **Roundwood House**. It's a fine old house where diners normally share one large table in the main dining room. However, there's another small dining room with only one table where I shared a meal with John Boorman last year. If you enjoy dining in splendid isolation, this one is for you.
Roundwood House, Mountrath, Co Laois. Tel 057 873 2120

10 In Cork city **Jacobs on the Mall** gives you a choice of two private dining rooms, one that will seat up to 15, the other up to 30. Jacobs can create a special menu to suit the group, whether corporate or a family gathering.
Jacobs on the Mall, 30A South Mall, Cork. Tel 021 425 1530