



# Richard Corrigan

From bogland farm to culinary creativity...

CORRIGAN'S MAYFAIR  
28 Upper Grosvenor Street,  
London, W1K 7EH



Jenny Linford discovers that this renowned chef knows as much about food production as he does about its preparation.



Richard Corrigan (left) with Head Chef Alan Barrins (right)

Affable, humorous and with friendly warmth to him, chef and restaurateur Richard Corrigan radiates hospitality. He is also eloquent, with a wonderful, vivid turn of phrase that any writer would envy, with his words delivered in a beguiling, rich Irish voice. His journey traces a trajectory from growing up on a small, subsistence farm in Ireland, to owning and running a number of restaurants including Bentley's - a London institution - and Corrigan's of Mayfair, both noted for their excellent service as well as their food.

His childhood, in Ireland, was a formative experience in shaping his food world, rooting him deeply in knowledge of where food originates. "My father really was something quite special with vegetables. We had a small allotment, a salad garden he called it. We grew cucumbers, tomatoes, all the things you would put on a salad plate; not exotic, but it was very tasty and we had lots of it." He has fond memories of the smell of bread baking. "Mam, like most mothers in those days, made bread every day." Breakfasts consisted of eggs from the family's hens, "when we had the wild salmon run, we'd have salmon for breakfast". He also relished eating eels for breakfast, "fresh eel of a certain size, none of your fancy schmancy-pants recipes - clean it, roll it in a bit of flour, fry it in the pan and the skin goes crispy, like bacon."

Growing up on a farm meant that Richard also learnt for himself the labour that goes into food production. "I started by weeding the salad garden. It's hard work. When you weed the potato furrows, you understand that

it doesn't just come out of a bag! When you take animals to market, you understand the role of the abattoir."

Drawn to food, a youthful Corrigan went off to work in a local hotel. 'Itchy bones' then took him to work in the Netherlands, in fine dining and hotels. While in Geneva, having read about the capital's dining scene, "I thought, I'm going to give London a crack" and he arrived in the city in 1987. His work experience included a fruitful partnership with Stephen Bull, with Richard being awarded his first Michelin star, as Head Chef at the Fulham Road restaurant, in 1994.

Lindsay House, in a Soho backstreet in London, made Corrigan's name. "It was great; I kept it small, very tight. It was a crazy place, with a basement kitchen serving three floors above," he groans expressively, "do I miss it? Do I hell! I did that for twelve years....worked so hard. The whole allure of Soho, the party, the madness, I had to give myself a rest. Soho can turn you into a moonlight character - it's a night place. At my leaving party, I said 'I remember coming here, I remember leaving here. I don't remember the middle!' I did it and am glad to have survived it!"

When it comes to Bentley's, which he bought and refurbished in 2005, he simply says, "I was a very lucky guy to get it. Everyone wanted it." He had worked there before, as a head chef, which stood him in good stead. "I had a huge admiration for what it was and the beautiful, simple fish philosophy." Buying Bentley's, then a 'failed restaurant' in what was a street 'full of strip bars', was a gamble which has paid off.

“ We should be generous, helpful and, when you get to a certain age, you have to teach and inspire the next generation to a better understanding. ”

His pride in what he has done there is evident. “I put it back to a thriving, city centre fish restaurant. The heritage is amazing. The Bentleys were oyster growers and we have them back here. They never felt it was good enough for forty years; now they’re our customers again. Honestly, I feel I am the custodian of Bentley’s; I don’t feel ownership. We’re looking after it and we just spent a million and a half on the kitchens, making them better.” Corrigan’s of Mayfair, which he opened in 2008, is about “good food – wild animals, birds, furred and feathered – beautiful food, beautifully crafted, without the ego attached to it – smatterings and dots are not allowed.”

Corrigan’s restaurant portfolio also includes Bentley’s Sea Grill at Harrods and Virginia Park Lodge in Ireland. There was no ‘grand plan’ to his career. What there was though, palpably, was a shrewd business sense. “I just wanted to work with people who were entrepreneurial; I always found that interesting. I was inspired by people who made it in their business and were successful; there are so many cooks who have gone bust. People I loved and respected would open a restaurant and then go bust. I used to watch and observe.”

Richard, it seems, was always well aware of ‘the pitfalls of this industry’. What are the pitfalls? “Ego, ego, ego - and not listening to your accountants, or financial directors. You must never treat the cash coming in the door as your cash. It’s not, it belongs to the business. Maybe it was my frugal farming background that helped me. Maybe it was my time in the Netherlands, the Dutch Presbyterian way of thinking – get a job done, keep your ego in check.”

Running a restaurant is about being a businessman as well as knowing how to cook. “If you don’t have an idea how to run a farm, you will never learn how to run a restaurant. The industry is peppered with idiots – really,” he says emphatically.

The influence of his childhood is apparent in the

affection and respect that Richard has for food producers. His voice softens as he talks of legendary salad growers, the Appledores, “wonderful people”, Reggie Johnson, of Goosenagh ducks and chickens, “the cheese makers of Britain and Ireland, our fishermen and our farmers. I understand their grief on trying to eke a living out of very little. Farmers need to be paid properly for their food and, if you pay the farmers properly, that’s reflected in the prices you charge. There’s enough cheap, bad food around.”

The quality of ingredients is at the heart of Richard’s approach to food; “there always has to be fantastic ingredients.” To this end, his business now has its own “chemical-free” farm and horticulture operation supplying his restaurants now. “Every week we get five hundred kg from our poly-tunnels, going on for over a year and half now. We’re doing it on a field scale scenario – it’s not just micro-greens and that nonsense, we’re growing the vegetables I grew as a child. It’s interesting; I’ve gone back to my own roots. I’m a natural food restaurant and a natural food grower and that’s what I want to do. Freshness is beauty – you don’t need to be clever, you just need freshness.”

Now, at the age of fifty-one, there is a reflective quality to Richard’s perceptions of the restaurant industry. “It is a tough life. Our industry breaks you down very quickly by the way. I’m quite a character in my own right and I love a party, but I don’t party now as much as I did in my thirties. In our industry there’s such an excess of everything, you really need to be very careful, be measured at a certain age, otherwise it will kill you.” He is proud of the work he is doing at his restaurants to bring on the next generation of young cooks. “We should be generous, helpful and, when you get to a certain age, you have to teach and inspire the next generation to a better understanding.”

