

# VANTAGE

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## *Geek Chic*

WEARABLE TECH GETS  
A SARTORIAL MAKEOVER

## *Design* RIGHT

INTERIORS MAVERICK MARCEL WANDERS  
SETS ZURICH IN HIS SIGHTS

## *Seoul* FOOD

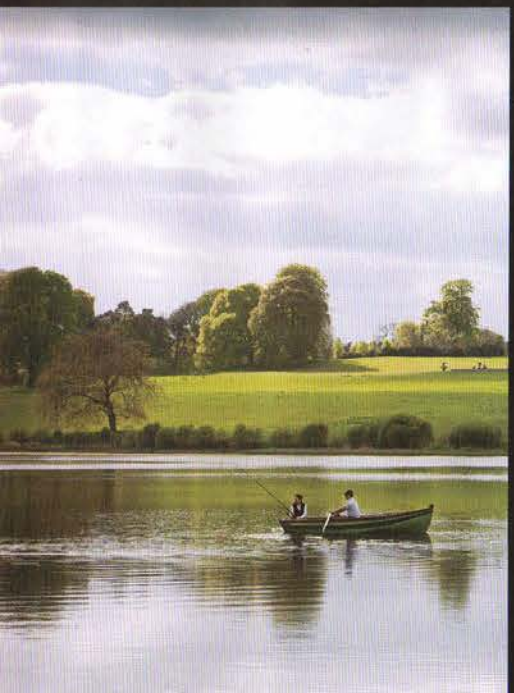
AT HOME WITH TV  
CHEF JUDY JOO





# LADY OF THE MANOR

Lauren Romano steps back in time at Ireland's sleepy Ballyfin Demesne, an hour's drive from Dublin



Pulling up the sweeping mile-long gravel drive, the approach to Ballyfin Demesne in rural Co. Laois appears like a setting Austen may have imagined. Our mini-van feels anachronistic; a horse and carriage would be more apt. Skirting a glassy lake worthy of a Mr Darcy wet shirt moment, the country house looms into view, its stone portico dwarfing the men in waistcoats lined up on the steps waiting to greet us. In the early evening light the Regency mansion looks as though it has barely altered since it was built for Sir Charles Coote in the 1820s.

Appearances can be deceptive, however. Re-opened in 2011, Ballyfin underwent a painstaking eight-year restoration to return the premises to its former glory. When Irish independence threatened to turf the British Cootes off their lavish estate, the family sold the house to the Patrician Brothers who ran a school there for much of the 20th century. The religious order couldn't afford the enormous maintenance costs involved, and eventually the building started to crumble. "When the ceiling fell down in one room, the brothers closed the door and moved to the next," Butler Lionel (a former pupil of the school) recalls as he ushers us into the imposing entrance hall, pausing in the shadow of a pair of 10,000-year-old antlers once belonging to a beast of an Irish elk.

With only 15 rooms, a maximum of 29 guests have the sprawling 600-acre estate at their disposal at any one time. Rambling around the rugged terrain, dotted with ancient woodland, crumbling follies and an eerie medieval-style watchtower, I feel very much like the lady of the manor, complete with fetching Hunter wellies picked out from the fireside selection in the hallway. My practical choice of footwear comes in handy when the dependable Irish elements ink the sky with ominous clouds. Thankfully, at the first hint of rain, a horse and trap comes to the rescue and our steed in shining armour, Billy (Ballyfin's very own version of Uber) trots our group, huddled in blankets, back to the great house.

Once inside, the roaring fires in the magnificent state rooms are a welcoming sight. The palatial saloon becomes the natural gravitation point for my two-night stay, filled with enough curiosities for a lengthy game of I Spy. A curator spent years tracking down pieces of furniture that used to belong to the original house, so I'm told, including the task of sourcing the family portraits that hang above the cantilever staircase.

Curled up in a regal-looking armchair with attentive but unintrusive staff on call with cups of tea, the setting is far from being as formal as it appeared on first sight. With a sumptuously furnished library and an ornate gold-leaf drawing room, I rarely bump into fellow guests other than in the dining room. The corridor leading to my state boudoir – the Westmeath Room – is similarly deserted, so much so that I chance the walk to the spa in nothing but my dressing gown. Overlooking the lake, the space is dominated by a beautifully carved four-poster bed which sits in the centre of the sunny yellow-and-gold-toned interior. In the spacious bathroom portraits hang above the fireplace and the twin sinks, turning my

morning tooth-brushing into a succinct art history lesson. With so much to explore within the grounds, my stay passes by in a whirl of croquet, clay pigeon shooting, archery and horse riding. Guests can explore the grounds by golf buggy and tandem or, for those with the best balance, you can take a penny-farthing for a spin.

All this activity drums up an appetite and the chefs at Ballyfin certainly step up to the plate. From elegant lunches in the light-filled conservatory (remember your sunglasses) to a five-course tasting dinner by candlelight, the menu incorporates seasonal produce, much of which is grown on the estate. On my first night I gorge on Irish Black Dexter steak tartar; Jerusalem artichoke soup with summer truffle shavings; Kilmore Quay line-caught halibut with native lobster; and pearl barley and local cheeses. Each course is expertly matched with wines, but for those who want to get better acquainted with the tipples on offer, a sommelier can guide you around the well-stocked cellar, home to vintages from 14 vineyards established by Irish exiles in the 18th century.

If you're struggling to decide what to wear for the occasion, do as me and the other guests did and raid Ballyfin's collection of period costumes from the Lyric Opera Company, which you can don as you dine. I spent an hilarious hour riffling through the rails of blancmange-like frocks, petticoats, fans and bonnets, before vetoing my pencil skirt for a more regal look.

Bidding farewell to Ballyfin is hard, but the blow is slightly cushioned by the fact that the estate is part of Relais & Châteaux's Route du Bonheur. Anyone who wants to continue their journey around this part of Ireland in style should stop off at Marlfield House in Gorey, Co. Wexford. The family-run hotel is lovingly presided over by the Bowes, who have run this scaled down, cosier version of Ballyfin for more than three decades.

There's a similar abundance of blast-from-the-past charm to be enjoyed here, too. With 35 acres to explore, walkways weave through dense undergrowth to a courtyard area that has been transformed into a delightful farm-to-table bistro. As I walk off a delicious lunch of cod and home-grown samphire I discover that Marlfield House also has a lake, but sadly the only thing strutting around it is a resplendently plumed peacock and not a Gallic Colin Firth. ■

## NEED TO KNOW

All-inclusive rates at Ballyfin Demesne start from €800 (Sunday-Thursday) and €915 (Friday-Saturday) per double room per night (1 October – 31 December excluding Christmas and New Year). In high season (June-August) double rooms start from €1,075. Marlfield House offers rooms on a B&B basis from €230 per room per night  
[ballyfin.com](http://ballyfin.com); [relaischateaux.com](http://relaischateaux.com)  
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For more information about Ireland, visit [tourismireland.com](http://tourismireland.com), 0800 039 7000