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IRELAND FIVE COUNTRY-HOUSE HOTELS

Stepping up to the mark

A new generation of hoteliers has taken charge at some of Ireland's finest rural properties. Aoife O'Riordain checks them out

BALLYFIN, COUNTY LAOIS

This is easily the grandest hotel in Ireland. It has also been a labour of love for Chicago electronics magnate Fred Krehbiel and his Irish wife Kay, who spent years searching for a suitable property to transform. They settled on this neoclassical mansion at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, which was built in 1820s for the wealthy Coote family. Ballyfin opened last May after a nine-year renovation that has returned the building to its original Regency opulence. It overlooks a tranquil lake on a 600-acre demesne with a park laid out by Sir Edwin Lutyens. The interior is lavish and sophisticated; there are 13 bedrooms and two suites, filled with the Krehbiels' collection of period Irish furniture and art, believed to be the finest in the country. As the rows of Hunter wellingtons in the entrance hall testify, nothing has been left to chance. Service is personable yet discreet and the French chef showcases local ingredients with an international twist, turning out dishes such as veal chop with morels and tagliatelle. A stay here gives guests a sense of what it must have been like to stay at one of the country's most magnificent private estates during its heyday, but thankfully with all the comforts of the 21st century.

Ballyfin, County Laois (00 353 5787 55866; www.ballyfin.com). Doubles from €950 full board

GREGANS CASTLE HOTEL, COUNTY CLARE

The 'castle' in Gregans Castle Hotel is a bit of a misnomer. This rambling, 18th-century property actually takes its name from a 13th-century tower house across the road. Castles aside, the hotel is in an enchanting spot looking out towards Galway Bay from its setting deep in the extraordinary, limestone landscape of the Burren in County Clare. Its current owners are Simon Haden and his wife Frederieke McMurray, who bought the place from Haden's parents seven years ago. Two years later, the departure of the chef gave them the chance to realise their ambition to launch one of the country's most exciting dining rooms. They installed youthful Finnish chef Mickael Viljanen, who displays an inventive approach to local ingredients, treating diners to an intriguing medley of flavours such as beetroot meringues and cod with oxtail dressing and eel cream. But for all its cutting-edge cuisine, Gregans still retains plenty of old-fashioned charm. The Corkscrew Bar is a cosy jumble of low tables, mismatched chairs and plaid and just enough chintz was chucked out of the 21 guestrooms, which are now a model of stylish country chic.

Ballyvaughan, County Clare (00 353 65 707 7005; www.gregans.ie). Doubles from €179 B&B

