

Wee outposts of Auld Sod

Kildare's, in King of Prussia and two other spots, serves Irish treats and a magnetic allure.

By Catherine Quilliam
PHILADELPHIA STAFF

Much like a best-selling thriller or novel, a successful restaurant often relies on the formulaic and the unexpected. Restaurateur Dave Magrogon, founder and owner of Kildare's and its "Irish experience," has proved that true.

In the span of 15 months, he has launched three restaurants in locations — West Chester, Manayunk and King of Prussia — that are a restaurateur's dream in terms of high traffic and architectural appeal.

The King of Prussia Kildare's, the largest of the three Irish-theme eateries, is housed in a rustic stone house, a former Pizzeria Uno, a short distance from the mall.

It follows the particular Magrogon mix of what he calls the "taughies" — a decor crisscrossed with authentic Irish artifacts and collectibles — and the intangibles, namely an atmosphere lifted from some tucked-away Irish pub with low-slung ceilings and fogged windows from all the warm bodies.

If that sounds a wee bit too much, I'm only telling you what your initial impression might be.

In decor and setting, the restaurants are part Irish theme park for the young and restless and part family-style upscale pub.

Walk into a Kildare's — each has a different setting, but the concept is the same — and you might be taken aback. The feeling might be described as akin to listening to the whirling, musical yarn of an Irish reel — for 24 hours.

Once you settle in, though, and order one of the many Irish-style comfort foods — and perhaps a pint or two — you might find yourself right at home.

It's an experience, Magrogon concedes, that happens a lot.

"It always happens that people come in here and expect to stay one hour and then go to a movie, but then they wind up staying for several hours," he said. "People like it here. They like the energy."

On a recent visit, I found that energy in full force. Seated in one of the "smugs," as the dining areas are called in Irish-speak, I was able to enjoy my dinner and have something to talk about.

The artifacts include authentic Irish street signs, oil lamps that hang above one bar, old whiskey barrels that serve as tables, and a 1950s pay phone (Magrogon's favorite) brought over from Ireland before the conversion to the Euro dollar.

"We have a guy named Frank who does nothing but drive around Ireland, buying things for us," Magrogon said.

The menu is much like the decor — rich and interesting (unless you don't like potatoes, a staple here), fresh and original.

It features authentic Irish food with what is typically called creative additions — how else to describe a salad featuring "sushi-grade" tuna and a crab-and-avocado "medley" appetizer?

Other offerings seem designed to appeal to American tastes but are tweaked to seem more native to the Emerald Isle. For instance, the popular Jameson's chicken (in demand because it's good) is a substantial entree that in-



You can't have proper Irish pub fare without the pub, and you can't have that without draft Guinness, being pulled by Jennifer Waite.

Kildare's

635 DeKalb Pike, King of Prussia. Phone: 610-337-4772.
Web: www.kildarespub.com.

■ **Hours:** Monday through Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 2 a.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. for brunch and 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. for the regular menu. A late-night pub menu is served from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

■ **The menu:** This is billed as a place for an authentic "Irish experience." You'll find spuds and Guinness and cubes and bangers here, but also food described as "palatable to American tastes." That is, Irish versions of such pub grub as fried calamari, buffalo wings and mussels, salads, burgers and sandwiches (known here as the "carvery," or build-your-own, an "Irish tradition") round out the light fare. There are also pastas, steaks, and other full-on entrees.

■ **I'd have another:** There's a lot to eat here, but I apparently follow the flock. It turns out the most popular offerings are my favorites. To start, try the traditional Irish smoked salmon or the "Irish sampler" — an easy-to-share appetizer consisting of crab, smoked salmon, and pepper-encrusted rice balls. For something different, try the bobby, a handkerchief-size potato pancake wrapped around an assortment of fillings. The salmon bobby is particularly good. Other winners are the Guinness beef stew, goat-cheese-encrusted salmon, and ever-popular beer-battered fish and chips.

■ **How much:** Appetizers, \$6.95 (Irish potato cake) to \$14.95 (Irish sampler); entrees, \$8.95 (vegetable bobby) to \$22.95 (rack of lamb). All major credit cards are accepted.

■ **How loud:** The King of Prussia site seats 400, but thanks to the Irish-inspired "nooks and crannies," it remains moderately quiet. That can change, of course, on live-entertainment nights, especially if the band plays those old-fashioned Irish fiddling reels. You may go a wee bit mad.

■ **Reservations:** Reservations are taken only for parties of eight or more.

■ **Children's menu:** Yes. Kildare's might be a pub, but it's also a family place.

■ **Smoking:** There are smoking sections in the upstairs and downstairs dining rooms as well as in the two bars.

■ **Facilities for handicapped:** Yes.

cludes fried potatoes and an oven-baked chicken made succulent with its stuffing of garlic and sage and Jameson's whiskey sauce.

Entrees billed as "Irish originals" include the requisite shepherd's pie and Guinness beef stew. Among the more traditional Irish offerings you don't always find on American Irish menus are "bangers and mash" (Irish sausage and mashed pota-

toes), ham and cabbage, and "Connemara-style" salmon, a potato-encrusted version presumably named for the Irish region and not the Irish breed of horse.

The selections were dreamed up in Ireland — literally, according to Magrogon. That is, the executive chefs of all of the Kildare's are given a crash course at the Dumbrod County House Hotel & Restaurant, a landmark near the Westford coast of southwest Ireland known as the "foodie hotel."

Magrogon, who recently gave up his chiropractor office at the ripe age of 32, said the waitstaff (numbering more than 70 at King of Prussia) goes through a specific training program to learn how to replicate that Irish experience.

As in a typical Irish pub, Magrogon said, they go beyond the Cheers experience in learning patrons' names.

"Irish pubs are designed to make you feel comfortable," he said. "You feel like staying around and having great conversations."

Add Kildare's signature touches such as soda or brown bread served with your meal and plates that resemble old-fashioned china from a bread-and-breakfast, and you have a place where you feel Irish even if you're not.