

# Sisters ready to shake things up

Twins Tricia and Martina Cronin, the duo behind The Square Table in Blarney, talk to KATE RYAN, as part of our series on Cork chefs about their success to-date and plans for the future.

**T**RICIA and Martina Cronin are the twin sisters behind The Square Table, Blarney. It has been garnering a reputation for fantastic food, great service and a devotion to supporting local producers since they opened in 2014.

Sharp, witty and driven, they are Ying to each other's Yang: one hidden in the kitchen, the other directing the restaurant floor show.

As they enter their fifth year, there is a palpable readiness to shake things up a bit, to 'apply the polish' as Tricia says, that perfectly reflects the passion and commitment the sisters have invested.

Martina is the head chef.

"I'm the only full-time chef here really, but I'll say I'm the head chef to make me feel more important!" she laughs.

Tricia takes care of running the restaurant's warm and welcoming front of house.

Tricia and Martina grew up in Coolavokig in the parish of Kilnmatyra. Their mother is a Coolea woman from a beef farming family.

"We always bring ourselves back to where we're from and how we were brought up — we're grounded and we reflect that in our careers. We're farmers' daughters," says Martina. "Dry stock and beef farmers."

"Our mother has a passionate obsession for feeding people — if she's not feeding us she's feeding the animals."

"Our brother keeps the farm ticking over now, he juggles being a carpenter, working for An Post part-time and building his own house."

"Fermentation, foraging, preserving, charcuterie — all of this, tis going back we're going, to a natural way of living."

"Our mother has been doing it for years, and now it's coming back as a trend but Mam had us hang hams from the ceiling of the kitchen, flies flying around it, thick with salt to preserve it. Nowadays if a chef has something hanging in the kitchen, he's super, you know, 'wow, he's making his own ham!'"

"Raw milk is another thing — everyone's all about drinking the raw milk, but Auntie Mary up the mountain, as ever she drank nothing but it!"

The understanding and respect for food; the magic of time and the old skills passed down directly from their mother has a direct link in how their menus are put together. For Tricia, an important part is to be able to talk to her diners about the people behind the produce, and the special bonds they have with them.

"When Martina and I started working together, I had a lot of learning to do to understand the menus and learn about the producers. We've developed fantastic relationships with the small producers we work with now, we know them. Michael Twomey is one of our butchers, he was the butcher our mother used when we were growing up."

"What makes me enjoy my work more is when I am able to talk about my producers. Customers always want to know you as well as the food, now they want to know the farmer and producer too. It's that friendship that we have with them, we just show it off all the time because that's who we are and what we've always been about."

The path to working together was laid out just 13 years old working together at The Mills Inn, Ballyvourney, working in the kitchen and front of house. It was there that Tricia found a talent for working with people and Martina's touch in the kitchen was recognised and encouraged. By transition year, Martina knew it was a career she wanted, but also knew to train with the best to achieve what she wanted.

"I studied at CIT and my first placement was at The Park Hotel in Kenmare. It was the most important thing to happen to me but one of the hardest parts of my career. I was a first-year commis coming from a kitchen serving bar food to a five-star hotel. I had a reality check, whatever bit of confidence I had was knocked out of me. It was hard but I don't regret it, it made me stronger for every place that went after it."

"The second year, my lecturer, a fantastic man called Ciaran Scully, head chef of the Bayview Hotel in Ballycotton, said if I was looking for a job to just ask. So I did, and worked for him for four summers."

A short spell working at Barry O'Connor's Crow's Nest in Cork led to working with Ross Lewis at Michelin-starred Chapter One in Dub-



**MAKING HER MARK:** Head Chef Martina Cronin, at The Square Table. Pictures: Andy Gibson Photography

lin. "Ross knew Barry from time they spent living and working in London. Ross spotted that on my CV, called Barry and then offered me a job! I was there for two years and loved it. Ross introduced me to Graham Neville at Restaurant 41 and I spent 6.5 years with him; another super guy, very humble."

For Tricia, it took a while longer for her penny to drop.

"I enjoyed working front of house as a summer job, and I was good at it. I worked for seven years at The Mills Inn while studying tourism at college."

"I wanted to move to the city to find a job in what I was qualified in, and ended up in G's Restaurant, part of Casey's furniture. It wasn't until I eventually became Gina's supervisor, the interest started to grow and made me realise that it was what I wanted to do."

"I learned a lot from working with Gina, but I needed to step back from my commitments there when we were looking for our own place."

I needed a small bit of experience of night time service, and Jacques was the ideal place. Their ethos was about supporting local producers, and they really introduced me back into good local produce." Martina always wanted to open a restaurant. The Square Table is their first time going into business and the sisters were keen to do something that could be managed within a tight budget.

"I didn't realise how good Martina was until I started working with her, she doesn't sell herself at all. When she was saying she was 'banging out starters' I was thinking of breaded mushrooms! It wasn't until we really got into it that I understood how good she really is and that we could build something really special together, starting small and making it achievable."

Martina recalls their first visit from the Michelin guide.

"He said the best of places start off organically and take time to grow. When I was working with Ross in Chapter One he always used to say 'It's not a sprint, it's a marathon,' and he was ten years at it before he got the Star."

"Key to us here is the produce we use: if we used less inferior products we would have more money in our pockets, but our priorities have always been to use best quality produce and pay our bills."

Martina describes her style as "natural, simple and not overworked", something that stems from her respect of the ingredients she works with.



**FRONT OF HOUSE:** Tricia Cronin. Picture: Andy Gibson Photography



**USE LOCAL:** A wonderful dish by Martina.

"Understand the produce, relate to it and respect the realness of the people behind it: that's what is reflected in our food. We don't use local because it's trendy, we do it because we want to and it's a natural thing to us."

Tricia says: "For a good while, the art of good service lost its way — it was only about the food. A good Front of House service needs to be engaging and polite. The kick I get is seeing people with a look of enjoyment on their faces as the food comes out. I think it goes back to our mother, standing at the table watching you eat and enjoy your food!"

### BUTTER ROADS TRAIL

Martina and Tricia are involved with The Old Butter Roads food trail year long — showcasing the producers in the region and promoting the North Cork region as a regional food destination.

"For me," says Tricia, "it's deeper on a personal level, a sense of pride in what's around us and we want to stand up for it."

The Old Butter Roads is a revival continuing the Irish food narrative, remembering and celebrating the heritage, skills and traditions that come with it. See [www.oldbutterroads.ie](http://www.oldbutterroads.ie) for more. All summer long, Wednesday and Thursday evening, a new menu "Taste of the Old Butter Roads" is available. Featuring producer members of the Old Butter Roads, the three-course meal serves up a taste of the region for €30pp. See <http://thesquaretable.ie/>

Next week we meet the chef at The Spitjack.

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