



She Cooks (1): Áine McGuire, The Idle Wall

Transcript of Episode #46 of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show*

Catherine Moran: Hello, and welcome to episode 46 of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show*, the show where artisan producers tell their brand story and share the secrets of their success. I'm your host, Catherine Moran.

In today's episode we're going to hear from Áine McGuire, chef-owner of The Idle Wall restaurant in Westport, Co. Mayo, which is on the rugged west coast of Ireland.

Let me note briefly that this episode is the first in a new series I'm doing called *She Cooks*. *She Cooks* will feature women who cook professionally, whether they're owners or not. It's very much about hearing the voices of women in food.

Back to Áine McGuire and The Idle Wall and Westport. Westport has a vibrant dining out scene and The Idle Wall is one of the top two places you can dine out in Westport.

The Idle Wall is strong on local, seasonal sourcing for both its seafood and fish and for its meat. Despite having *not* spent years studying at culinary college, classic cooking techniques are, I think it's fair to say, the backbone of Áine's cuisine. And, it seems to me that she sets out to delight and comfort rather than to surprise and impress. Surely, on your plate of food, if you haven't got the former two, there's little point in having the latter two.

Áine tells some great stories in this episode, including how she pays homage to the reservoir of culinary talent in her family, how she worked as a private chef in various kitchens including for the British Ambassador, what it's like to be a Fáilte Ireland Food Champion for her stretch of The Wild Atlantic Way. And not forgetting the story of the rare breed pig from Louisburgh, the train to Dublin and the shopping trolley. More about that on the show. Here, now is my wonderful conversation with Áine's McGuire from The Idle Wall.

Catherine Moran: I'm delighted to have the opportunity to sit down and talk food and the business of food with one of my favourite Irish chefs, Áine McGuire.

Áine McGuire: Thank you [laughing]

Catherine Moran: [laughing] No need to blush, now-

Áine McGuire: High praise [laughing].

Catherine Moran: [Laughing] Áine, Welcome to *The Artisan Food and Drink Business Show*. Thanks very much for-

Áine McGuire: Thanks, Catherine, for coming to see me here at the restaurant.

Catherine Moran: It's a pleasure. You have something in the oven, and would I dare say, is it something chocolaty?

Áine McGuire: Good nose! [laughs]. Yes.

Catherine Moran: Yes, it smells phenomenal, whatever you're baking.

Áine McGuire: Oh, my young sister and her buddies are heading off to Knock tomorrow, so I was *told* that I had to make several gluten free goodies for them.

Catherine Moran: Oh I see, right, okay.

Áine McGuire: That's my job today [laughs].

Catherine Moran: Wonderful, wonderful. As you said, we're sitting in your beautiful restaurant, The Idle Wall.

Áine McGuire: The Idle Wall.

Catherine Moran: It's got an intriguing name, but before we talk about that, you have an interesting career in food to date. Would you tell us a little bit about what you were doing before you came to The Idle Wall.

Áine McGuire: Okay. Well, The Idle Wall is in Westport and I grew up around here. I grew up in Newport. I grew up in a house that was *very much* food-obsessed. At least my father was and he was *such* a good cook. In fact Catherine, if you look over there to that wall, above there's a back of a boat up against the large white stone wall. And above that there's a fishing rod and it's a light, slight rod if you can see, but it's a trout rod and it's one of those split cane rods, it was my father's. He used to as a pastime... he would fish on the river in Newport, the Black Oak river.

We grew up on a diet of wild salmon and brown trout and sea trout. I mean, *just delicious* and it was great. He could cook these things very beautifully and he would go off and pick wild sorrel and make a little sorrel sauce to go with the salmon. Or he would go to Newport House and have... They had a smoke house there, and Newport House is the big house, so to speak, in the town. They had a beautiful old-fashioned smoke house with oak slats and the fish hung between the oak.

Anyway, I asked him to get me a summer job up there at one time. He went in and asked Mr Thompson, Kieran, and so I ended up working. I was young, I mean I think I was probably... Excuse me, I have a little bit of a cold, I think you probably hear it in my voice.

I had a summer job when I was maybe sixteen, seventeen, around that age, and worked in the kitchen with the chef who is still there. I learned an awful lot. Yes, so that was Newport and it was, yeah, it was a good place for food and... I often think about other things. My aunt was a great... my mother was a terrible cook. Well, she was actually very good but she never did any. It was my father who did all the cooking, from

homemade burgers, his burgers are on my menu, to beautiful curries. My aunt was — aunt Mary — was an *amazing* cook. A real home cook. I think I brought... between that and the kind of *fancier* food that I picked up from Newport House, I had a very short time there, but I had this great love of food.

I didn't take it at that point and I went to university. I went to Maynooth and I studied a degree in English Lit and Sociology. An Arts degree. English Lit and sociology, you know.

Catherine Moran: Same here.

Áine McGuire: Did you? OK. I think I read that the guy from Loam [a restaurant in Galway] also did the same degree, which is, maybe that's something for food people [laughs]. It's funny. Then I had a different job, I worked in theatre and a little bit of film right up to my late 20s, early 30s. Then just took one notion and decided, "Okay, I'm going to give this a go." You know, it's like a compulsion. It's slightly grander than a desire but I just felt I had to cook, which is terrible.

Catherine Moran: No, not in the slightest.

Áine McGuire: So I had no choice and I went off to... I saved up some money and I went to Ballymaloe and I did a three-month course there. That was the only formal training I ever had. Even back then, that was in the year 2000, at that time it was really, it was mainly very wealthy housewives and kids on gap year. It wasn't really... doing that course, it wasn't really for the person who wanted to go into business *at that time*. I think it's more structured in that way now, but it still was massively influential. I learned a lot there.

Catherine Moran: Right. At Ballymaloe?

Áine McGuire: Yeah, I did.

Catherine Moran: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Áine McGuire: Immediately after that I opened a restaurant.

Catherine Moran: All right.

Áine McGuire: Yeah.

Catherine Moran: You became your own boss?

Áine McGuire: I did, yes. Yeah, I did.

Catherine Moran: Okay, so-

Áine McGuire: Arrogantly so, I did become my own boss. I had a small restaurant on the Aran Islands, for a short period of time. Did nice food, didn't make any money because seasonality there was... I mean, I didn't know what I was doing. Really, I didn't. I kinda went from there to France, I cooked as a private chef in France. I went to the Caribbean and cooked as a private chef there. But I never went in under any really great chef. That's a mistake. That was an error. Because everything I learned, I learned it on my todd. You're kind of going in a roundabout way to learn it. You come sometimes to the same conclusion. I have an unusual way of cooking.

I don't cook the same way as other people who have gone to college. I don't cook in exactly the same way. And I've learned from books and from TV and from reading and from other people who work with me in fact, as well. I just absorb sponge-like from other people who are good. So that's how I came to cooking.

Then I was in the wilderness a little bit. I think the Thomas Read Group were opening up the Winding Stair, and about three months before they opened they employed me. Now, not because they'd ever heard of me or anything like that, but because a friend of a friend had recommended me to the lady who was running it. I think she felt that I might be able to do... you know I just might do it.

Catherine Moran: This was in Dublin, of course?

Áine McGuire: This was Dublin, yeah. I moved and I think at the time they didn't really know what direction they were going. I had been very interested in what was happening in London, and the gastropubs at the time were just intriguing me. Because I had that, I suppose, very strong background in local food because of my upbringing I felt that this was it, now we needed to...

The producers were only starting off at that time. It was a different place then. I think originally, The Winding Stair, they were, they wanted to do some kind of a Portuguese restaurant. I came along and said, "No, no, we must do an Irish restaurant here." And they liked it and they let me off. I really didn't have a clue what I was doing, but we did it. I worked so hard... it really nearly *killed* me.

I knew I was working at least 100 hours a week and it was the hardest thing, but it was also very good. I didn't know how to run a kitchen, I didn't know any of this stuff.

Catherine Moran: Were you in charge of the kitchen?

Áine McGuire: Yeah, fully. I set up the menu. I sourced all the food, all the suppliers. I ran the kitchen, I *hired* the kitchen. It was a big undertaking. I probably didn't realise at the time how big it was. I did it and it was exciting in parts and the food was good. I knew that.

I remember trying to get pork from here. There was a guy in Louisburgh doing a rare breed pork. There were no distributors bringing food from one place in Ireland to another. They were not bringing local food. The kind of food that I wanted for the restaurant wasn't available. So [laughs] If the EHO is listening to this, you should turn off your device now.

So, what we did was, Chris came up on the train with the pig in a bag. It's a very big pig. Then because of where the Winding Stair was, I "borrowed" a Tesco trolley and went down to the train station and I met Chris. We put the pig in the trolley and we brought him up to The Winding Stair and we butchered him. It was delicious.

Catherine Moran: That's incredible.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, I know. I think that part of the story, apart from the fact that it's a little bit funny, it goes to show you that even back then the climate was very, very different and people *weren't* putting the names of the producers on the menu. And I started doing that then, and it was unusual. It was seen to be unusual. Now, I was taking my cue from London, there's no question. I had seen the gastros and I just thought what they were doing

was incredible. And they had this pride of English food and I really feel... I had that pride of Irish food and I used get so angry with people who would say, "No, we don't have Irish cuisine." "What kind? What do you mean it's an Irish restaurant? Ha ha ha." They would laugh a little bit. I'd go, "It's an Irish restaurant." It was hugely interesting and I met amazing people through that whole process.

Catherine Moran: What period, what years are we talking about here?

Áine McGuire: When did it open? Maybe 2006.

Catherine Moran: Right.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, probably.

Catherine Moran: Right. Okay.

Áine McGuire: What year are we now? Yeah, 10 or 11 years ago. The difference in ten years is remarkable. You can now go anywhere in the country and you will see "local" and "seasonal" written on the menu. Unfortunately, a lot of the time it may not be authentic and honest as we might like to think it. There's a zeitgeist and a bandwagon and people have jumped on that for sure.

Catherine Moran: Not necessarily always with the best intentions. Some people but-

Áine McGuire: Just because it sounds good for marketing.

Catherine Moran: It's inevitable, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yes, it is inevitable. Yeah, sure, because it's good. Sometimes I find myself, now when someone says, "What kind of a restaurant do you have?" and I say, "I have an Irish restaurant, with local and seasonal..." In my head I'm cringing because when I hear that it just... while it's the right thing and it is what it is. I just feel that it is bandied a little bit about but anyway...

Catherine Moran: Yeah, absolutely.

Áine McGuire: So that was it. Then once Winding Stair was done, well, I left it. And we got a Bib Gourmand there from Michelin. Yeah, it was good but I was exhausted. I ended up getting a job for two years. We were coming into the recession, you see, and the Thomas Read Group was the first big group to go bust in the recession. They were certainly heading that way. I was glad to get out of it. I went off and I worked for a man called Sean Drumm. He had a company that sold high-end kitchen appliances to the domestic market. These were fridges for ten grand and *beautiful* ovens. Just the most beautiful things.

So all I had to do was try and sell them and do a little bit of cooking. You can imagine, after the stress of running a kitchen, this was, it was fabulous. I loved it. I really loved it.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, it's a relative breeze in comparison.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, yeah, and craic and fun. I loved being surrounded by the most beautiful products and I did a lot of traveling with them and with him but then the recession was getting... there was a bigger hold on it and this was the luxury appliance market so I lost my job there. I was very disappointed to lose it but we've remained friends since. I had a great time. I really had.

Catherine Moran: How were you as a saleswoman?

Áine McGuire: I'm good. I wonder what Sean Drumm would say if it was him. I think I'm good at it. I know I am, yeah. I could sell it.

Catherine Moran: Because you're going to be needing selling skills. Currently, yes as a chef.

Áine McGuire: Yes, I guess so.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, definitely.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, that's why we're here, we're in the business of selling. I enjoy it.

Catherine Moran: Well, when you've got a good product it's-

Áine McGuire: It's easy.

Catherine Moran: It's easy, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yeah. It-

Catherine Moran: Engaged customers.

Áine McGuire: For sure. Yeah, yeah, uh-huh. And of course we were getting customers, they were all interested in food and all of that kind of stuff, so it was good. It was good fun. So then after I was made redundant, at that point I was a bit concerned about the recession and what it might do. Ross Lewis gave me a job in Chapter One for a little while. It just wasn't what I wanted but it was wonderful at the same time. He had offered to keep me on. But that high end Michelin Star is just not my kind of cooking. I felt a bit like a fish out of water because I don't have that kind of training. I did feel a little bit, emm, not sure if I'm confident enough to be here. And I found my feet eventually there, but it just wasn't for me even though it was a wonderful place to be. He was really kind because I was panicking, because I was, "I don't have a job."

I fell back on to my private cheffing skills and I worked then for the British ambassador for about four years.

Catherine Moran: In Dublin?

Áine McGuire: Yeah.

Catherine Moran: Wow!

Áine McGuire: Yeah, as their private chef. That was fun. I loved it, I enjoyed it. We opened up... The guy I worked with originally, the ambassador, Julian King was his name, and he was very forward thinking. We opened up my role quite a bit. I wasn't just making soup and sandwiches for the ambassador and going off to work. Then I got involved in the events, I'm showcasing Irish produce again. I put on a couple of really big events for their garden party with food from the four provinces; that was one of them. That was really interesting. I was going around the country meeting producers and trying to get the best of each, and bringing down the produce from Ulster. There are amazing things. They have amazing food products but it's not on our radar so much.

Catherine Moran: That's right, yeah. It's weird, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yes, it is.

Catherine Moran: Even though it's on the same island.

Áine McGuire: Yeah. I *really* enjoyed that part.

Catherine Moran: You must have been able to use the finest ingredients in the land, in that position.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, I certainly had a budget. Different events had different budgets. It was great. Different events. Yeah, of course, I mean sometimes you're doing a party for the Gardaí [the Irish police force] and you might have a certain amount per head but they all quite liked my curries. And I had an assistant. She was from Bangladesh and she certainly gave me my love of using fresh spices. Not really part of my restaurant at the moment but when we do our cookery school, we do an Indian class and it's well attended.

Catherine Moran: Wonderful. Yeah, wonderful. That brings us back up to the present now?

Áine McGuire: Yeah, more or less it does. Yeah, it does. When I finished at the embassy, I had been looking for... I did some freelance work a little bit, but I had been looking for... I have family here and I wanted to come home.

Catherine Moran: Come back to the west?

Áine McGuire: Yeah. I'd been looking for a premises. This came, through a friend of a friend, this place, which was a restaurant called Key Cottage, it came up. I knew this place very well. I'd had my eighteenth and my twenty-first here, so it was very familiar to me. And I remembered it very well. When we were teenagers and started to go out to dinner, feeling sophisticated, this is where we came. I'm at the end of my second season. In February, 2017, it'll be two years. It's still very much in its fledgling stages. It's still very much a restaurant baby, but still alive.

Catherine Moran: I think that's one hell of an achievement, isn't it? It is still alive.

Áine McGuire: Yes. We won't clap ourselves in the back yet.

Catherine Moran: Tell us about, why is this called The Idle Wall? It's a fascinating name.

Áine McGuire: Okay, yeah. I love the name, Catherine. I love it. You can see here when you're looking out the window, you can see how we're right on the seafront, on the *quay* front. This used to be a very busy quay going right back to pre-famine times. There's a wall just up the road on the right hand side, and it is called the idle wall. It's where the men would come and sit and wait for jobs on the boat. People would even come out from the work house and sit there and they might get a job for the day; loading or unloading and going right up to the sea. A lot of coal came in here, a lot of... right up to herring coming in in the 60s. That's kind of when it finished.

The idle wall name, it was a docker's term. The name remained. There are still older men here who come and walk along here. They'll sit and chat, and sit on the idle wall. It's a local landmark. I needed to change the name when I took over. Local history is of great importance. So we had to, with the help of some friends we came up with that name. I love it.

Catherine Moran: Oh, it's brilliant. It absolutely is.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, I really do. Lots of the local people... like I got some calls from people, not about the restaurant, but about the name, going, "Now, I can give you a bit of information, a bit of history." People would drop in photographs and tell me little bits about it. The other side of the idle wall, on the sea side of it, is called the rotten dock. That's where boats came to be mended. I think that's another good name. Probably not for a restaurant.

Catherine Moran: No, no. The rotten dock...

Áine McGuire: Yes. Yeah.

Áine McGuire: It could be a pub.

Catherine Moran: Indeed, yeah. It could definitely be a pub. How many covers, I think that's the word, does your-

Áine McGuire: Covers, that's the word we use.

Catherine Moran: Yes.

Áine McGuire: How many covers do we have? You are sitting in the front part. The rest, this is the old house. Mr and Mrs O'Grady lived here. This is their front door and that was their back door. Grand enough too, because they had nice big windows. Yeah, it's quite nice looking. Then the bar would have been built on by the previous owners. Then there's another room, a long room at the back, Catherine, have you seen that? Because you've been here a couple of times.

Catherine Moran: Yes.

Áine McGuire: That long room, between all, it can seat up to anywhere between forty and sixty. It depends on the set up of the tables.

Catherine Moran: That's a lot of people. Yeah, it's a lot of diners.

Áine McGuire: Yes it is.

Catherine Moran: Fantastic. Okey dokey. How would you describe your culinary style?

Áine McGuire: Okay, well... you know, we had a guy here reviewing the restaurant from one of the papers. He gave me a very nice review, to be fair. I think he was a bit concerned that he didn't want to call me a home cook because he thought that might be sexist. Because there is that talk at the moment about women as chefs, and that they don't necessarily seem to make it to the top positions, and if they do they might be in pastry. There are all of these things and I think-

Catherine Moran: Yeah, the stereotypes.

Áine McGuire: Yes, there are all those stereotypes. I think he was a bit concerned that that might... and I was like, "That's okay if you say that about me, because that's what I am." I don't have the training, in fact I like to call myself a cook, but a chef is my trade. I know how to make food tastes really good. I know how to do that. I know that that's not something that everyone can do.

So I think our style is taking the *best* ingredients that we can afford. A lot of people do this, don't do a whole pile to them but just make them sing. Put them with something that works, but I don't like to use too many things. I don't like to use too many flavours on the plate. I don't like to... In fact I don't even like a whole pile of processes unless you're dealing with something like a shin, or tongue or ears, or something that needs lots of processes. Of course that's interesting in itself.

I think, yes, I think simple, tasty food that means something also. Maybe that's something slightly different, that I do like... it has to have meaning. You can't just put something with something. For me, there has to be some kind of thought process that's in some way intelligent. You're not just going to ... I wouldn't... monkfish and chorizo, sure, but I couldn't have that here.

Catherine Moran: Is that because it's too clichéd or...?

Áine McGuire: Yes, I suppose. Yeah. Maybe that's a bad choice, because we do have some chorizo on the menu and it goes with an egg, but it's an Irish one so maybe that's not so bad. Yeah, I think it needs to have meaning to my terroir, to my land. It needs to have something. It needs to mean something to where we are in Westport, at the Quay. It needs to mean something to me personally. I suppose that, yeah, that's tiny bit weird. We've set up some rules, I guess, for The Idle Wall. Some of them are based on very sound thinking in terms of sustainability, particularly with fish.

I know some restaurants work *very* well, like they have a twelve mile radius and they only get all their food from a twelve mile radius. We have to work a little bit outside of that, and we do use things like lemons. We don't use olive oil, for example, we don't serve pasta. We do the odd time use risotto, but only because, gosh, lobster risotto is so good it's hard to not do it. It's only rare. We try and keep our produce to being indigenous and local. That works for lots of reasons in that, A) the food tends to taste a lot better. When people come here I want them to taste the lamb from down the road because it tastes of the place.

And I think that something, you know you see that in Italy, you see that in Spain and France. And people are so proud of their terroir. I was talking to a couple of oyster farmers the other day and oyster pickers, so the guy who picks the wild or the natives, and the guy who grows the Irish rock oysters, I believe that's what we're calling them now, not Pacific Gigas. They were saying that the ones that are grown in Clew Bay taste differently from the ones that are grown in Galway Bay, and that they would notice a difference. Now, I'm not that much of an aficionado to notice that, but isn't that great and isn't that important?

We went to visit ... I went to visit a guy who grows rope mussels out in Clew Bay, now they just go into a truck and they go to... he doesn't sell them here, for example. That's the difficulty that I'm trying to work with Bord Iascaigh Mhara [Ireland's state agency that develops the sea fish and aquaculture industries in Ireland] about, that a lot of the really excellent products are just going off to be sold in the Boqueria, or to be sold somewhere else.

And I know I'm going off on different tangents here, but I suppose that what he was saying is that... *I know* the difference between a wild mussel and a rope mussel. For me there's much more flavour in a wild mussel. Originally, what I had on the menu was that you could have rope mussels from Killary Harbour and wild mussels from Clew Bay. I had both of them on, because I wanted people to try that difference.

I suppose what I'm talking about is that the lamb is going to taste different from here. That's still the thing that we should be proud of. I remember last year we did, we had some wild rabbit. I did a rabbit and turnip pie with cider. I just remember thinking, to me that's, it was a *very important* dish. I know it was a bit like a fricassee or something, because it was slightly creamy, but it was important because I felt that if my grandmother had had these ingredients, she could have put that together. She was a good cook. She might have very well put that together. I think these are the things that keep me going in the kitchen.

Then outside of that, I'd love if this was a restaurant where you just got those kind of dishes. I have to, as you said before,

I'm trying to sell. I do have a burger on the menu, it is my father's recipe and it's from really good beef from our local butcher. But I need that on there too. If I want to get the person in who wants to buy the rabbit pie, they may have somebody with them who eat a burger. It's different, I think, if you're in a place with a *big* catchment, like in a city. Then you can afford to be slightly more niche. I can't, here, so much, I think. I think.

Catherine Moran: I remember recently, when we last dined with you. I had the fish pie, and the cod mornay was on as well, which of course is a brilliant classic.

Áine McGuire: It's, yes. Yeah.

Catherine Moran: It strikes me, with some of your cooking, you seem to adopt the approach of minimally processed, minimally invasive. You want to let the ingredients sing.

Áine McGuire: For sure.

Catherine Moran: Which is what it's all about.

Áine McGuire: We've changed from the cod now, because we can't... I've been finding it difficult to get suppliers to give me Irish cod. We're using hake at the moment. I mean, that mornay... my grandmother would have made that. They would have had cream, they would have had nice cheese and mustard sauce, these are big things. These, they're old fashioned, I like them. We don't even put salt and pepper into that dish. It's just three really good ingredients, which is nice. It's nice, I like it.

Catherine Moran: I had some cod from Renvyle the other day, which I bought in Castlebar. I was very impressed.

Áine McGuire: From Renvyle?

Catherine Moran: Yes, yeah.

Áine McGuire: Really?

Catherine Moran: Yeah. I bought it in the fish shop in Castlebar.

Áine McGuire: How much did you pay for it? I bet it was twenty Euro a kilo.

Catherine Moran: For three good portions... I think it was about eight euros. I thought that was reasonable.

Áine McGuire: That's cheap.

Catherine Moran: Right. Yeah, for Renvyle cod? It was as fresh as a daisy.

Áine McGuire: Okay.

Catherine Moran: I certainly trusted the person I bought it off but-

Áine McGuire: Well, okay. Okay.

Catherine Moran: Then, you know ...

Áine McGuire: Huh?

Catherine Moran: Yeah. Anyway, that's another story, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yes, that's a whole *other* story. For sure.

Catherine Moran: You mentioned Michelin earlier.

Áine McGuire: Oh Yeah. Did you watch that?

Catherine Moran: I didn't see anything but I saw the-

Áine McGuire: The podcast. Did you see the live... You didn't, no?

Catherine Moran: No, I didn't watch that. You probably know what I'm going to ask you about that Veuve Clicquot, special prize-

Áine McGuire: The women's prize?

Catherine Moran: Yeah, yeah.

Áine McGuire: It was enraging. What nonsense.

Catherine Moran: It's an absolute disgrace.

Áine McGuire: Absolute disgrace. Poor show. *Poor*, poor, bad, *bad* Michelin.

Catherine Moran: Yeah.

Áine McGuire: I suppose we need to explain to your listeners what that was.

Catherine Moran: Yes, yes, we do.

Áine McGuire: Clare Smyth who has three Michelin stars in her own right was yanked up out of the audience and given a *red* Michelin star for a special female chef. I am doing the-

Catherine Moran: Air quotes.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, that's right. And I was kind of horrified. I thought maybe she was getting some acknowledgement for something obviously, but not just because she is a girl [laughs].

Catherine Moran: [laughs] Yeah, yeah. A "*good girl*" at that.

Áine McGuire: "Good girl!", yes, "well done you, with your girlness".

Catherine Moran: I'm surprised it wasn't a pink star, really. They missed-

Áine McGuire: Yes, it wasn't, they did, yeah.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, yeah.

Áine McGuire: I thought that myself this morning. It was really terrible, it was *really* terrible. And I wonder, was it an afterthought, because when they looked at all the new Michelin stars they were given, they were *all men* standing on the stage. *All of them*, all whatever, 20, 18 of them. They brought this *really remarkable* chef up on stage. There was a touch of town hall about the whole thing, because it all seemed a bit awkward. It was, "Take off your jacket, put on the chef's jacket. Hold it up." It all looked a bit awkward. I really, I felt that that was a step backwards. As someone on Twitter, Gary O'Hanlon, actually, he tweeted. He was saying that, "A chef is a chef. I'm a chef, I'm not a *female* chef. Your doctor, the lady doctors don't get special awards for being lady doctors." [laughs]

Catherine Moran: "Lady policeman" is one of my favourite. Yeah.

Áine McGuire: Yes [laughs]. It's outrageous really in this day and age. This is absolutely outrageous and I was a bit disappointed that Clare Symth accepted it. I think she should not have accepted this, but who knows what's happening there. I mean, you just, "No, thanks. I am..." She three Michelin stars!

Catherine Moran: Yeah, exactly.

Áine McGuire: Even though she's a woman! I mean it's like you feel like you should add that in. Then not one woman given any... I think that we seemed to have missed out here in Ireland, *again* by Michelin. It's a bit disappointing. They were all over the place, they tweeted they were here. The guy was here. They do introduce themselves, actually.

Catherine Moran: After eating?

Áine McGuire: Yeah they do, yeah. When I was in Winding Stair, the guy introduced himself and I was called out to talk about the way I had cut the liver, he didn't like the way I cut it. I remember having that conversation and so then when, it was last May, and it was actually at this table where we're at, I had a guy come in, and then *you do* look out for an English mobile number, guy on the phone. We had some nice food and he liked it. Then I came out, as I always do, to my customers, if I can. Sometimes if I'm too busy I can't come out, but that night I was able to come out. I said, "Hi, so thanks for coming in." He said, "Can we talk for a minute?" I was like, "Yes." I had two regulars who were sitting over on this table here. I brought him into the bar and we sat down.

He said, "We've met before." I was going, "I'm sorry, I don't remember." He explained that he had met me at the Winding Stair, and that he was from Michelin. I was like, "Okay, that's great," and, "could we talk?" I said, "Yes, yes of course we can." And we had a very interesting conversation about food. It was really interesting. We had a glass of wine and a chat, and I signed papers. So I presume they're going to include The Idle Wall, as they do lots of places, just in their listing, because obviously they have way more places than just the stars and bibs. They have lots more in their listings. We're listed in the French one actually, for 2017. I saw that. It's just a listing.

Catherine Moran: Congratulations.

Áine McGuire: No, no, it's not... I would say don't congratulate me. I would prefer if we had a Bib Gourmand, that would be better. I think our pricing might be an issue there. I think because, I don't know, yeah, I would prefer if we'd had a Bib Gourmand. He was a very nice guy, so that *does* happen. They have to get your signature for that.

Catherine Moran: Okay. They also have to introduce themselves?

Áine McGuire: Yes, and they were tweeting as well this year. They tweeted that they had been here. That's way back in May. Now, obviously some other people would have had to come as well, so I don't know what happened after that. They come incognito, the other ones.

Catherine Moran: Do you think you'd find it very stressful if you won a star?

Áine McGuire: We're not that kind of a restaurant, and I think it would effect my business. I'm not, you know, look at Chapter One, look at us, look at ... We're *different*. We're not at that level. I don't want to pitch myself at that level. We're certainly bib standard, so I wouldn't mind having a Bib Gourmand. I think we should have one of those at some stage.

Catherine Moran: Oh, most definitely you should.

Áine McGuire: But it's not a Michelin star kind of restaurant. I think especially where we are, that might feel ... Sometimes that freaks people out. They think maybe they have to dress a different way or I don't-

Catherine Moran: Behave differently.

Áine McGuire: Behave differently, yeah. There's no need for that. I used to chase 3-star restaurants around the globe with some friends. We'd go to some really fancy places. The last one I was in was El Celler de Can Roca [an avant-garde restaurant in Catalonia, which has topped the "World's 50 Best Restaurant's" list]. It was just so formal. Sometimes the Spanish can be way more formal even than the Brits. It was just unenjoyable, because of its formality.

Catherine Moran: Stiff and starchy, and you when you leave then you can finally breath and relax.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, no, no good. Because we had gone to The Fat Duck and that was just fabulous because it wasn't one bit... and they understood what we were as soon as we walked in. Therefore, they treated us accordingly. They've got that so... that was the best food experience I've ever had. It was-

Catherine Moran: It's very witty there, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yes it is. There's a lot of craic, and there should be, there should be fun. Sometimes when I come from the kitchen out here, especially if it's a quieter night, the people are speaking in hushed tones and I'm like, "Oh, no!" There's one restaurateur from Dublin who had said to me, "Good tip: music up, lights down," so people can be relaxed. I think that's really important.

Catherine Moran: I remember the first time I met you here, we plonked ourselves down and we were looking at the menus and it was early. Very quickly after we came in, you came out to greet us, which was a lovely touch, and you had your chef's whites on. You were clearly the chef. I was terribly comforted by the handshake because your hands were quite rough. I thought "this is a great sign".

Áine McGuire: This is a working lady! [laughing]

Catherine Moran: [laughing] This is a *proper* chef here. She's actually peeling the spuds and God knows what else. You're not just in there with a clipboard barking orders.

Áine McGuire: No, if only, *if only* that were my life. [laughing]

Catherine Moran: Some day.

Áine McGuire: On of these days.

Catherine Moran: Your food was absolutely marvellous.

Áine McGuire: Yeah. I mean, it's not, you know... as you say, you had fish pie and there's a mornay. It's not rocket science, it's not.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, it's all about the ingredients I think, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yeah, yeah, sure.

Catherine Moran: It's showcasing them.

Áine McGuire: Yes.

Catherine Moran: A horrible word, to use, I know, but let them sing.

Áine McGuire: Yeah. Everything, just everything sounds like a cliché now.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, it does.

Áine McGuire: It's just terrible really. Maybe have we out-fooded food, I don't know.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, quite possibly.

Áine McGuire: Out-foodied food, maybe that's it.

Catherine Moran: What about your role as a Food Champion, a Fáilte Ireland Food Champion? [Fáilte Ireland is Ireland's tourism development authority] Could you tell a little bit about that?

Áine McGuire: Sure. This year, I was made a Failte Ireland Food Champion. I didn't really know exactly — someone else nominated me — I didn't know exactly what it was. But I do now and I quite like it. So, my role as a champion, just something I do naturally, is to promote food tourism in my area, The Wild Atlantic Way.

And what Fáilte Ireland has done is connected me up with lots of other people. So, recently, I went to an event and I met people from Bord Iascaigh Mhara, from Bord Bia [the state agency that promotes Irish food abroad and at home] and I was there with my Fáilte Ireland hat on. It opens up your network and opens up some routes to making things better. I'm very pleased about it.

You're also networking with people. "Networking", that's a horrible word... *meeting* people who are in the same business with the same kind of problems. Like, seasonality is a *massive* problem for my business, so I'm working all summer flat, flat,

flat out in order to sustain the restaurant from *now* until next March or April. That just seems a bit bonkers.

Catherine Moran: It's really awful, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yeah, it's awful. You're working for kind of nothing in a way, except just to keep the restaurant open, and is that enough? What I need to do, what I want to get from Fáilte Ireland is to stretch the season. I want them to help me do that and obviously they want me to help them do that. It's a very good symbiotic relationship.

Catherine Moran: Yeah. Actually I was at that same event you just mentioned. You came up with an absolutely blinder of an idea. I think I misquoted you on Twitter, because I think you said, "Why haven't we got a Westport Seafood Festival-"

Áine McGuire: "Mayo", it was "Mayo"-

Catherine Moran: Ah, it was Mayo, okay, well, I didn't misquote you then-

Áine McGuire: That's okay, yes.

Catherine Moran: Yeah. Absolutely and-

Áine McGuire: Why don't we?

Catherine Moran: Well, exactly.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, because I had a very measured report to read based on stats and things that I had gotten from Fáilte Ireland, of course I went completely off message, and it just started giving out. That was mainly about the fact of finding it *so difficult* to get my local produce into my restaurant, from a fish point of view.

Now I have a couple of amazing suppliers, like Padraic Gannon [an oyster, mussel and clam producer based in Clew Bay] and John Thornton [an oyster producer, they are *amazing*. There are other difficulties. Yeah, why don't we have? We should have, we have *amazing* seafood. We have *amazing* oysters, we have clams that are unique to Clew Bay, clams that are unique to Kilmeena, which is *one area* in Clew Bay, and you can't get them on this side of the bay.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, talk about terroir.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, there we go. I remember one time at the Winding Stair, bringing clusheens up to Dublin, no one knew what clusheens were and people were *amazed* by them.

Catherine Moran: They are sort of clam, are they?

Áine McGuire: It's a type of scallop, but it's a variegated scallop.

Catherine Moran: Okay.

Áine McGuire: Yeah.

Catherine Moran: Do you have them on the menu much?

Áine McGuire: No, not, much. The tides are amazing at the moment so I'm hoping to go and pick them. It's a bit of work in it but we will have them, I guess, if continues like this, we should have some in October. I'll give you a shout when they're here.

Catherine Moran: Oh, fabulous. There's a wonderful video, I think it's on YouTube, of you cooking clusheens.

Áine McGuire: Oh, they're clams.

Catherine Moran: Oh, right.

Áine McGuire: Yes. Yes, they are.

Catherine Moran: Okay, so they're a bit different.

Áine McGuire: They're different. Yes, they are. Yes, I didn't have them. I had some in my hand, I think. They had come in a couple of days, this was for John and Sally, wasn't it? For McKenna's, who had filmed this. No, they are actually. They are a ridged clam that come from Kilmeena, they're lovely.

Catherine Moran: Okay. Maybe it's time to make a little video of you ... not a little video. Make a video-

Áine McGuire: Big movie.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, an MGM celluloid. A big budget... cooking some clusheens.

Áine McGuire: Yes, yes. It's really a beautiful process because they come from under sponge in rocks. What you tend to do, because they're filthy, they're manky dirty, you can't clean them in the way that you can clean a clam. You tend to boil them dirty and then clean them afterwards.

Catherine Moran: Okay.

Áine McGuire: Probably hasn't got the best production value.

Catherine Moran: No, yeah, quite labour intensive as well. Yeah.

Áine McGuire: Yes, yeah.

Catherine Moran: Would you be willing to get involved with the seafood, a new seafood festival in this area?

Áine McGuire: Yes, yes, yes,

Catherine Moran: Of course you would.

Áine McGuire: Of course I would. It could only do me good. I think we need to get, I hate the word committee, but we need to get some interested folk together.

Catherine Moran: Together, yeah.

Áine McGuire: I'm going to meet the Bord Iascaigh Mhara people at the end of the month and we'll talk about it. Yeah, *of course* we should have it. Because what was interesting, last week, and I don't know if I said this in the little talk that I gave at the-

Catherine Moran: The Mayo Seafood Day.

Áine McGuire: The Mayo Seafood Day. There was a couple here from Berlin and they were a young couple, millennial or hipsters, something, isn't that what we call them?

Catherine Moran: Certainly millennials, yeah.

Áine McGuire: Yes. They had seen, many years ago, a documentary on the television about the Galway Oyster Festival. And somewhere in some of the statistics I've been given via Fáilte Ireland, I had read it, there was something about, we all think the Internet is where it's at, but people are still watching TV documentaries and still reading magazines. So they had read about it somewhere else then in the magazine, and of course they heard about Guinness. That was the only reason they came to Ireland, but they did not expect good food.

Catherine Moran: Right.

Áine McGuire: They just didn't know about it, and they were from Berlin. They just didn't know we had it.

Catherine Moran: The story needs to be told, doesn't it?

Áine McGuire: For sure.

Catherine Moran: That's going to change, I think, with lots of things out there, Fáilte Ireland are doing-

Áine McGuire: Yeah, I think so too, yeah. It's important for sure.

Catherine Moran: Wouldn't a Mayo Seafood Festival, wouldn't that be a great way as well of extending the season?

Áine McGuire: We should have it now.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Áine McGuire: Yes.

Catherine Moran: Now, October, November, of course.

Áine McGuire: October would be a good time, I think. Because it's a good time for shellfish and natives [oysters] are back in season and you can still get lobsters and the weather isn't as bad as it might be a bit later. It certainly shouldn't be in the summer.

Catherine Moran: No. Definitely not.

Áine McGuire: Yeah, because it's very busy around here in the summer. We're struggling to cope with the numbers that we have already.

Catherine Moran: During the summer?

Áine McGuire: Well, it seems to me that the season is more intense but shorter.

Catherine Moran: Right.

Áine McGuire: That's not what we want.

Catherine Moran: No.

Áine McGuire: The Wild Atlantic Way has had a *big* impact.

Catherine Moran: A positive?

Áine McGuire: Positive, yes for sure. Lots of people are coming here. We just need to make them come outside of that very short period of summer.

Catherine Moran: Smooth it out a bit?

Áine McGuire: Yeah. It needs to be an all year round destination.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, yeah.

Áine McGuire: Be known for its food and that, we can do that. They are just some changes that need to be... That's good for everyone. That's good for me and it's good for my friends who have restaurants in town. We all need to work together to do this so that we can maintain our businesses throughout the year. It's good for the hotels. The hotels seem to do all right around here. It's the people that come now this time of the year to the hotels, they're getting good deals and they're not often coming out for dinner. It's a bit like the song, you can check out anytime you like but you cannot leave.

We all need to work together. There's a group called Destination Westport, which is really this group of smart people. It's an umbrella sort of marketing group and people of

all kinds have come together and work together to try and promote, as a cohesive group, trying to promote our area. This year for the first time I got involved with that. For me it's very important. It's big learning curve of this all this marketing stuff. It's big, it's new for me.

Catherine Moran: It reminds me a bit of the Boyne Valley Food Group.

Áine McGuire: Yes, that's right.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, they're doing great.

Áine McGuire: They have some really, *really* good work.

Catherine Moran: They are doing great work, yeah. It is all about collaboration, isn't it?

Áine McGuire: Yes it is. Yeah.

Catherine Moran: One final word, you mentioned a cookery school, so-

Áine McGuire: Yeah, we do. A school is probably a big word. It's in it's, again, fledgling stages. What I did last year, once the busy season was over I ran classes. I had built... Have built a portable demo table that I can wheel in and out of the Long Room at the back of the restaurant. For bigger groups, we have a television and a camera. Yes, so we can do it for up to 35 people.

Catherine Moran: Fabulous. Right.

Áine McGuire: We have been doing classes like *Simple Autumn Suppers* and *Entertaining at Home* and *Italian Visiting Chefs to Christmas Bakery* — not very popular — which is disappointing, isn't it?

Catherine Moran: Yeah, yeah.

Áine McGuire: This year we're going to do... the first one is coming up actually, on the 18th of October, and it's called, it's a cookery demo for Slow Food Mayo, that's it. I am doing a cookery demo called *From Sea to Supper*. I'll be doing some kind of old fashioned salting and things like that.

Catherine Moran: Oh yes, fabulous. Wonderful.

Áine McGuire: Yes, yeah, you should come. Yeah, if you're around.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, yeah. Tell us quickly what your website is and what your social media is so people can-

Áine McGuire: Can get in touch.

Catherine Moran: Yeah.

Áine McGuire: Our website is very basic at the moment and it has basic information. It's called The Idle Wall, T-H-E-I-D-L-E-W-A-L-L.I-E. You can book at bookings@theidlewall.ie. Our phone number is 098 50692. I'm on the Twitter machine and The Idle Wall is there. We're on Facebook. The Idle Wall on Facebook is good. I tend to update that the most actually, and tweet when I can.

Catherine Moran; Áine, thank you so much for your time.

Áine McGuire: Well, thank you Catherine for taking the time out to come down here and talk to me. That's good.

Catherine Moran: Not at all, it's my pleasure and hopefully we'll be eating with you soon again.

Áine McGuire: You'll be very welcome.

Catherine Moran: Thank you Áine, take care.

Catherine Moran: I hope you enjoyed hearing Áine McGuire describe her culinary journey so far and her cooking at The Idle Wall.

You can find Áine on Twitter as [@TheIdleWall](https://twitter.com/TheIdleWall). As Áine mentioned on the show, The Idle Wall's website is www.theidlewall.ie and it's Facebook page is The Idle Wall (<https://www.facebook.com/The-Idle-Wall-327314827474045/>).

All links mentioned in the show are available at my website, which is www.myartisanbusiness.com. And you can download a free transcript of my conversation with Áine there.

To get updates on when I publish new episodes of the show, subscribe to my email list and I'll let you know when new episodes are live. So that's all at myartisanbusiness.com.

You can find me on Twitter as @FoodDrinkShow, so please get in touch if you have any comments or questions or suggestions — you can always reach me there. And if you'd like to feature on the new *She Cooks* series, or there's a woman that you think should be featured, please let me know

Until next time, I'm Catherine Moran, happy cooking, happy brewing, happy fermenting, happy distilling, and thank you for listening.

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Episode 29 is a wonderful conversation with Padraic Gannon, founder of Croagh Patrick Seafoods Ltd. Padraic is a shellfish producer and he supplies oysters to The Idle Wall Restaurant. You can listen to that episode here:

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