



Chef Margaret Browne in her Killeagh restaurant, a far cry from what she saw in the slums of Calcutta.

'My hopes for Calcutta's poor'

By SIMONE TAYLOR

MARGARET Browne is one of Ireland's most talented chefs and has been described as RTE Radio 1's 'Domestic Goddess.'

But a chance conversation led to the Cork woman doing something completely different — spending the recent St Patrick's Weekend in Calcutta, launching the First Irish Food Festival with Cork's Hope Foundation.

How did this come about for the author of the cookery book *Through My Kitchen Window*?

At her family-run hotel Ballymakeigh House, in Killeagh, near Youghal, she explains: "The Hope Foundation was founded by Maureen Forrest, my sister-in-law — a very persuasive woman!

"I used to always say to Maureen, please ask me for the money for the foundation. I'll do fund raising. Just don't ask me to go there.

"So one night after a few glasses of wine we thought it would be a very good idea to go to Calcutta to see it!"



A smile from a child, despite living in the slums of Calcutta.

The Hope Foundation works in the slums rescuing some of the poorest people from a desperate and hopeless life. Now Margaret has witnessed the situation at first hand.

"What's happening in India now is their economy is catching up," she says. "There's a new middle class emerging from the slums and from the lower classes. They've work, they've money, they've got cars, they've everything. But they are forgetting about their poor.

"The elderly people, the children, the beggars and all the really poor people are being pushed down into the slums. There's no social welfare. No help. No assistance. Nobody helps anybody there. Prostitution is huge. They've no choice.

"There's a very big divide between the very rich people and the poor. The rich people are ashamed of the poor people and so instead of addressing the problem, they just push them aside and pretend they

don't exist." Margaret adds: "I was wondering how we can raise awareness among the people of Calcutta to the situation so we thought we would have a food festival. Food is a wonderful link. It's what you need for survival."

The food festival ran over the entire St Patrick's weekend in Calcutta's Park Hotel. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served each day.

Of course India was introduced to the full Irish breakfast as well as soda bread, Colcannon and Irish stew, where Margaret fondly tells me of some problems. "The hardest part with the chefs was to prevent them putting spices into the stew. They really wanted to spice it up. They wanted to marinate it. There was uproar over it!"

On the Saturday night a huge ball took place and an educational film for some of India's most wealthy people.

Margaret says the solution to India's problems lie in raising awareness. "The Hope Foundation are big on education. They have preparatory schools

down in the slums and they believe that if they can educate the children that they'd grow into broad-minded people that can address and help the situation around them."

To date, The Hope Foundation has a girls' home with 80 residents, as well as 100 preparatory schools, a polio hospital and a rehab centre and are working towards setting up a hospital for AIDS sufferers. They are also getting involved in stopping child trafficking.

Margaret says: "It's wonderful to go over and see the results. The people here are very, very generous. All of this has been possible as a result of the ordinary people on the street.

"We are looking for a full-time sponsor — there's so many people depending on you that you have to have a reliable income as well.

"The Irish Government has given an ambulance and a jeep, which makes a difference. The ambulance goes out at night picking up people that are dying or lost. There's 17 million people and it's the size of Dublin. People get lost."



ROBERT O'SHEA

TIRED of free CDs, the chance of winning a holiday and well-researched news articles?

Good, because today I am offering you an opportunity that is groundbreaking in the history of newspapers — the chance to move in with one of our top columnists, Me.

I filled out one of those little ad things at the back of the paper to rent the spare room in my house. I handed my scrap of paper to the ad lady. She started typing.

"It's a little over the required length," she said.

"By how much?"

"273 words."

The only practical solution was to extend it and turn it into an article.

But was this ethically OK? To use the space reserved for my consideration of the weighty issues of the day to find someone to help pay my mortgage.

I decided to find my journalistic mentor, Freddie, who is a slightly balding ex-hack with few teeth and an uninteresting drink problem.

When I confided in him my moral dilemma, at first he laughed. Then he continued to laugh, starting to cough and wheeze before resuming his laughing.

His implicit approval was Beethoven to my ears for I have been getting lonely with only the company of a dog I have joint custody of and the odd wandering woodlouse.

With those ads you often don't know what sort of person you are ringing up, so by giving a more detailed description I'm providing a valuable service at least to room-hunters out there.

And I know what it's like having pounded footpaths in the not so distant past looking for somewhere to rent. It can be a frustrating business.

A few years back in Dublin, at a very low ebb in my hunt for student digs, there was even a distressing incident where the box numbers were mixed up and I found myself ringing up a man who had placed a very different type of ad in another section of the pink pages.

Me: "Hi. I'm phoning about the ad."

Him: "Yes."

Me: "Well. Could I come around and have a look at it today?"

Him: "You want a look?"

Me: "If that's not a problem. How big is it anyway, you don't mention size in the ad?"

Him: "I didn't know you had to. It's normal size I suppose. Does it have to be big?"

Me: "Well, it depends. I'll have to see it first."

Him: "I've never done anything like this before. Are you muscular?"

This, as you can imagine, was a turning point in our brief conversation, because it turned out that he was selling a boat or something, I'm not really too sure.

So, to avoid any such confusion for both of us, I can give a clearer description of life at my place

First off, I don't condone smoking inside the house; I encourage it. I'm quite laid back to the point of almost being horizontal, sometimes even inclined backwards a few degrees. I can be annoying, but I am quick-witted, as we can see in this example of something a lady said to me as I schmoozed her in a club one night.

"Do you know you are the most irritating man I have ever met?"

"No, but if you hum the first few bars I might pick it up."

That's me in a nutshell.

My only criteria for the prospective tenant is that they can put up with my singing while I iron and they not be Fianna Fáil or Man Yoo supporters.

The house is in a convenient neck of the woods and only a seven-minute sprint to the city centre. It is surrounded by some friendly local pubs, many of which still have locks on some of their toilet cubicles.

If there is one them e running through the house itself, it would be 'Argos'. The living area is spacious and modern — there is a flat-screen TV somewhere, but I can't find it because I put it down sideways.

A nice added feature in the bathroom is a heated toilet roll — the holder is located just above the radiator.

Oh, and my spare bedroom, it's enormous.

If you're interested, contact me on 087- this article has been discontinued by a concerned but bubbly sub-editor, who has a GSOH and enjoys long walks in the countryside.

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