

Wineport Lodge: country house making waves

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In 1993 Jane English and her husband Ray Byrne built Wineport Lodge in Glasson, on the shores of Lough Ree in Co. Westmeath. The lodge now has a national profile, because it was used for the hit TV series, *The Restaurant*.

The couple had opened their first business, a coffee shop, in Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath 18 months earlier, but took on the property at the suggestion of Jane’s mother and her partner, who were setting up a sailing centre on the lake.

Wineport originally opened as a 60-seater restaurant, but such was demand for overnight accommodation that the couple built its first 10 bedrooms soon after. Further extensions followed and, today, Wineport Lodge has 30 bedrooms.

Unusually for an Irish hotel, more than 90% of its business comes from the domestic market, rather than from overseas. Having survived the recession, which saw revenues fall 30%, the business has been back on a modest growth path since 2013.

What’s your business’s elevator pitch?

That guests will feel the difference the moment they arrive. More than a hotel, this is a luxury lodge with a unique sense of warmth and comfort. The appeal here is not just that we are nestled on the banks of Lough Ree, in an idyllic setting surrounded by native woodland, but that Wineport Lodge also offers exceptional levels of style and service.

What do you regard as your business’s greatest achievement?

Growing the business from a small dining facility in 1993, that was a part of a family sailing centre, to the 30-bedroom lodge it is today, winning national awards for hospitality along the way.

What was the lowest moment?

Seeing the turnover drop by double digit figures in 2009 and again in 2010, and wondering when it was going to stop. By 2013 we saw a turnaround and, while we’re not back where we were, we’re making steady progress.

How have you coped with setbacks?

We kept on looking for solutions and working on the basis of never giving up. We rely on a dedicated team that works together to get through whatever challenges come along. We had to reduce costs during the recession.

We didn't reduce pay but we had to ask staff for more flexibility, which they gave us. You have to be resilient too, and have a lot of positivity. Thankfully, Ray has loads of that and it rubs off on me.

What's your attitude to risk?

I take a very conservative attitude to risk but, unfortunately for me, Ray is the opposite which makes for some interesting debates!

What's your most effective form of marketing?

Our membership of the Blue Book, a hotel marketing organisation, is hugely helpful. We also invest a lot on our website, keeping it current, because it's our shop window. We use national media, such as promotions in newspapers and on radio, to promote our business at certain times of the year, like Christmas.

We find Corporate Social Responsibility helps too. We very often sponsor community events, offering prizes such as free overnight stays that enable people to come and experience Wineport for themselves. They then go out and spread the word. Sponsoring prizes at events also ensures our name is read out at various functions, and helps the community.

Who has inspired or motivated you and why?

Myrtle Allen and the Allen family for what they have done at Ballymaloe. She opened a restaurant in her house in 1964. What has grown from that modest start has been an amazing achievement.

What do you do, if anything, to switch off from the business?

I go for a walk a couple of mornings a week, take two or three visits to the gym, and spend a lot of time driving our two sons to their various sporting activities. I really enjoy watching them from the side lines.

What would you do differently if you were starting your business today?

I probably wouldn't do anything differently, as I have enjoyed the journey even though it was, and is, hard work. For a couple who knew nothing about this business starting out, every step of it has been a learning experience.

What lessons have you learned in business that others could apply?

Work hard to achieve your goal and take advantage of opportunity when it comes along. When that happens, don't procrastinate. In my experience, if you think about something too much, you won't do it. Believe in your business, look for ways to improve what you are doing and always look at it from the customer's perspective.

Finally, if there was one piece of business advice you'd like to give to another business owner, what would that be?

Look after each and every customer, try to make a personal connection with them and inspire your staff to do the same.

Visit [Wineport Lodge](#) for more details.