

A NATION OF FOODIES

How times have changed. Ireland is no longer a nation of drinkers but instead we have become a nation of foodies, writes **Elaine Sloan**.

Everyone knows that the Irish are social beings and the evidence from the B&A's most recent Eating and Drinking report re-affirms this. A very high proportion of us like to go out for meals, go to the pub and also drink at home.

Nowadays however there is a greater tendency for us to drink at home rather than go to the pub with 24% drinking at home weekly and only 18% of us going to the pub.

Despite the economic recovery the number of Irish adults drinking in pubs at least weekly continues to decline. In 1996, 53% of us were drinking regularly in our local pub and now only 18% of us do this. The decline in footfall is staggering!

Some 20 years ago there was 1.3m of us going to the pub at least once a week compared with 655k now.

This is a decline of 700,000 people over admittedly 22 years; about 350,000 in the last 11 years and from a more recent perspective, 140,000 since last year!

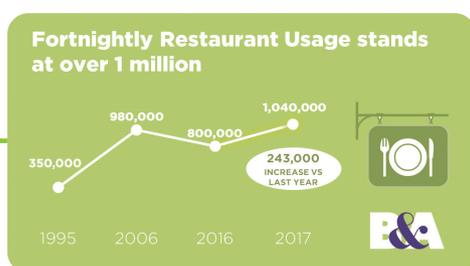
This suggests the speed of decline is accelerating!

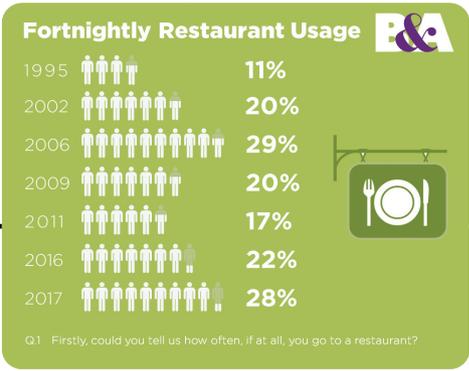
Volume may not be impacted as significantly but the reduced number of weekly pub users is still staggering. The Drinks Industry Group of Ireland reported recently that there are currently 7,193 pubs in the country.

What I find interesting is that if every pub was sharing the users equally (and I know they are not) this would mean that every pub lost about 20 weekly users over the past year – so they may not even be aware, despite its significance!

So, does this mean that we are exchanging the pub for drinking at home? The answer to that is that we were definitely trending in that direction for a while but the most recent data suggests that this behaviour peaked in 2011 and has been on decline since. The evidence on this issue suggests that the speed of decline is also accelerating here.

Notwithstanding that, there is still a lot of alcohol consumed at home and indeed more of us on average





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do that than in 1995 when we began collecting this information. The figure now stands at 900,000 drinking weekly at home versus the 655,000 drinking in the pub.

So the question is now ‘have the Irish finally turned to a new chapter and are changing their alcohol consumption behaviour?’ It would certainly seem so.

Beyond drink, our love affair with restaurants and food is forging ahead. The area of most significant change for the Irish is the number of visits to restaurants. While footfall losses were evident in recessionary times, the restaurant sector has been the largest growth sector in the social arena over the past two decades. We have been on a steady and significant growth path since 2011.

In 1995, there were circa 395,000k people eating in restaurants on a fortnightly basis, this now stands at over 1m. In fact, 2006 was the ‘year of the restaurant’ and while growth post-recession has been slow, there we are now on a clear march. Clearly, once we can afford it, we enjoy ‘eating out’ and are definitely doing this in higher

and higher numbers. Fortnightly users have grown by circa a quarter of a million over the past year.

Isn't it interesting to find that there are just over 1m of us visiting restaurants at least on a fortnightly basis compared with a figure of 1.1 million going to the pub with the same frequency? If this trajectory continues it won't be long before there are more of us in restaurants than there are of us in the pubs! Won't that be massive change in our cultural norm?

Regardless, even before that happens, there is clearly a lot of social change happening when it comes to our behaviour around social eating and drinking. With the continued significant decline in regular pub usage, and the growth in interest in dining out, it is not surprising to find that there appears to be more Gastro pubs than ever before. I guess it is most definitely the case of ‘if you can't beat them, join them!’ **IMJ**

Elaine Sloan is a director of B&A.

