

# THE BLEND



## ADDING TO THE MIX BY GERARD TANNAM

### **T**he Key Ingredient

You've heard it yourself. He's the life and soul of the place, a grand man altogether. She's the heart of the business, a formidable woman. Sometimes, it seems to me that the more successful hotels or restaurants are those that are closely identified with their larger-than-life owner or founder. In Ireland, the personalities of P.V. Doyle, Myrtle Allen and Paddy Fitzpatrick stand squarely out in front of the places they created. Elsewhere, Conrad Hilton and Heston Blumenthal do the same. Did I say 'closely identified'? Sometimes, in our minds, they are the business. We find it impossible to imagine these establishments without them.

In many ways, these characters make the business of branding the hotel or restaurant a simple matter. No need to worry about the tricky question of differentiation for they are one of a kind, outstanding in a field that they've paced out, planted and grown. If you need to know how the brand should behave, just study the owner and watch what he or she does. He is the brand in action, she is the brand made flesh. The story of their lives is your brand manual, each entry a lesson in how to greet a guest, treat a supplier or promote the business.

However, whilst it has many obvious attractions, this can be a dangerous strategy. What happens when the defining character passes away or moves on? Who do we look to

for direction? The world of business is full of stories of withering decline following the departure of the main man or woman. They leave a gap that cannot easily be filled.

So how do we find another way to breathe life into our business and safeguard its future? This was the challenge facing Declan and Bernadette Fagan in early 2005, as they made plans to add to the success of their business, The Temple Spa in Co. Westmeath. The pair had tended to the steady growth of Temple from a farmhouse offering bed and breakfast accommodation to one of Ireland's first dedicated spas. Now, they wished to stretch a little more and sensed that it was time to develop an identity for the business that was less reliant on their own, immediate delivery of it. They invited us to help and we met with them in late spring to begin work together.

### **History Ready-Mixed?**

Their already difficult task was made even harder by the fact that they proposed to move their accommodation and spa facilities from the farmhouse that had housed the business since its beginnings some fifteen years previously, to a new building across the farmyard. For their guests, the image of the eighteenth century farmhouse stood for all that was best about Temple and the prospect of both stepping back from the business and stepping out of the building that had been its

home for so many years was a daunting one for its owners.

So, where were they to look to in order to find a story for their business? At first, the answer seemed obvious. The farmhouse at Temple stood on a site that had its origins in the seventh century when it had been closely associated with St. Kieran of Clonmacnoise. The ecclesiastical centre founded by the saint is only a short fifteen miles away and the earlier title of the place, Teampaill Mac An Tsaoir, carried his family name (meaning Son of the Carpenter in Irish). Even better, there was evidence to suggest that members of the family of the saint had set up house on the site of the current Temple, which stands just off the nearby esker line, one of the natural roads left behind by the glaciers that were the routes of transport and pilgrimage in earliest times.

A ready-made story, straight from the tin and ready to eat! This was too good to be true. And so it proved. We raced off to the history books to research the life of St. Kieran, sure that we had found a personality whose story could become the story of Temple. There, we discovered accounts of an extraordinary character whose life read like one great adventure story. Kieran had founded monasteries, commissioned great books, performed miracles and left an indelible mark on the face of early, Christian Ireland. However, we also discovered his reputation as a driven holy man and scholar of impossibly



## About The Blend

Adding To The Mix is part of a series of articles in which Gerard takes a look at how to cook up a great brand, samples some of the ingredients you'll need to make one of your own and weighs up the impact of branding on different parts of the business mix.

Gerard is Owner Manager of Islandbridge, a business that delivers brand direction, planning and communications across a wide range of sectors including hospitality and tourism. Recent clients include Quality Hotels, Platinum Hotels, Liberty Limousines, The Westport Woods Hotel, The Arbutus Hotel Killarney, The Smile Conference and DIT School of Hospitality Management & Tourism's MagicTouch Partners.

If you would like to tell your own brand story, please get in touch with Gerard on +353 1 495 3330 or visit [www.islandbridge.com](http://www.islandbridge.com)

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high standards, who was possessed of a fierce determination and inflexibility that would try the patience of, well, a saint, I suppose.

### Or A Family Recipe?

We were in a fix. How could we square the story of the life of this formidable and difficult-to-live-with saint with the story of our much gentler Temple? Should we look elsewhere? Despite the misfit, it seemed to us that we were somehow in the right territory. And then, we wondered. We imagined what it must have been like to live and work at Clonmacnoise in the shadow of a saint. In many ways, monasteries were the cities of their time and St. Kieran's community crowded together at the crossroads of a network of some of the earliest routes of both pilgrimage and trade. We imagined the place as a hive of activity, busy with the comings and goings of hundreds of people. Towering over this bustling society was the figure of a living saint, fierce and demanding. It is not difficult to imagine that a man living in the shadow of this ancient metropolis might have experienced something we now know as stress.

Nor is it difficult to picture this same man, waking one morning and quietly removing himself from the hustle and bustle of Clonmacnoise to seek out a place of retreat where he might spend time alone with his own thoughts. He wouldn't have to travel too far before he found the place that is Temple and it would have struck him then, as it strikes us today, as the perfect place for a man to put away his worries and his routines and simply be.

In time, of course, others would hear of the quiet corner that this man had found for himself and would make their own way from Clonmacnoise to spend some time there before returning to the rigours of their everyday lives.

### The Way To A Man's Heart

Did it happen as we have imagined it? Probably not, but it could have done. More importantly, this is a story that helps make sense of what we now know of Temple and what Declan and Bernadette need in order to grow their business. Their new story becomes much more a story of place than one of history. It is a place that predates the farmhouse that has been the face of Temple for the last number of years and one that continues to offer the same quiet appeal now that the business is moving across the farmyard to new accommodation.

In the story of our holy man seeking exile from the madding crowd, there is much that rings true for both the owners of the business and their guests. His move away from the hectic worlds of commerce and academia has echoes in the escape from modern pressures. His seeking out of a quiet place in which to heal speaks to his more contemporary cousins, beaten down by the stresses of life.

We can easily imagine him in the Temple of today, occupying himself with simple household tasks or basking quietly in a corner of the garden that briefly catches the sun. This gentle man has his own faith, but is just as

comfortable with those of other faiths or none. All he asks is that they step lightly in his world.

### A Second Helping

On a practical level, the story offers Declan and Bernadette a new model for behaviour and communications in their business that owes much to their own values and practices but is bigger than them and therefore less dependent on them. It helps them to describe their business in a less self-conscious way.

They can now talk of Temple as a place apart, a way of life and a state of mind, somewhere that their guests can return to both by road and in their mind's eye. The story deepens the connections that Temple has always enjoyed with those who have visited. It takes the emphasis off the spa element alone and celebrates the broader range of peace and quiet, great food, treatments, guided (and free-range) walks, yoga and fine wines that Temple has to offer. This in turn has prompted the reframing of Temple Spa as Temple Country Retreat & Spa.

Finally, the accent on place enables the owners to deflect attention from the newness of the recent work and any concerns in the minds of returning guests that this represents an upheaval – after all, this is just the latest in a long series of gentle changes made since Temple was first inhabited some 1,500 years ago.

If you would like to step off the beaten track and drop in on Temple, why not pay a visit to [www.templespa.ie](http://www.templespa.ie)