



PHOTOGRAPHY: HEIDI'S BRIDGE

*What do you do when your cafe has NO KITCHEN?  
Get CREATIVE with turning preconceptions  
on their head (and UPSIDE DOWN again).*

**WORDS SARAH THEEBOOM**

**M**y plate arrives with a smear of butter, a pile of flat-leaf parsley and two open cans. A bowl of baguette slices is placed alongside it. One of the cans contains what looks like tuna, but is actually Icelandic cod liver marinating in its own oil. I smear it thickly on a slice of bread; it tastes like butter but with the fishy aftertaste of cod liver oil tablets. Using a toothpick, I spear a tiny smoked mussel from Washington State out of the other can. It's briny and sweet, with the colour and texture of a mushroom. I gobble several more in quick succession.

This was my dinner on a recent Monday night at Maiden Lane in New York's East Village; the first tinned-seafood bar in the US. While it looks like a typical neighbourhood bar, Maiden Lane has one notable point of difference: over 60 per cent of its menu comes out of a can. It sounds like a gimmick, but the move was borne out of necessity. This former cafe space has no kitchen, so when co-founders Gareth Maccubbin and Nialls Fallon took over in 2013, they had to find a creative – and frugal – way around food service.

"We needed a no-cooking menu, but wanted to do more than cheese plates and olives," says Gareth, who is now the sole owner. While brainstorming ideas, Gareth admitted that when his girlfriend



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was away, he often enjoyed a simple dinner of beer, bread and canned sardines. So they decided to offer sardines as a bar snack and looked around for a good product, stumbling almost accidentally upon the world of European conservas – gourmet tinned vegetables and seafood.

"We became really obsessed with this stuff and really passionate about how underrepresented it is in the US," says Gareth. Soon, the tinned section on their menu ballooned. Today, Maiden Lane offers around 35 cans sourced mainly from the conservas-loving countries of France, Spain and Portugal.

On the Iberian peninsula, entire shops and restaurants are dedicated to artisanal tinned goods. But until a few years ago, this trend was relatively unknown across the Atlantic – and unsurprisingly, Maiden Lane's menu was initially met by customers with hesitation and incredulity.

Most Americans associate tinned seafood with cheap supermarket tuna, a snack to be smothered with mayonnaise or pasta sauce at home when payday feels like a hazy memory, not plated and served over a modern bar counter with a cocktail. As such, Gareth has regularly had to educate wary customers about the quality and care that goes into these cans, which are intended to preserve seafood caught at its peak. >





"In France, you can go to the grocery store and get a tin of foie gras or an entire confit duck. But here, we automatically associate something out of a can with being low-quality and inexpensive," says Gareth.

As a result, the price of conservas is a major hurdle for potential consumers. At Maiden Lane, most cans sit at price-points ranging from US\$12-\$20 – but some can climb well beyond that. The most expensive item on the menu is a can from Spanish company Ramón Peña; it contains 40 cockles in brine and costs US\$55. Gareth points out that price reflects a product's availability – he cites the brief 20-day fishing season of Spanish needle sardines as an example – as well as a labour-intensive production process. Each of those tiny cockles was individually harvested and cleaned, opened so that the liquid inside it could be retained, then cooked and packed



by hand in its own brine. Think about how much you would spend on a dozen oysters, Gareth posits, and that tin of 40 cockles no longer seems so outrageous.

"We find there are a lot of parallels with wine," says Gareth. "You could buy a \$10 bottle or you could spend four times that and get something nicer. And hopefully you can appreciate why there's a difference in price, both in terms of the taste and the process that went into making it."

Some canneries reserve the season's best catch for their premium vintage lines and, like wine, note the year on the label. Over the long shelf-life of a can, the flavour of the seafood will deepen as bones decalcify, fats emulsify and flesh tenderises in olive oil or brine.

Other companies use marketing to distinguish their high-end seafood from supermarket fodder. Porvaz conservas products from Spain are covered in comic strips showing how the Galician shellfish inside were prepared. Meanwhile the arty packaging for José Gourmet, which was launched in 2008 by a father-and-son duo who wanted to reinvigorate Portugal's canning industry, is designed and illustrated by Portuguese artist Luis Mendonça, who has been featured on the pages of *Wallpaper* magazine. And a few years ago, French cannery La Quiberonnaise released a limited series of cans featuring images from maritime photographer Philip Plisson – and considering some of his art prints retail for €100-200, that's one can you might think twice about recycling.

Not all of these brands are currently readily available, but in the US, gourmet purveyors and grocery stores like Whole Foods are stocking more and more of them. Maiden Lane, which launched an online store in December of its first



*This is a  
FILLING, healthy,  
SUSTAINABLE meal,  
but unfortunately  
it got a BAD RAP.  
We're just doing what  
we can to CHANGE  
that PERCEPTION.*



year of opening, now ships nearly 50 products nationwide. And in New York, you can now order conservas at several Spanish restaurants and tapas bars, including Donostia, a pintxos bar located one block away from Maiden Lane. With this proliferation has come greater consumer awareness.

"We definitely have to explain it less these days," says Gareth, who has expanded Maiden Lane to two New York locations as well as a boutique importing arm. "We say, 'This side of the menu is all tinned,' and they just go, 'Oh, okay.' That never happened when we first opened."

The principal difference between other conservas spots and this unassuming local bar is that there's nothing European about Maiden Lane. Gareth has never been to Spain or Portugal – a situation he has been meaning, but as yet unable, to rectify. The decor leans towards industrial rather than nautical, while on the weekend you can order bagels. This is no Spanish transplant, but a New York version of a conservas bar, a place that serves canned seafood for the same reasons you have it at home – just because it's easy and delicious.

Gareth hopes that the quality of European conservas will influence the rest of the world, leading to more domestic production and wider availability.

"This is a filling, healthy, sustainable meal, but unfortunately it got a bad rap," he says. "We're just doing what we can to change that perception." He's optimistic about that change, noting that ramen became a cult craze despite once being synonymous with \$1 instant noodles. It may be harder to imagine sardines igniting that kind of fervour, but don't be too surprised if you eventually hear that cockles are the new caviar. ■



## SPOTLIGHT: SOL E PESCA

Want to try your hand (and palate) at a traditional Portuguese take on the tinned-food trend? This late-night conservas bar in Lisbon's Cais do Sodré nightlife district was formerly a fisherman's shop, and it retains much of the shabbiness of its previous incarnation. Rods, nets and other maritime paraphernalia cover all available space. On one wall, hundreds of colourful tins are stacked in a display case that probably once held hooks and flies. The Portuguese cans are served simply with bread, though you can add a beer and side salad if you choose. This is a great place to settle at a sidewalk table and watch the world go by; and with a name that translates to mean 'sun and fishing', the good life is what this quirky bar is all about. [solepesca.com](http://solepesca.com)

See our guide to the globe's most out-there niche eateries at [collectivehub.com](http://collectivehub.com)