



PERK

gling with guests while young fallow deer hide mischievously under the redwoods, western red cedars, oaks, pines and copper beech trees.

Otherwise, just pull up, park for free, order lunch, and pass the day reading the newspapers without the hassle of traffic congestion, road-works or any of the other hazards that often accompany a drive to the countryside. ♦

The Fionn Uisce/Phoenix Café is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in winter and from 9.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and "sometimes a little later" in summer, 01-6770090.

MARCH 13, 2004



Helen Cunningham (above) has made a labour of love of Fionn Uisce, the café at the Phoenix Park Interpretative Centre (left and top left)

The café at Dublin's Phoenix Park Interpretative Centre is a hidden oasis, writes **Paul O'Doherty**.
Photographs: **Alan Betson**

If someone in Dublin civic offices ever suggests an Olympic-style hide-and-go-seek championship for Dublin, the grounds surrounding the Phoenix Park Interpretative Centre would be the perfect venue. Camouflage conceals delicate layers of brickwork, walled gardens, paths and 100-year-old evergreens with secret hideaways in their trunks.

There is also Ashtown Castle, a medieval, four-storey tower house dating from the 17th century that remained hidden in the residence that for centuries was home to the Under-Secretaries for Ireland and later, the Papal Nuncio. It was only when the house was being demolished that the fortress was uncovered. Now, a low clipped bush marks the outline of the living quarters of this once great house. Nestled between the castle, courtyard, former residence and visitors' centre is the interpretative centre's restaurant, Fionn Uisce, also known as the Phoenix Café.

When Helen Cunningham, Fionn Uisce's proprietor, says "I loved the restaurant from the moment I arrived," her eyes glisten with excitement. "It has a great atmosphere outside, surrounded by the trees. It's just so peaceful and gorgeous around here. There's no worst thing about it, probably because of the location, surroundings and the people who have made an effort to come.

"We have outdoor seats in the courtyard. During the summer we put out tables and chairs on the grass among the trees. It's absolutely gorgeous. People can sit under the trees or move their chairs around following the sun all day."

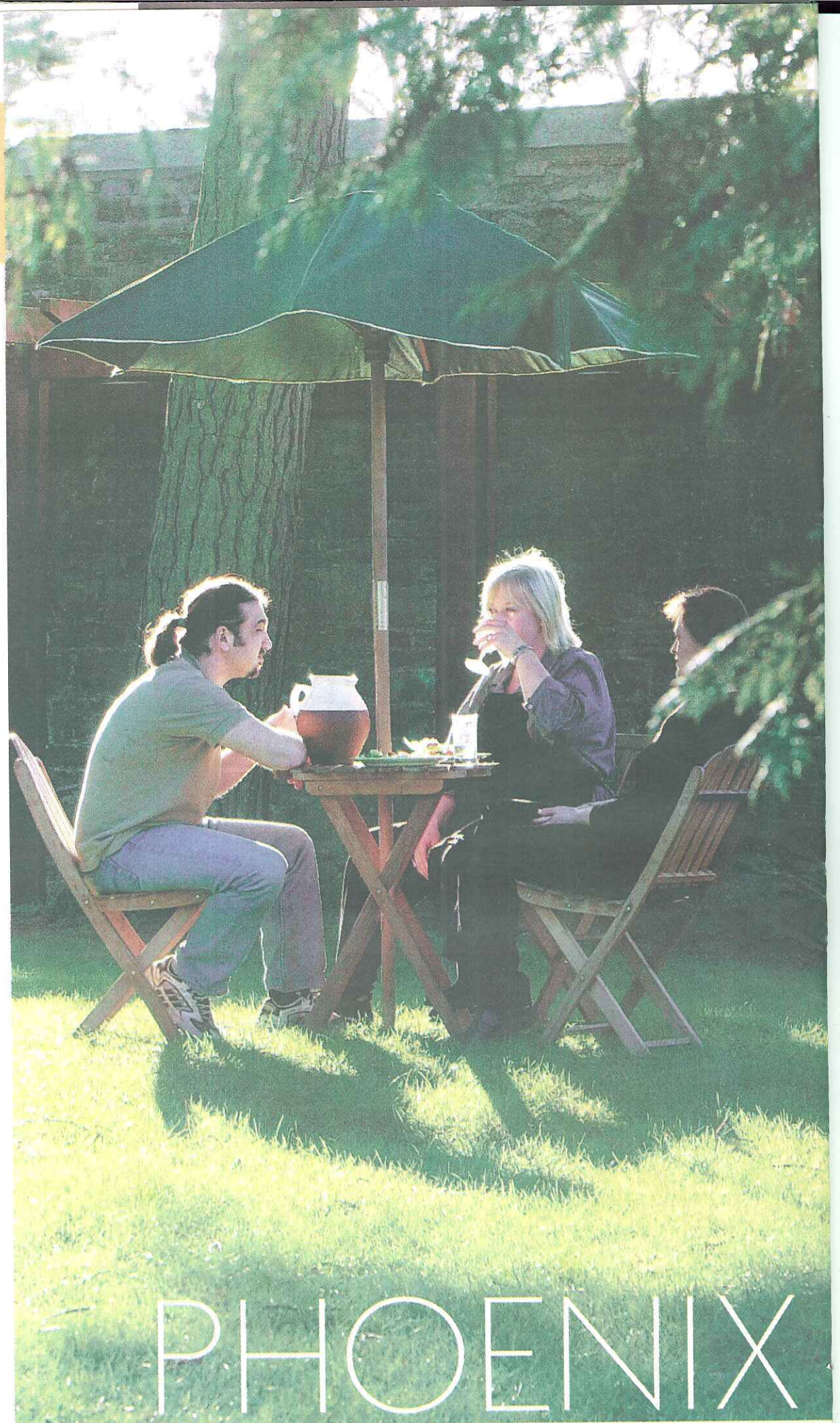
Cunningham has been in the hospitality business since the early 1980s. "My husband and I had a little restaurant in Temple Bar called Blazes, down a little side street on the west end opposite City Hall, for about 16 years. We had a good atmosphere there, with a piano and nine open fires, some of which were in the cellar - that's why it was called Blazes. We lit the fires every night and played the piano.

"And we also had a roof garden - one of first in Temple Bar. I think Temple Bar Properties probably got the idea for roof gardens from us. And we grew vegetables in a greenhouse at the back."

So, why did they leave? "Temple Bar was developing and it was impossible to run a business. It was a building site. Sometimes they'd have gates at the end of our street saying 'Please wear a hard hat on entering site'. It was very difficult in the last year or two to run a business. I think all the traders in the west end had a hard time because it was the last section to be developed."

After selling Blazes, Cunningham took some time out for a year, then she got a bit bored and was looking for something new. "I came up here and saw this old walled garden which I remembered from walks with my husband and I thought I'd love to get at it and restore it and grow vegetables.

I brought my brothers, Sean and Paul up here for coffee before they got involved in the gardens - they're the two Irish guys who work with Diarmuid Gavin and Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen on



BBC's *Homefront* programme - they said of course you would have to go for the restaurant as well if you were going to do the garden. And then, three or four weeks later, there was an advertisement in the paper for the restaurant, saying the lease was available. And they all said that I had to go for it. And sure enough, I got it. I've been here ever since and that was six years ago. I still haven't developed the garden, but I have a view to doing it."

The heritage services division of the Office of Public Works has been instrumental in a lot of the ongoing work around the interpretative centre. "The old wall around the garden has been re-

stored and the plan is for them to restore the garden itself. I'm really into gardening as well as cooking and I'd love to grow vegetables, fruit and flowers and use them here and sell the remainder as organic boxes."

Everything in the restaurant is made in the kitchen, including soups, breads, cakes and a selection of poultry, fish and salad dishes. Mark it down for a long lunch or an early afternoon stop-off, or as a place to go for a coffee after a walk in the park.

And if you're planning an alternative wedding or party, there are few places more central to Dublin city where you can spend an afternoon min-