

Join the club

Say farewell to the pub, the place to meet now is at the club.

DEIRDRE MULROONEY signs in.

Private members' clubs have always suffered from a distinct lack of cool. Perhaps it was the leather armchairs; the rustle of newspapers; the gentle snoring of retired colonels; the overcooked food; or the absence of women, but these establishments were not at the social cutting edge. Well, that's all changing. Meet the new private members' club aimed at the seriously social.

In London, the trend kicked off back in 1985 with The Groucho Club, the very antithesis of those stuffy Pall Mall leather and snuff clubs. It's where, on one, probably typical, night, Bono serenaded Bill Clinton at the piano with "Happy Birthday, Mr President"; where author and columnist Toby Young (now barred), Melvyn Bragg and chef Anthony Bourdain, who hangs out there with chef crony Richard Corrigan, were members, and acid-tongued columnist Julie Burchill once held reign (though she maintains she was never a member). It's where careers in the arts and media have been founded – and floundered. Other like-minded clubs soon followed – Soho House led the arts pack (supposedly finance types are barred), with its sister clubs, Shoreditch House, Babington House in Somerset, and last year's launch of the Group into Manhattan's hotspot, with Soho House NY, in the Meatpacking district.

Closer to home, Dublin's newest private club, Residence opened quietly in June. Appropriately enough, it's in a beautiful Georgian building (reputedly developer Johnny Ronan's favourite) on St Stephen's Green, the epicentre of the city's old-style gentlemen's clubs since the 18th century (but more of that later). For restaurateur-twins Chris and Simon Stokes, the exclusive club is a natural extension of their restaurant Bang, around the corner. Residence's website pronounces: "Our boutique club will appeal to the late-night revellers who wish to network into the early hours." It aims to be, say the twins, "a five-star hotel without bedrooms". So far, so good. The essence of a successful club, however, is its membership, and Residence, with links to The Unicorn, is well-placed to draw the cream of Dublin society.

But, before we get carried away, what is this trend all about? According to clinical psychologist Leslie Shoemaker, the private club "taps into our basic human need to belong". It's also handy for networking, "especially if you don't play golf, tennis, cricket, or go sailing". In a way, says Shoemaker, "private clubs and memberships to other organisations, such as a golf club, are an extension of the cliques adolescents set up during their teenage years". These clubs are geared to "meet our psychological and business needs, making us feel special, exclusive, and helping us to feel good about ourselves".

Women are a recent addition to this man's world. Even the Fitzwilliam Tennis Club only opened its doors to women members as recently as 1996. Yacht and golf clubs, traditionally places where judges, businessmen and millionaires rubbed shoulders, have also been mostly male bastions. There are some notable exceptions, the United Arts Club on Merrion Street counts Lady Gregory, and Countess Markievicz among its 1907 founding members. But it

wasn't until 1993 that the Stephen's Green Club became the first Irish gentlemen's club to admit women. It was a popular move. Now 30 per cent of their membership is female, and Ray Mooney, club manager, says that, not only are women on the club's board, but Network Ireland Women in Business holds its board meetings there. Since their amalgamation with the Hibernian United Services Club back in 2005, this non-profit organisation (members are actually part-owners of the building), has more than doubled its membership, from 580 to 1,400. And it's on a mission to rejuvenate and regenerate itself, though without jettisoning its old-world caché.

Larry Ryan of Behaviour and Attitudes suggests that the phenomenon has something to do with the fact that after centuries of self-denial, frugality, and sparing (a hangover from the famine, perhaps?), we Irish have embraced the notion of pampering ourselves with extraordinary gusto. These clubs are tapping into that. We have travelled the world, and are more discerning consumers than before. We want to be seen quaffing the finest wine, and savouring the finest food, showing, he says: "I'm not the average punter. I want better. I want more." Yup – we're worth it.

It's about the all-round experience, believes Castle Leslie's Samantha Leslie, who has transformed her County Monaghan family home (since 1665) into a luxury hotel (it played host to Paul McCartney's ill-fated wedding to Heather Mills). "Private members' clubs are the way of the future," she says. "People want places that are experiences rather than just places to stay." She should know – launched last year, Club Castle Leslie is already halfway to its target of 500 members.

The Odessa Club, an offshoot of the restaurant, appeared four years ago. Its founders, who own a portfolio of restaurants and nightclubs, say they just wanted to create the kind of place they and their friends would like to go. "Our aim is to provide a wide array of stuff," says Eoin Foyle, one of the founders. "There are meeting rooms, screenings – you can watch rugby matches here, movie nights, gigs, rockumentaries, wine and cheese-tasting evenings, debates (eg, on The Lisbon Treaty), yoga classes, and a new roof garden." Just off Dublin's Dame Street, "people use it as an office during the day". Then there's the groove, which is worth the membership fee on its own, with monthly live gigs by the likes of Jape, Declan O'Rourke and Cathy Davey.

And there's one more little-known plus. "I'm told the conquests are unbelievable," says co-founder Jay Bourke. "Very much more than in a regular nightclub. I'm told that it's a good place to meet women, and a good place to meet men." For singletons, this may be one of the biggest benefits of buying into a "curated" crowd.

Meanwhile, in its own blue ocean, with third generation members, an average age of 40 to 45, and 160 reciprocal clubs around the globe, there's the Stephen's Green Hibernian Club. If you like old-fashioned decorum, and turn pale at the sight of denim, this could be the club for you. Not only are you guaranteed to cross paths with kindred spirits, you will also have the opportunity to go



CASTLE LESLIE

IN THE CLUB

■ **WHERE** The Odessa Club, 13 Dame Court, Dublin 2; www.odessaclub.ie **ANNUAL FEE** €395; out of town, €200; overseas, €120 **JOINING FEE** €50. You must be proposed by a member, and subsequently accepted by the membership committee **MEMBERS** Media; entrepreneurs; people in the arts ■ **WHERE Residence**, 41 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2; www.residence.ie **ANNUAL FEE** Individual, €1,600 (+€1,000 spouse/partner); out of town, €1,400; overseas, €1,200; corporate, €4,000 **JOINING FEE** €250 individual/couple; out of town, €225; overseas, €175; corporate, €625. "Prospective members will be invited to join by the directors or via existing members" **MEMBERS** CEOs; stockbrokers; self-employed; architects; actors; media; Bono; Johnny Ronan ■ **WHERE Stephen's Green Hibernian Club**, 9 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2; www.sghc.ie **ANNUAL FEE** €1,200; €650 country member (outside 30 mile radius) **JOINING FEE** €400 **ROOM RATE** €85 **DRESS CODE** "Jacket and tie for men and equally suitable attire for the ladies. Under no circumstances may jeans or trainers be worn in the club." An existing member of five years must propose you, seconded by a member of more than one year. Your application goes before a board of 19, and then an election committee of 23 **MEMBERS** Legal profession; CEOs of banks; gardeners; entrepreneurs/self-employed; Bill Cullen ■ **WHERE Club Castle Leslie**, Co Monaghan; www.castleleslie.com **ANNUAL FEE** Individual, €1,800, couple, €3,000; European membership, €1,200; international, €1,000; corporate, €12,000; founding life membership, €50,000 **JOINING FEE** 1.5 times annual fee **MEMBER'S DAILY RATE** €300 for 24 hours. "All your accommodation, breakfast, lunch, dinner, afternoon tea, bacon butties, champagne reception, the bar, fishing, boating, after dinner drinks and chocolates" are included. Application form available online. Criteria seems to be that you "get it". You'll know **MEMBERS** Business people; Gerald Kean and Lisa Murphy

with them to Punchestown Races; to the opera (in black tie, of course); to sit at the members' table, and to dine overlooking Stephen's Green. As for networking – one young member in the legal profession confided: "I had just come back from abroad, and was told, I could go about finding a job the hard way, or the easy way. I chose the easy way, and joined the Stephen's Green Club." (Be warned: joining is a long and convoluted process.)

Manager Ray Mooney, formerly with the K Club, may have been "brought in as the catalyst of change, to bring [the club] into the 21st century". "You have to move with the times," he says. But don't expect the club to hang up its smoking jackets quite yet. "Old-world traditions are very much alive in this club. There is a huge market for them."

Other unbeatable benefits include accommodation in their twelve newly refurbished rooms, half of which overlook Stephen's Green at just €85 per night.

Membership, anyone? ■



PAUL RAESIDE