

I have lived all over the country and in many parts of the world, and I am convinced that there is not a major city anywhere on earth that doesn't have at least one Irish pub. Irish pubs, as a matter of fact, are one of the only cultural symbols whose significance is universally constant - they are known around the world as good places to get a drink, watch soccer, and meet friendly people. I have seen people who hate folk music and have never met a single Irishman singing Irish pub songs on the street while drunk on a Sunday afternoon.

For a long time, I thought all Irish pubs were the same. You see, the Irish pubs San Francisco has are almost the same as the New York ones, and the Chicago ones are not much different. Basically, although it is hard to point to any one thing, there is a certain Irish bar atmosphere that stays the same. The walls are usually wood-paneled, the crowd is friendly and populated heavily with locals and regulars, and beer and whiskey are always the specialties. Often, there are live performers at night and at the very least there is usually an open mic night at least once a week. Based on this, I thought I knew what an Irish pub was like. Before I went to Ireland, however, I have no real idea.

You see, the marketing of Gaelic culture is like the marketing of any other culture - it picks up on a few aspects that are easy to translated to sell around the world and goes with them. Irish Spring soap, for example, can sell because everyone knows that Ireland is green and therefore, fresh and clean. Similarly, Irish pubs do so well because everyone knows that the Irish like to drink stout beer, eat potatoes - excellent bar food - and have a raucous good time when drunk. German pubs - inhabited by stereotypically dour Germans - have not had the same success, although the Germans can drink every bit as well as the Irish. Even English pubs don't have the reputation.

Nonetheless, authentic Irish culture is much different than you would believe from your typical Irish pubs in this country. If you go to Ireland as a matter of fact, you are definitely stepping into unfamiliar territory. The people are friendly once they get to know you, but when you first step into a small Irish bar in an unfamiliar town, you are definitely made conscious of the fact that you are a stranger. It is not the same anything goes atmosphere as in this country.