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Put a lid on it: the airtight appeal of Tupperware

Far from going out of fashion in the 1970s, Tupperware parties are in full force in livingrooms all over Ireland, lengthening shelf lives and enhancing social lives

Rosita Boland

I'm in the living room of a house in Ratoath, Co Meath, and there is a large table with dozens of brightly-coloured plastic objects on it. There are yellow boxes and purple jugs and green bottles and pink tongs and many, many other oddly-shaped plastic items about whose functions I have no idea.

I'm not alone: there are eight other women in the room. They're sitting back, glasses of wine and cups of tea in hand, looking at the pieces of plastic expectantly. This is an event you most likely thought vanished at the end of the 1970s, but you're wrong about that, because the Tupperware party still endures in Ireland.

Clara Flynn is the demonstrator for the evening; one of some 150 currently in the country, according to Tupperware Ireland. "It's not just plastic," is her mantra for the night, as indeed it is to the other women in the room, a mix of Flynn's family, friends, and friends of friends.

Marlis Nolan from Balbriggan is one of the guests in the living room waiting for Flynn to start her demonstration. "I found the girls through Facebook," she says. (Flynn and her sister Katherina have a Facebook page called The Tupperware Dolls.) "I was looking for Tupperware. I had a few bits from years ago, and myself and my sister were saying we'd love a few new pieces. You can't see the benefits of Tupperware just by looking through a catalogue. Once you've been to a party, you can see how useful it's going to be in your life."

Newplaces

As guest Helen Moore from Dunshaughlin puts it, being a Tupperware hostess has brought her to many places she hadn't been before. "I have done a good few parties. How far did we go? We went to Moynalty at the far side of Kells, we went to Cavan, we went to Castlebellingham, and over to that place in Westmeath starting with a C; what do you call it? Castlepollard. We went way out. If someone wanted a Tupperware party, we just got in the car and went. It could be an hour and half's drive away but you'd be guaranteed to have a good night, good craic, and meet

loads of women, and you'd have those friends for life."

Flynn starts her demonstration, which she does like the total pro she is. I honestly had no idea you could do so much with different pieces of plastic: but, of course, it's not just plastic. There are rice cookers, cream shakers, omelette makers, a stacking pot that you can cook a complete dinner in, quiche dishes that can go in the oven – or is it the microwave? I'm getting confused. There's a jar with blades inside, operated by a string that will chop onions. "Add two boiled eggs and a tomato, and you have a lovely salad for lunch," Flynn says, pulling the string to demonstrate. "This is the one item of Tupperware I have that I use the most."

A box with dividing sections is produced. "These are meat-saver boxes that will store mincemeat in the fridge and . . . blood won't be leaking in your fridge. The mince will keep pink for days in these boxes," Flynn says.

"You're joking," Pamela Galvin from Castleknock says, craning for a better look. "You can put chicken in them either," Flynn says. "And here's one that you could put cooked rashers in one side and sausages the other, and it'd be lunch for himself."

With theatrical build-up, she whips the lid off a yellow box and holds a cream cracker high in the air, like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. "Look," she instructs. We look. Flynn snaps the cracker in two, and it makes a loud, distinctive sound.

"Those cream crackers are in the box since Christmas and they're still fresh."

"Brilliant!" says Colette Casey, also from Castleknock.

Back in the kitchen, there's bruschetta waiting to go into the oven for later, as well as cocktail sausages, and chicken nuggets. There are tortilla chips and assorted dips on the table, and plenty of wine; if it's an evening event, most guests bring wine. The hostess for the evening will do the food. She gets 10 per cent commission of sales made during the evening.

So, do people actually buy merchandise at a party? The women refilling their glasses and taking a closer look at the demonstration items laugh.

"Of course," Moore says. "We sit down after the demonstration and decide what

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we want to buy." They say €60 is their usual average spend per person, but tell me of someone they know who regularly spends €300 per party. The women gathered in Ratoath attend Tupperware parties about twice a year.

"I don't think the Tupperware name is out there enough," Katherina Flynn says. "People think it has gone away, but it hasn't." "Tupperware is a long, long time on the go. When your children are young, you can't afford a lot of it, but today, times have moved on, and I have Tupperware all round the house, all over the house," Mary Flynn from Castleknock adds. I ask her how many pieces of Tupperware she has now. She thinks for a moment. "Between 80 and 100."

"I love Tupperware," says Gabrielle Kenny from Dunshaughlin, when asked why she's come along this evening.

"I'm here because I love Tupperware and I love when they're hosting a party," Michelle Fagan says.

Is it the Tupperware or the social element that is the biggest draw for her? "The Tupperware," she says firmly. "I look at a product on the catalogue, and that's good, but here you get to ask the questions of the consultant and they know exactly what they're talking about. I love Tupperware," Fagan repeats.

I had no idea kitchen items made of plastic could induce such emotions in people, but then again, it seems Tupperware really is not just plastic.

I ask Kenny why the guests are all women and no men? "That's a good question," she says. "I don't think it would be the same social evening if there were men there too. I came across a man once at a party a few years ago, but it was only the once. I suppose from the social aspect of it, the parties would have started at a time when women were at home most of the time and it was an evening out for women; women getting out for a couple of hours on their own."

So what motivates Clara Flynn to be a demonstrator? "I do this because I love the product and I love getting the product out there for people to enjoy," she says. "It's a chance to gather friends together, sit down and have the natter, have a little glass of wine. The next thing is there's a little business going, and the hostess feels

like she's had a night out, even if it is in her own home, because she hasn't had to organise a babysitter, as the kids are in bed."

The demonstration is over, and the food is emerging from the oven. It's all put out on plates. Ceramic plates. I think Tupperware is missing a lucrative merchandising opportunity there.

Video
Watch Bryan O'Brien's video of the party on irishtimes.com

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■ Cold storage: Clara Flynn demonstrates products at a Tupperware party in her home in Ratoath with, from left, Marlis Nolan and Michelle Fagan. Below, the Extra Chef, which chops food.

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: BRYAN O'BRIEN