

Shop! Mary Portas has an uplifting experience at Avoca in Ireland

Rating 9/10

Good for homespun Irish homeware and gifts

Bad for some of the merchandising



I have become rather friendly of late with the people behind Innocent smoothies. Innocent, which appeared as if from nowhere a few years ago, is now the brand against which all other smoothies are judged. People love them for their taste and natural goodness (no, they're not paying me), but to me Innocent's true genius comes from the creative way the product is marketed. From the witty packaging to the quirky, turf-covered vans, everything the brand touches has passed under the nose of the company's creative director, Dan Germain. The fact that Innocent has a creative director at all says an awful lot about it. So few fast-moving consumer goods companies (FMCGs, in trade-speak) put creativity at the heart of their brand, and even fewer retailers. But this week's shop certainly does.

I was in Dublin for the weekend and my enlightened Twitter followers (@maryportas) had been unanimous in recommending one shop not to miss. Avoca gets its name from the village in Co Wicklow where, in a woollen mill, the company started as a co-operative for farmers to turn their wool into tweeds and blankets (Avoca still weaves its throws, blankets and rugs there). The business thrived early in the 20th century, but by the 1960s the looms had fallen silent. Rescued by a Dublin lawyer, Donald Pratt, and his wife, Hilary, in the mid-1970s, Avoca has seen an astonishing revival, offering a 'lesson in stylish Irish living' and expanding into fashion and food, beauty and jewellery. It now has nine shops in Ireland, one in Belfast and another near Washington, DC. In the Suffolk Street store there are four floors of merchandise, with soft mohair and lamb's wool blankets and a whole host of other product to seduce. In the words of the Avoca creative team, 'Against the backdrop of the mundane in people's lives, the theatre of our store should leave you uplifted.'

The windows On my visit, there were elegantly dressed 'winter wonderland'



Avoca

Suffolk Street, Dublin

Visited Saturday, 1pm

Number of stores 10 in Ireland and Northern Ireland

What they sell Fashion and homeware

Website avoca.ie

Who's in charge?

Donald and Hilary Pratt

scenes – mannequins posed with deers and owls amid general gorgeoussness. It was white, twinkling and utterly sophisticated. If a shop's windows are this good, it's a dead cert that the inside will hit the spot, too...

Shopability ... Which indeed it did. This shop sits somewhere between the American chains Anthropologie, J Crew and Urban Outfitters, but with a generous dollop of homespun Irish charm. My eye was first caught by the excellent beauty offerings – Cowshed, Green & Spring and Horto Botanico carrot and lettuce soaps (sounds hideous, I know, but I loved them). Sadly, it was all slightly let down by some cheap merchandising and

displays, which detracted from the sophistication of brands you'd normally only find in Liberty and the like. The store's biggest asset is in its basement – which is foodie heaven. I bought some delicious fruit soda bread and the biggest apple tart I've ever seen. Beyond Avoca's own fashion line, Anthology (a bit earnest for my taste), there is also an excellent line in gifts. My favourites included a beautiful blue pig jug, vintage doll's houses, quirky doorknobs and gorgeous lavender candles. One of my Irish friends told me that a gift chosen at Avoca was considered the ultimate sign of good taste, and I would have defied any of the heaving Saturday crowd we shared the shop with to leave empty-handed.

Was I being served? I was approached by a stylish, bubbly blond sales assistant who told me the story of the brand and encouraged me to try a €99 dress. Service like this, even when a shop is really busy, means someone passionate about people as well as product is at the helm.

Online You can get a sense of Avoca for yourself at avoca.ie, but if your order is less than €50, you'll have to pay €9 to have it delivered to mainland Britain. Better to book a weekend trip. Springtime in Dublin, anyone?

Verdict If you do pay a visit, don't do what I did and turn up at lunchtime. There was a 20-minute queue on the stairs for soups and salads, though all were served with mouthwateringly good homemade chips. When a brand is this good, people will come – and when they're surrounded by so many things of beauty, they will happily wait for the privilege. From the fries to the fruit breads, the soups to the soaps, everything here has been masterminded by a highly creative team with real passion and care. And because they've taken such a holistic view of things, brands such as Avoca – and Innocent – are, in this critic's opinion, heaps ahead of the competition.

Do you agree with Mary? Have your say at telegraph.co.uk/maryportas

Illustration by Philip Bannister
Next: Leon

I would have defied any of the heaving Saturday crowd we shared the shop with to leave empty-handed

Throws, from €39.95 to €79.95; lavender candle, €16.95; Foosey cake stand, €54.95; Pioneer throw, €79.95

