

The Irish Table

Irish food is best known for the quality of its ingredients and the honest simplicity of its preparation. "The newest of food and the oldest of drink," says the old Irish proverb!

Books and legend suggest that medieval Irishmen lived well on dairy products and "corn," what we would call cereal. Herds of sheep, cattle, and goats yielded milk to be drunk sweet or sour or turned into cheeses. One ancient chronicler rhapsodized about the "great daintie" of sour curds called bonnyclabber, which is still enjoyed today. The Irish are prodigal about using dairy products in their cookery, butter, for instance, being used rather than oil. That so many Irish recipes call for buttermilk or sour milk rather than whole milk reminds us that refrigeration was not available to Irish bakers until relatively recent years.

Butter played an important role in the household in earlier times; every household had its churn. Lumps of butter were sometimes thrown into the water through which cattle were driven in order to ward off evil and to keep the cows' milk flowing. Bags of butter have been found in bogs, edible after centuries of burial. Milk was often thought to superstitions developed around dairy products and their attraction to the spirits. One called for a live cinder to be put into the churn to guard the butter from the netherworld's creatures. One prohibited a person from taking live fire out of the house during churning, and another required that if a man rekindled his pipe at the hearth, he had to take a turn at churning to ensure that the butter and churn were preserved from all harm.

Oddly enough, although the Irish today consume more potatoes and dairy products than their fellow Europeans, they consume the least amount of cheese per capita. The irony of this fact is that the Irish were the first Europeans to make cheese. It is said that the Swiss learned to make Appenzel from the advice and knowledge of Irish monks. Cheese too was supposed to be the medium chosen by St. Patrick's would-be assassins to poison him.

Agricultural Ireland was also rich in cereals. Oatmeal was the cornerstone of the Irish diet in pre-potato days. Whether made into bread or, more simply, boiled up as a "stirabout" or porridge, oatmeal was the food of the people. It is said that St. Columcille learned his alphabet by having the letters traced on an oaten cake by his nurse. In medieval times, the manner in which oatmeal was served signaled class distinctions. Royalty's children were nourished with wheaten stirabout flavored with honey and milk; the chieftains' progeny had their stirabout made with fresh milk and flavored

with butter; workmen's children were fed oatmeal with buttermilk or water. Oatmeal also served as currency: As late as the 1600's rents were often paid with oaten meal and cakes.

Seafood, lamb, pork, and a variety of vegetables are part of Ireland's dietary history, but the potato is the food most intimately associated with Irish history. The unfortunate turn of events which forced the Irish into dependence on the potato started around the time of James II's defeat at the Battle of the Boyne, June 14, 1690. The two Georges who followed James enacted the Penal Laws which denied Catholics a host of rights. When rebellion inevitably followed repression, two of the rebel groups, the Whiteboys and the Defenders, scorched the land during their campaign of terror against the English. While the above ground crops could not withstand the burning, the potato, cultivated underground, survived to become the peasant mainstay. But the dependence on one type of vegetable left the country vulnerable to the diseases which wiped out the potato in 1845, 1846 and 1847.

Although the popular association of the potato with the Irish has a melancholy history, nevertheless, it could be a treat to stop by a neighbor's cottage just as she took the boxty out of the oven. This hot loaf, still served today, is a kind of potato bread which, before baking, is always marked with a cross so it can be divided into sections, or farls: Boxty is traditionally eaten in Ireland on Halloween, as is colcannon, mashed potatoes with cabbage and butter. On Halloween, coins are wrapped in foil and buried in colcannon. Children would eat their way to where the coins were hidden. Earlier versions of colcannon began with a mixture of raw white vegetables- white cabbage, parsnips, onions, potatoes- which were seasoned with salt and pepper and layered in a giant saucepan. Champ (mashed potatoes with scallions) is another Irish staple. Leftover mashed potatoes, combined with equal amounts of cabbage and browned butter in a skillet, make a tasty dish called "bubble and squeak."

An old Irish verse celebrates fond remembrances of the potato:
*Did ye ever ate colcannon that's made from thickened cream,
With greens and scallions blended like a picture in your dream?
Did ye ever take potato-cake or boxty to the school,
Tucked underneath your oxtar with your book and slate and rule?*

(written by Mary Lawlor & originally printed in 1990)

© Irish Cultural Society of the Garden City Area