



Journey through Thyme

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Columnist

What the Irish really eat on St. Patrick's Day

Darina Allen, cookbook author, chef and owner of Ballymaloe Cookery School in Shanagarry, County Cork, Ireland said, "For centuries in Ireland, the March 17 holiday celebrating the country's patron saint was a somewhat sober affair. It was much more of a religious feast — you went to Mass where people would wear a live shamrock, a little Irish dancing, and sometimes a parade."

St. Patrick is one of the patron saints of Ireland. He is said to have died on March 17 in or around the year

493. He grew up in Roman Britain but was captured by Irish raiders and taken to Ireland as a slave when he was a young adult. After some years he returned to his family and entered the church, like his father and grandfather before him. He later returned to Ireland as a missionary and worked in the north and west of the country.

According to popular legend, St. Patrick rid Ireland of snakes. However, it is thought that there have been no snakes in Ireland since the last ice age. The "snakes" that St. Patrick banished from Ireland may refer to the druids or pagan worshippers of snake or serpent gods.

It's often said that everyone is at least a wee bit Irish on St. Patrick's Day, and across America it's certainly a giant celebration of green brew and tiny leprechauns. No St. Patrick's Day in America would be complete without a dinner of corned beef and cabbage — but that's not quite as Irish as you might think. That dish actually comes from the early days of Irish immigrants in America, not the old country itself. Head over to Ireland and you'll find all sorts of parades, festivals, live music, and street carnivals, but you won't find any

corned beef on the table — and there won't be any green beer either.

An Irish St. Patrick's Day meal revolves around staple ingredients that have remained part of the Irish tradition for generations.

Beef was long considered a luxury item in Ireland, and thus wasn't consumed very often. When Irish immigrants arrived in America, beef (including corned beef, thanks to its popularity in the community) was plentiful, and soon became a signature dish.

So, what do the Irish eat on St. Patty's Day?

When our friends across the pond awake on St. Paddy's Day, they'll likely start the day with a traditional Irish breakfast of fresh eggs (normally fried), along with sausage, bacon, grilled tomatoes, black pudding, white pudding, mushrooms, and Irish brown bread. The bacon served in Ireland is generally back bacon, which is thicker and meatier than the kind sold in America.

After all the festivities of the day — including parades, dancing, music, and religious services — families will usually return home for a large meal. Nine times out of 10 this will feature leg of lamb, probably roasted in the oven with rosemary and garlic.

It could also include shepherd's pie. The Irish love their pies, and a bit of steak and Guinness pie is a guarantee for many traditional tables set for St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

Of course, potatoes are customary on the side and sometimes as soup with bacon, or alongside root vegetables like carrots, parsnips, and pretty much anything else they can boil the heck out of. Potatoes can also be served mashed or roasted too, of course. For greens, peas and broccoli are the Irish standards.

In many places bread recipes rely on yeast as the agent that makes them rise. In Ireland, though, that's traditionally been a little difficult to do. Ireland's climate presents some problems when it comes to baking, and that includes getting things to rise properly. Wheat flour grown and produced in Ireland is what's known as

"soft," and the low protein content of that flour means yeast doesn't work in quite the same way. The Irish use what's on hand and what's affordable to survive on. The Irish have long relied on bread made from bicarbonate of soda, not yeast, called baking soda, or bread soda, this particular ingredient works to make bread rise when it reacts with other ingredients to produce CO₂.

While you might find all kinds of bread at a grocery store or bakery, it's soda bread that still forms the backbone of a traditional meal, and it's always on the table. It's incredibly easy to make and can be either white or brown.

A benefit of this bread is its versatility, and it's just as good first thing in the morning with a bit of butter and honey as it is in the evening, soaking up the last remains of the gravy from a steak and ale pie.

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