

Stick with Irish tradition this St. Patrick's Day

By Jodi Schneider
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It's often said that everyone is at least a little bit Irish on St. Patrick's Day.

Across America, it's a huge celebration of green beer and a meal of corned beef and cabbage — but that's not quite as Irish as you might think. Head over to Ireland, and you'll find parades, festivals, live music, and street carnivals, but you won't find corned beef on the table — and there won't be any green beer, either.

Next Tuesday, March 17, marks the celebration of the life of St. Patrick, the bishop who brought Christianity to Ireland in the early 400s.

An Irish St. Patrick's Day meal revolves around staple ingredients that have remained part of the Irish tradition for generations. In Ireland, it all starts with the potato. When it comes to food, there are three major periods in Irish history: before the potato arrived, after the potato arrived and after the potato failed.

It's impossible to look at Ireland's history without reading or hearing about the Potato Famine in the mid-19th century. This tragic event changed the country permanently, killing over a million people and leading many millions more to leave Ireland forever.

The potato was introduced to Ireland by the late 1500s by Sir Walter Raleigh. Within 200 years it had replaced older staples, including oats and dairy products. The potato became the mainstay of the Irish diet. In the 1840s, the country's heavy reliance on potatoes led to the Irish Potato Famine. Most Irish farmers grew one variety of potato, which turned out to be highly sensitive to disease. A potato blight that had started in Belgium swept the country,

It destroyed one-third of Ireland's potato crop in 1845 and triggered widespread famine. In the next two years, two-thirds of the crop was destroyed. Over one million people died as a result of the potato blight, and two million emigrated to other countries.

Even though they had suffered through the Irish Potato Famine, Irish people continued to love potatoes. As soon as the spread of the disease

stopped, the potato slowly returned to its place as the staple food in the Irish diet. In the early part of the 21st century the Irish were consuming more potatoes than most countries in the world.

Without the potato, there would be no colcannon, no Irish stew and no shepherd's pie.

Colcannon is a festival favorite, and it's also on the dinner table for every

Sunday's roast. If you're looking for something truly traditional this St. Patrick's Day, try this delectable Irish peasant dish. Made with potatoes, ham (Ireland's bacon) chopped cabbage or kale and scallions, colcannon combines all the deliciousness of a buttery mash with some of Ireland's

staple vegetables. The word colcannon is from the Gaelic "cal ceannann," which means "white-headed cabbage."

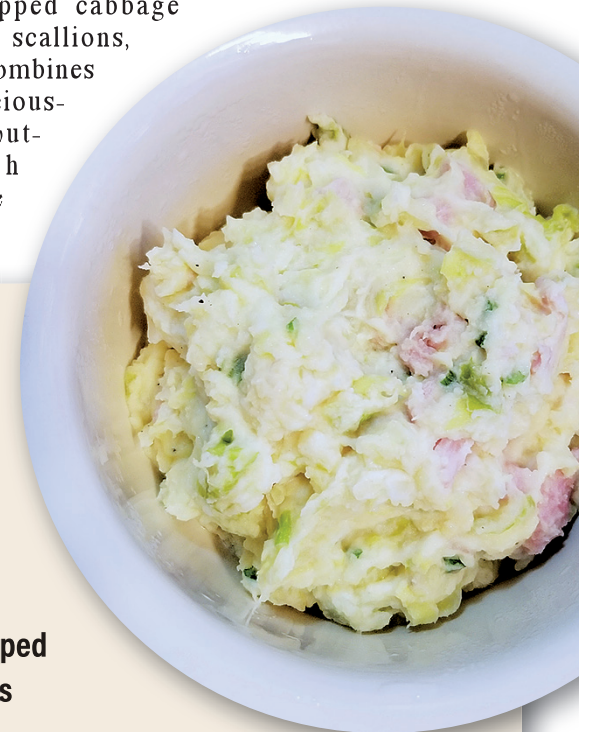


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Colcannon

This traditional favorite is prepared in Ireland with local seasonal foods without complicated cooking methods or exotic ingredients. It's pure comfort food.

3 pounds of potatoes, scrubbed (red-skin potatoes work well)

2 sticks of butter

1-1/4 cups hot milk

1 head of cabbage, cored and finely shredded

Freshly ground pepper

1 pound ham or bacon, cooked

4 scallions, finely chopped

Chopped parsley leaves

Steam the potatoes in their skins for 30 minutes (it adds flavor) then peel.

Mash thoroughly to remove lumps. Add 1 stick of butter. Slowly stir in hot milk. Season with some of the black pepper.

Boil the cabbage in unsalted water until it turns darker. Add two tablespoons of butter (it helps soften the cabbage).

Cover with a lid for 2 minutes. Drain cabbage thoroughly, and chop into small pieces.

Add cabbage, scallions, and ham or bacon to mashed potatoes, stirring them in gently.

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