



Midwinters Revel 2015
A Feast of 14th century Ireland
in honor of the Saint Brigit of Kildare or Imbolc
January 31, 2015
By Lady Lisette la Roux



Ich am of Irlaunde

Icham of Irlaunde
Ant of the holy londe
Of Irlande.

Gode sire, pray ich the,
For of saynte charite,
Come ant daunce wyt me
In Irlaunde.

-Anonymous, circa 14th Century

St. Brigid Day (*Lá Fhéile Bríde*), or Imbolc in Gaelic tradition, is the holiday welcoming in the beginning of Spring. St. Brigid Day is based on the Catholic saint Brigid of Kildaire canonized for her legendary and fantastic miracles as well as her boundless charity and compassion for those in need (Catholic Online, 2014). This specifically included numerous miracles associated with the multiplication of food in the form of apples for lepers and milk from her cow for visiting bishops (Saint Brigid Parish, 2014). On her feast day, Brigid was believed to visit the farms with her cows and bless the farmers and their animals. An oat bannock (or oat cake) and bowl of fresh milk or butter was left on the windowsill or doorstep in her honor as well as some grain for her cow. These attributes greatly influenced the feast represented for Midwinters Revel.

This festival is also associated in the Gaelic calendar as Imbolc (meaning “in the belly”) associated with the period when female sheep (ewes), pregnant with spring lambs, started to lactate and give milk again. The interpretation of this holiday lends significance to the celebration of fertility, reproduction, and the young with the entering of Spring. Food and music were used to celebrate which incorporated seeds, dairy, and other spring-evolving foods. (Adelmann, 2014)

Another major contributor to the development of the menu were Brehon Law. The Brehon Laws made up the early Irish legal system prior to English rule. These laws were evident in areas of Ireland until the 17th century. These rules or law were governed by the Brehon or judges / arbitrators based on a class structure including Kings, Nobles, Non-noble Freeman with property, Non-noble Freeman without property, and the non-free clauses. (Ginnell, 1894). Food staples were one of the tools used to pay taxes, to establish hierarchy (i.e. beekeeping and honey mandates), lack of (fasting) as punishment for crimes, and as determination of laws broken (i.e. a pregnant woman denied food by her husband can have charges brought against him). It was also a way of ensuring the best classes received the best of the table:

"What are their victuals? *Leite=stirabout* is given to them all; but the flavouring (literally *dip*) which goes into it is different; namely, salt butter for the sons of the inferior grades, fresh butter for the sons of chieftains, honey for the sons of kings. The food of each continues the same respectively until the end of one year, or three years [according to the kind of fosterage]. Stirabout made of oatmeal on butter-milk or water is given to the sons of the Feini grades, and a bare sufficiency of it merely, and salt butter for flavouring. Stirabout made on new milk is given to the sons of the chieftain grades, and fresh butter for flavouring, and a full sufficiency of it is given to them; and this stirabout is made of barley-meal. Stirabout made on new milk is given to the sons of kings, and it is made of wheaten meal, and honey for flavouring."

Ginnell, Section II Fosterage

These laws gave a unique glimpse into the role food, in particular, played in this caste system of laws and observances.

Great care was taken with each of these recipes to not only use as many documentable ingredients to medieval Ireland but to also prepare foods in a manner consistent with preparation techniques, albeit using modern tools (i.e.: ceramic baking stone in oven versus flat stone in front of hearth or electric smoker but using wood consistent with wood that would have been available in period in Ireland).

Menu

First Course

Oatcakes

Butter of various flavors (garlic, honey, and plain)

Pea and Ham Soup

Cheese

Second Course

Freshly cured and smoked ham in honey and juniper berries

Smoked Salmon in apple cider and Thyme

Honey Roasted parsnips

Boiled cabbage with butter and bacon

Third Course

Irish Lamb Stew with root vegetables, onions, and garlic

Boiled Buttered Leeks

Peas

Fourth Course

Blackberry and Honey Curd Cakes

Roasted Apples

Oatcakes

Bread was a staple in Irish meals as was common in most of medieval Europe. The common grains used in the preparation of cereal, soups, thickening agents, and breads was oat and barley more commonly found in the north and west of the country, where the land is not as fertile. Wheat was considered a high status food found more commonly in the south and east. Barley bread was also associated with penance in the lives of the early saints until Sunday when they feasted on wheat bread, salmon and ale. (Mahon, 1998) Commonly, oatcakes were griddled or baked on a baking stone (hot flagstone) in front of a fire.

Bread was also considered a “talisman against hunger” (Mahon, 1998) and played a role in superstitious traditions including traveling with a crust of bread in your pocket to avoid hunger and placing oat bread and cakes as offerings.

Bread was not served by itself but instead with an array of relishes including honey, hard-boiled eggs, and garlic. The most common condiment paired with bread was, of course, butter. However butter was also flavored with herbs and ingredients such as onions, garlic, and honey. (Sexton, 1998)

Oatcakes (recipe adapted Noel McMeel and Lynn Marie Hulsman, Irish Pantry, 2013)

½ c. Buttermilk
2 cups old fashioned oats
½ cup whole wheat flour
2 Tbsp melted unsalted butter
2 Tbsp clover honey
½ tsp fine salt
½ tsp baking powder
2 large egg whites
Kosher salt for sprinkling tops

Preheat oven to 325F. Grind the oats to course flour. Add all ingredients into large bowl. Will be wet, so add small bits of whole wheat flour until balls can be formed. Form balls and flatten into 2 inch circles. Sprinkle with salt and bake on a stoneware platter until golden brown or about 20-30 min.
Yielded 13.

Lessons learned: These can be made of any size including formed into the St. Brigid crosses presented to high table. Originally used sugar or salt in sprinkling prior to baking, however taste test showed that the salt complimented the savory nature of the bread better than sugar. Oat cakes can be made the day before and keeps well for the day after. Can yield 16 oatcakes per batch with rolled into smaller balls.

Ham Stock for Split and Ham Soup

Pigs were a main staple of meat for most households in medieval Ireland and were often smoked, enabling their meat to be kept for long durations. Pigs were considered a low status animal of necessity. They could be kept cheaply, in care and feeding because they did not compete with the other livestock for grass and were able to roam free in woods eating acorns from the trees and other forest edibles, then brought in for slaughter. (Linnane, 2000) Pig meat was easy to preserve either by smoking or salting. Pigs were also used in payment of taxes to the King.

The old Irish proverb told by a Sean O Conaill, a famous Irish storyteller, told of the origin of pigs coming from a piece of fat provided by St. Martin to a farmer who had only cattle. Even the titles of geographical areas are often associated to pigs or boars such as Kanturk (Boar's Head) and Ros Muc (headlead of pigs). (Mac Con Iomaire, 2003). There are many examples of the pig's representation in literature and folklore that even reference down to the different parts of a pig to eat such as bacon, hams, and sausages.

“Most of the pig was salted, placed in a brine barrel for a period or placed up the chimney for smoking. “

“The body was washed and then each piece that was to be preserve was carefully salted and placed neatly in a barrel and sealed...whilst others used juniper berries in the fire when hanging the hams and flitches wrapped in brown paper up the chimney for smoking.”

(The Pig in Irish Cuisine past and present
2003)

Ham Stock

5 qts of water
2 onions, chopped
4 carrots, chopped
½ full stalk of celery, chopped
2 ½ lb ham bone with meat

Put all in large stockpot. Bring to boil. Reduce heat to simmer and let simmer for 3 hours covered, stirring occasionally.

Pull out meat bone, strain out celery, carrots, and onions and discard. Pick off meat off bone and set aside. Discard bone. Put meat back in stock and refrigerate allowing fat to congeal on surface. Remove and discard fat solid. Stock can be used now or stored for later (preferably frozen).

Yields approximately 13 cups.

Lesson learned: This had a great result right out of the gate. The meat can also be left out and used immediately in the split pea and ham soup if planning on using it for that right away.

Split Pea and Ham Soup

In conjunction with above information regarding ham, peas and beans were available and were a source of soups and stews.

Split Pea and Ham Soup (recipe adapted from John Murphy, A Little Irish Cookbook, Split Pea and Ham Soup, 1986)

1 lb split peas (green)
1 ½ cup cooked ham from ham stock, chopped
1 large onion
6 cups ham stock
Small amount of oil to soften the onion

Soak peas as directed.

Chop up onion and soften with a little oil. Add peas and stock. Cook gently until the peas are soft. About an hour. Puree peas in blender or food processor. Add ham. Salt and pepper to taste.
Can add a swirl of cream to add to taste.

Yields about 7 cups.

Lesson learned: Again, this recipe was great right out of the gate, with a few changes from the original including the additional of freshly made ham stock instead of water. Yellow peas can be substituted for beans, but in trying those as well do not change the flavor, only the cosmetic appeal. Can use ham stock for quicker results, but prefer the flavor of fresh ham stock from the bone.

Cured and Smoked Ham with Honey and Juniper Berries

1 fresh ham bone in (for test recipe used 10lb ham with skin and fat cap to be removed. Approx. 8 lbs after removal)
3 gallons cold clean water
28 ounces by weight of kosher salt
3 tablespoons of Premium #1 Prague Powder

Optional ingredients used in cure:

2 large onions chopped
2 cloves garlic
2 cups honey
3 Tbsp. whole black peppercorns
2 Tbsp. whole fresh (not dried) juniper berries

Put 1 gallon of water in pot and add all ingredients except ham. Boil until all dissolved and chill.

Clean 5 gallon food grade sealable bucket and sanitize. This step is extremely important to avoid contamination that may spoil the ham or cure liquid during the curing time. If ham smells odd or has a film when opened after 7 days, do not use!

Add remaining 2 gallons of water into the cure liquid and mix. Using a food injector, start by injecting the cure into the ham near the bone to avoid sour bone. Inject in several locations all around the bone. After that inject the meat with the cure every 2 inches throughout the ham. This allows the ham to cure in a shorter period of time then simply submersing it into the liquid. By injecting and then submerging, the ham cure and salt equalizes throughout the meat in a faster time.

Place the ham in the cleaned and sanitized bucket and pour in the remaining cure liquid. If necessary use a plate or a bowl filled with liquid to ensure the ham stays submerged. Seal for 7 days in a cool environment.

After 7 days, rinse surface well removing as much of the salt off the outer ham that has accumulated over the cure period. Set your smoker temperature to as close to 325 F as possible (in colder weather may be more difficult) and smoke using Apple wood until deepest part of the ham meat reaches 160 (USDA says that 145 F is minimum for serving ham, however this is still a bit to pink for most people). This takes approximately 5 hours, however use of a meat thermometer is imperative.

During the last hour, paint with a glaze. For this recipe:

1 c clover honey
½ c apple juice
5 cracked fresh (not dried) juniper berries

Heat the glaze until it is thick enough to drizzle but not so thick it won't coat.

Yields 3-4 tables of 8 worth if using an 8 lb ham and serving with other foods.

Lessons Learned: Great care must be taken to ensure exactly the correct amount of salt and to use the Prague powder to ensure the curing process is complete. The main ingredients must remain constant while the optional can be changed for flavor.

The ham was a tad on the salty side, which was acceptable for some pallets but not all. Although this was appropriate for this type of ham and the saltiness did decrease, the ham was kept in the cure one day longer than originally planned. This may have caused increased saltiness. For the next ham, it will be removed at the appropriate time to help reduce the time the ham cures in the salt. The ham was washed significantly, but next ham will include a soak in cold water for an hour to reduce salt intake. Also think that we over injected the cure into the ham. This time we will inject every 2 inches not every inch. All these should reduce the saltiness but still would not affect the flavor.

Although Oak was the wood most associated with smoking of meats, Apples were the only cultivated fruit in Ireland during this time, so the use of apple wood for smoking is not unreasonable.

Also, .2 pounds was a good serving when coupled with other removes.

Smoked Salmon in Apple Cider and Thyme

Ireland is a small island nation where fishing was a main vehicle for food production, particularly those with direct access to the shore. Archaeological sites have exposed rich deposits of shellfish such as Oysters, Cockles, Prawns, and Mussels, as well as other treasures of sea like fish roe and seaweed for eating and cooking. (CIT, 2012/13). With the introduction of Christianity came the custom of abstaining from meat on Fridays, on fast days and Lent. The increase of fish consumption for protein was increased during these days. For inland areas this was the only time fish was available. Salmon was considered with high regard, with the presentation during feasts saved for the prized position. Records from 1400-1416 licenses were issued for tradesman who brought goods into market for the purposes of returning with Irish salmon. (Mac Con Iomire, 2006).

“The salmon was regarded as the “king of fish”. Gaelic chiefs saved the prized position at their feasts for the salmon, which they roasted whole over an open spit and basted with wine, honey, and herbs.”

(The History of Seafood in Irish Cuisine and Culture, 2006)

“Only it may be remarked that salmon was then the favourite; and we meet with constant reference to it as superior to all other fish. The salmon of the "salmon-full Boyne," of Lough Neagh, and of the Barrow, were much prized.”

(Joyce, 1906)

Smoked Salmon in Apple Cider and Thyme

2 lb salmon fillet

Brine:

8 cups apple cider

2 tsp black peppercorn

9 gr. Or about 12 sprigs of fresh Thyme

½ c kosher salt

To make brine: Combine in saucepan salt and apple cider. Bring to a boil and dissolve all salt. Add remaining ingredients, simmer on lower heat for 10 minutes and set aside to cool.

Once cool (not just luke warm so it helps to put it in fridge or outside, covered in winter). Rinse salmon in cold water and place in glass container deep enough to be

able to submerge fillets in the brine. Pour brine over salmon and cover. Place in refrigerator for no less than 6 hours, but overnight works well.

Remove salmon from brine and place on wire smoker rack (on a lined cookie sheet to avoid dripping in refrigerator). Place in refrigerator for no less than 6 hours (or overnight).

Remove from refrigerator and set aside while setting up smoker. Place catch pan for dripping in the smoker below where the fish will be. Place fillets on parchment paper on rack and place in smoker. Smoke with Alder wood at 160 F for 4-5 hours or until the inner temperature reaches 145 F.

Yields 2 tables worth or 16 people when not serving a lot (note this is being served with smoked ham and 2 sides.

Lessons Learned: It is important to pay attention to the thickness of the fish. Although the different thicknesses towards the edges took on a wonderful candied flavor and jerky texture, the centers were more flaky and moist. Cut 2 lb fillet in half and length ways. In order to ensure consistency of texture and flavor, the thinner parts of the fillet will be removed and placed in the center of the rack while the thicker portions of the fish will be placed on the outer edges while smoking. This should allow for more heat and smoke to be introduced to the thicker meats while the thinner portions will be slightly obscured, slowing their cooking. 4 hours for ½ in thickness is perfect but anything thinner needs less time.

Although Oak was the wood most associated with smoking of meats, Alder trees were indigenous to Ireland and produce a lovely smoke flavor particularly with fish, so I made the choice to alternatively use Alder as it was readily available for the smoker and can be documented as existing in medieval Ireland. Alder grows better in wet areas so it does well in Ireland and was thought to be used for structural purposes and shields. (Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, 2014).

Honey Roasted Parsnips

The common root vegetable associated with Ireland is the potato, however in 14th century Ireland, the potato had not yet been introduced. This does not prevent other root vegetables from being main staples on the menu. Both cultivated and wild many vegetables included watercress, celery, parsley, kale, cabbage, wild garlic, leek, onions, chives, peas and beans, carrots and parsnips. (Mac Con Iomire, 2011). Most vegetables were boiled with butter or spices.



Bees and Beehives from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves
C. 1440 (courtesy of <http://americangardenhistory.blogspot.com/>)

Honey was widely known and used both in cooking and as a condiment or sweetener. Beekeeping was considered a respectable profession and was regulated specifically by the Brehon Laws. (Ginnell, 1894)

Honey Roasted Parsnips (adapted and altered from Honeyed Parsnips recipe from Irish Pub Cooking)

16 Parsnips, peeled and cut into quarters
8 Tbsp. Vegetable Oil
2 Tbsp Honey

Preheat oven to 350 F. Bring a large pan of water to a boil. Reduce the heat, add parsnips and cook for about 5 minutes, drain thoroughly.

Pour 4 tbsp of oil into an oven proof dish and add the parsnips. Mix the remaining oil with the honey and drizzle over the parsnips. Roast in preheated oven for 45 minutes, until golden brown and tender. Remove and serve.

Serves 1 table or 8 people

Boiled cabbage with butter and bacon

1 head of cabbage
½ lb of bacon (will yield the necessary grease)
2 Tbsp bacon grease
3 Tbsp salted butter
½ cup water

Cook bacon and save grease. Set aside. Wash and chop cabbage into 1-2 inch pieces. Add bacon grease and butter to skillet or pot. When butter melts add cabbage and water. Cover to steam, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking. Cook until cabbage is tender, about 15 minutes. Cut up bacon and toss into cooked cabbage.

Yields 1 table worth or approximately 8 people.

Lesson Learned: This depends greatly on how you like your cabbage cooked. Cook longer for more tender, although the period of cooking time in the recipe was sufficient for this cook, some like it a bit more done. All personal preference. Prefer pre cooking the bacon and crumbling in with cooked cabbage to change the texture with each bite.

Irish Lamb Stew with root vegetables, onion, and garlic

Lamb is particularly significant for this feast. Lambs and the feeding of newly born lambs of the spring are symbolic in the Imbolc festival as well as traditional foods used to celebrate. Imbolc is derived from the Gaelic word that means as “ewe’s milk”. Stewing was a main method of cooking along with roasting, and boiling. (Mac Con Iomaire, 2011) Stews originated in the cottages and villages where cooking utensils were scarce and all the ingredients could be added to one pot and went a long way. (Mahon, 1998).

Irish Lamb Stew (adapted from A Little Irish Cookbook, J. Murphy, however altered significantly to ensure authenticity with ingredients and the time period of the feast)

3 lb lamb
¾ cup pearly barley
7 cups cold water (6 cups for beginning, 1 for end)
¼ Tbsp. pepper
½ Tbsp. salt
2 large carrots, peeled
2 parsnips, peeled
1 turnip, peeled
½ small cabbage
1 large onion
4 Tbsp garlic

Add raw meat and water to large pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil and cook until meat appears done. Remove lamb and cut meat from bone, removing as much fat as possible. Skim water to remove excess fat. Dice meat and return to boiling water. Add barley, salt and pepper. Cover and simmer for 60 minutes on lowered heat, skimming every now and then to remove excess fat. While simmering coarsely chop vegetables. Add vegetables starting with garlic, then cabbage, then the rest of veggies. Add 1 more cup of water. Simmer for 30 minutes to avoid veggies getting soft.

Yields 7-8 cups

Lessons Learned: Used a shoulder cut by mistake so it made removing the meat very difficult. Use a different cut that has more large pieces of meat. Originally added the vegetable in different order and the cabbage didn’t cook in time, so

adding it earlier then veggies adds texture and flavor without making the root vegetables soggy.

For feast will make the broth day before but stop before adding garlic, cabbage and the rest of the vegetables and save for the next day in order to keep from getting soggy when reheated at feast.

Boiled Buttered Leeks

4 medium leeks, trimmed and thoroughly washed
2 Tbsp. unsalted butter

After thoroughly washing (pulling back leaves to expose to water), put leeks into pot big enough to hold them. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Continue boiling for about 10 minutes or until tender. Drain water and squeeze leeks gently to remove excess water. Melt the butter in saucepan and drizzle over cooked leeks.

Yields 1 table worth or 8 people

Lesson Learned: Originally I cut the leeks into 1-2 inch pieces prior to boiling. Did get tender and tasted great, but for presentation purposes will only cut stalks in half to keep form.

Blackberry and Honey Curd Cakes

Bánbidh or “White foods”, those consisting of milk, were a favorite as shown in the 12th century poem Aislinge Meic Con Glinne (The Vision of Mac Conglinne). These white foods were in the form of butter, buttermilk, curds, and hard and soft cheese. (Mahon, 1998). The feast wouldn’t be complete without representing milk in some form. Blackberries were widely available in the wild and was praised by poets as early as 9th century.

“A hermit who lived in the 9th century praised his hermitage which provide him with a clutch of eggs, honey, sweet apples, red cranberries, strawberries, raspberries, hazelnuts, a cup of hazel mead, and good blackberries”.

(Land of Milk and Honey, 1998)

Filling

2 cups 4% large curd cottage cheese
2 heaped Tbsp. sugar
1 Tbsp. salted butter
½ juice lemon juiced or 3 Tbsp. lemon juice
2 eggs, separated

Bring butter, cottage cheese and eggs to room temperature. Mix curds with sugar, soft butter and juice of lemon and beaten egg yolks. Beat well, then add stiffly beaten egg whites, put in pastry case.

Topping

1 egg slightly beaten – room temperature
1 Tbsp. sugar
1 Tbsp. flour
1 Tbsp. salted butter, melted

Cut circles to fit in small tart pan. Paint bottom of pastry with some of beaten egg from topping to prevent pastry from becoming heavy. Mix egg, sugar, butter, and flour. Pour evenly over top of filled pastry. Bake in over preheated to 350 F for 35-40 minutes or until top is golden brown. Serve cold not chilled.

For Blackberry included in filling:

Add ½ cup crushed blackberries to the filling. Add blackberry juice from crushed blackberries to the glaze for blackberry curds.

Recipe yields 2-3 table worth (at two tarts per person at table of eight).

Lessons learned: The pastry shell would be made from scratch but for the purposes of time, store bought pastry was used. Would like to try with finer curds and home made dough to taste compare. The two flavors while each very different from the other actually paired well together and the difference in colors made it nice for presentation.

Roasted Apples in Honey and Spices

It is suggested by many sources that apples were the only fruit cultivated although crab apples were used in cider and verjuice (Linnane, 2000). Regardless, it is obvious in research that apples were common in the Irish diet and is mentioned most frequently in Irish documents. As a sweet, apples were roasted with honey and spices.

Roasted Apples

2 Apples (for test experiment I used Gala)
Honey

Preheat oven to 400 F. Cut apples into quarters and then again. Toss cut apples in cinnamon. Spread out in roasting pan and drizzle with honey. Bake at 30-35 minutes tossing halfway through until tender but firm. Yields 1 serving.

Lessons learned: Tried different variations including honey by itself, cinnamon and nutmeg each by itself. Final result was the simply honey because of the flavor and lack of final prep time. Result was well received.

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