



The Scullery: Recipes from an Ulster-Scots heritage

Diane Hoy

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Little has been written about Ulster-Scots cooking, traditional or contemporary. Ask an Ulster man or woman what constitutes Ulster- Scots fare and they will most likely mention the Ulster Fry or stew. Starchy bread and potatoes may be considered the staple diet of an Ulster-Scot but this is not necessarily the case, as I hope to prove! Very few recipes are invented - most are modern adaptations of traditional dishes. A trawl through historical cookery books can often reveal similar recipes with different names. National cuisines vary from country to country, although it is interesting to discover several cuisines claiming ownership of the same dish, which all goes to prove that the diversity and pedigree of many cultures naturally produces a shared culinary heritage. In an historical sense, Ulster-Scots food is a combination of Ulster, Scottish, and English styles of cooking, a reflection of the early Scottish and English settlers during the Hamilton and Montgomery Settlement of 1606 and James VI's Plantation of Ulster in 1610. The immigration of the French Huguenots to Ulster in the seventeenth century and the emigration of the Ulster-Scots to the New World in the eighteenth century, introduced a European and South East American influence. The early Ulster-Scots were a thran and hardy bunch, creating a new life for themselves amidst a barren land desolated by war and famine - a far cry from the prosperous, fertile land imagined. In the beginning, they struggled to survive but did so through hard work and successful harvests during the first few years. They also helped to establish modern farming and agricultural methods, and today their Ulster-Scots descendants are predominantly from a rural as well as a seafaring background. In the seventeenth century people ate according to the seasons and what was available - no fridge freezers and popping round to the local supermarket in those days! Animals would have been hunted for their meat; fish caught from the local rivers and seas; mushrooms, nuts and berries gathered from woodland areas; and porridge, oatcakes and breads made using hand-operated querns or water-powered mills to grind the grain. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century saw the growth and development of corn mills producing ground oats, barley and wheat. The potato, which had been introduced into Ireland during the seventeenth century, was now considered a staple food, especially during the winter months, when one of its many uses was as a thickening agent for soups and stews. It thrived in the rainy summer months and mild climate. From the eighteenth century onwards, a wider range of fruit and vegetables was also available, and a meal of meat and vegetables was considered incomplete unless accompanied by the potato. Popular imports resulted in sugar replacing honey as a sweetener and tea replacing ale as the common beverage. In the nineteenth century, the growth of the Industrial Revolution saw hard manual labor in rural communities such as crop gathering, butter churning and milking by hand gradually replaced with food processing and preservation techniques. Fresh meat was more readily available - and therefore more affordable - to the working classes and poultry was reared on a larger scale. Grocers were established in the larger towns enabling a wider choice of foodstuff and outdoor markets thrived in rural towns and villages. The Victorian building hosting Belfast's famous St George's Market was built between 1890 and 1896 and continues to sell fresh, local produce at its Friday and Saturday markets today. In the twentieth century, due to trade route expansion and new developments in food preservation, especially that of 'freezing', the importing and exporting of food from around the world changed our relationship with food. The first supermarket was introduced into Northern Ireland and fast food outlets began to spring up around the country. Today, wheat, oats and barley are some of the home-grown cereals used in the production of our wide variety of breads - soda bread (farls, from the Scots word 'fardel'), potato bread (fadge), wheaten bread, treacle bread, scones, pancakes, fruit loaves, and the malt bread, Veda. Veda was invented by the Scot, Robert Graham in Gleneagles in 1904 and Northern Ireland is the only country in the United Kingdom still making it today. Ulster pork, beef, lamb and poultry are of the highest quality from animals reared in verdant pastures, the grass made lush with abundant rain. Salmon,

trout, eels, cod, skate, plaice, herrings, mackerel, lobsters, prawns, oysters and mussels, locally caught in our seas, lakes and rivers, offer a wide choice to the discerning chef. Dairy farms produce milk, butter, cream and yoghurt, and Glasstry Farm in County Down and Hoy's Farmhouse in County Antrim make their own ice cream from local dairy herds. Free range eggs are readily available to purchase fresh from local farms, and local cheeses such as Ballybrie and Ballyblue soft cheeses and Dromona cheddar, all from County Tyrone, and Coleraine cheddar from County Londonderry, are now exported to an international market. Orchard fruit such as pears, plums and County Armagh's famous Bramley apples, and the soft fruit from Counties Antrim and Down like the raspberry, strawberry, tayberry, gooseberry, red and blackcurrants, are popular in light summer puddings, autumn jams and chutneys. The wide variety of tuber and root vegetables such as the Comber potato from County Down and rhubarb grown near the banks of Lough Neagh, with cauliflower, cabbage, carrot, swede, parsnip, pamphrey, mushrooms, onion and beetroot, all thrive in the rich agricultural heartland of the Ulster-Scots. Contemporary Ulster-Scots cooking remains flavoursome and uncomplicated, taking advantage of locally produced meat and poultry, fish, fruit and vegetables and cooking these in a variety of delicious and healthy ways. The main emphasis is on fresh, simplistic, wholesome fare.

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