

GOURMET RECIPES

The Country Cooking of Ireland

Irish country cooking? Oh, come on, we thought...a whole, beautiful book devoted to the subject; surely you jest. Of course Ireland is beautiful, and abounding with charm and blarney both, but great cuisine worthy of a gorgeous book?

It took Colman Andrews in his *The Country Cooking of Ireland* to bring to life the people, the emerald countryside and the straightforward earthy fare of Ireland, which is fast emerging as one of the world's hottest food destinations. How good is it? It just won the James Beard Foundation's Cookbook of the Year award.

My goodness, where have *we* been?

Not up with Coleman Andrews, that's for sure. He was a co-founder of *Saveur* magazine and served as its second editor in chief. This is Andrews's seventh James Beard Foundation Award, and he is the author of *Catalan Cuisine*, *Everything on the Table* and *Flavors of the Riviera*, and the co-author of three *Saveur* cookbooks. He knows his food and travel.

In the introduction to *The Country Cooking of Ireland*, Darina Allen, proprietor of the Ballymaloe Cookery School in Shanagarry, County Cork, most definitely one of Ireland's top foodie destinations, said, "For many years, visitors to Ireland praised the quality of the produce but despaired when they tasted the end result on the plate." She goes on to state that "I've been going to America for twenty years now, and I can't believe how many times I've had to emphasize that we don't just live on



corned beef, potatoes and cabbage..."

Today, Ireland abounds with city restaurants, country house hotels and inns and many being supplied by a whole new generation of artisan food producers. These talented people are making farmhouse cheese and butter, curing meat, smoking fish, baking and turning out jams, marmalades and chutneys, all of which attract tourists who can't wait to eat!

So what's with *The Country Cooking of Ireland*?

Coleman Andrews tells us that there is a sense in which all Irish cooking – at least the good stuff, the real thing – is country cooking. It is almost inevitably straightforward, homey fare, based on first-rate raw materials whose identity shines through. Even in sophisticated urban restaurants, it tends to have an underlying earthiness and solidity that suggest honesty and respect for rural traditions. Not surprising, as no other nation in Western Europe, not even Italy or Spain, remains as intimately and pervasively connected to the land as Ireland does. Almost everyone will admit to some personal association with a farm... Even the President of Ireland herself, Mary McAleese, has long maintained a vegetable garden and a chicken coop on the grounds of the Áras an Uachtaráin, the Irish White House!

Historically the Irish used to eat very well indeed. Ten thousand years ago the hunter-gatherer inhabitants of the land enjoyed a varied diet of seafood, which they smoked, game, and later domesticated animals. Cereal crops were cultivated millennia later, and they developed a passion for "white meats," the collective name given to an immense range of dairy products, from fresh milk to butter to a wide range of cheeses.

Waves of invaders added to the larder by bringing in olive oil and wine, spices, pulses and other vegetables previously unknown, and perhaps most importantly, improving agricultural methods.

The climate is grey and rainy much of the time, but mild. There are vast expanses of mineral-rich farm and grassland supporting crops and herds, and the unpolluted waters and coasts teem with fish and shellfish. There is relatively little "agribusiness" in Ireland; the phrase "farm-to-table" rings true here.

Well, we had to read this book to find out more!

Given the mostly damp climate, the opening chapter on Soup is a natural; it's followed by Eggs and Cheese and Farmhouse Basics. The next three chapters, covering at least 40 pages, are devoted to Fish, Shellfish and Salmon. We move into Savory Pies, Poultry and Meats, including Game and Offal! Vegetables, Breads, Cakes and Sweet Breads, plus Pudding and Confections, Fruit Desserts and Preserves and... get this, an entire chapter devoted to Oatmeal. Seems that oats, better suited to Ireland's damp climate than wheat, have grown prolifically on the island for centuries. Probably because they were so common, they weren't held in high regard. They still aren't on top of anyone's favourite list, and while you may not yearn for Herring Fried in Oatmeal, you won't be able to resist the Oatcakes!

Don't resist *The Country Cooking of Ireland* either. In 1843, in *The Irish Sketchbook*, William Makepeace Thackeray stated, "We can feel the beauty of a magnificent landscape perhaps, but we can describe a leg of mutton and turnips better." Well, William, that may have been gourmet in your time, but Ireland has come a long, long way since then.

On today's menu:

- [Watercress and Almond Soup](#)
- [The Grant Loaf or Ballymaloe Brown Bread](#)
- [Roast Pike with Lamb Sauce, Lovage and Bacon](#)
- [Lamb's Liver with Whiskey Cream Sauce](#)
- [Rhubarb-Ginger Crumble](#)

Watercress and Almond Soup

We liked the idea of Smoked Cockle Chowder and the quirky Nettle Soup, but finding the ingredients would not be easy, so happily settled on this recipe with watercress and almonds. We had never encountered such a combination, and were frankly surprised at how delicious it is. The late cookbook author Theodora FitzGibon adapted the recipe from "a handwritten recipe book, 1735." She noted that



"Almonds were immensely popular in richer homes in 18C Ireland. They were not only used for cakes and puddings, but also with meats, fish, vegetables and in soups... Watercress is a far more ancient food in Ireland, eaten since prehistoric times."

We love this soup not only for its taste and texture, but also the fact that it takes only a few minutes to make up. Put that can opener down, you can do better here!

Serves 4

- 1 cup/240 mL milk
- 1 cup/240 mL heavy cream
- Rind of 1 lemon, in 1 piece if possible, pith removed
- ½ cup/40 g ground almonds
- 2 Tbsp butter
- 2 cups/300 g minced celery heart
- 2 Tbsp white flour
- 2½ cups/600 mL chicken stock
- Salt and white pepper
- 2 bunches watercress, trimmed

Combine the milk and cream in a small saucepan over high heat. Add the lemon rind and almonds bring almost to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 5 to 7 minutes.

Tony's wine recommendation:

Pouilly-Fumé, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or a dry Amontillado sherry

The Grant Loaf or Ballymaloe Brown Bread

All over Ireland you'll be served a kind of moist, slightly crumbly, dark brown yeast bread that is the perfect foil for rich Irish butter. It's not really Irish, however; the bread is a creating of a remarkable Scots-born Englishwoman named Doris Grant, who died in 2003 and was an early and vocal supporter of pesticide-free vegetables

and what we now call "whole foods." When Myrtle Allen started cooking for the public at her Ballymaloe farm in 1964, this was one of the breads she served; it became so popular that it's now baked and served from one end of the island to the other. This version was perfected by Tim Allen, Myrtle Allen's son who adapted Doris Grant's recipe.



Now go out and buy the best butter you can find!!!

Makes 1 loaf

- 1 tsp black treacle or molasses
- 1 oz/28 g fresh active yeast, crumbled, or one ¼ oz/7 g packet active dry yeast
- 5 cups/500 g stone-ground whole-wheat flour, preferably Irish or Irish-style *or*
4½ cups/450 g stone-ground whole wheat flour mixed with ½ cup/50 g white flour, preferable Irish, or unbleached pastry flour
- 1 tsp fine-ground sea salt
- Sunflower or canola oil for greasing

Dissolve the treacle in 2/3 cup/160 mL warm water in a small bowl. (Around 100°F/40°C is ideal; Grant calls it "blood heat," and notes that the easiest way to obtain this temperature without a thermometer is to bring 1 cup/240 mL of water to a boil, then add it to 3 cups/720 mL of cold water.)

Stir in the yeast and set aside for 8 to 10 minutes or until the yeast begins to froth.

Put the flour into a large bowl and mix in the salt.

Lightly grease a nonstick loaf pan with oil.

Make a well in the flour, pour in the yeast mixture, and let it sit for a minute. Pour in about 1¼ cups/300 mL warm water, then form your hand into a rigid claw and stir the liquid into the flour slowly but steadily in a spiral motion, starting in the middle and working outwards to the rim of the bowl. The dough should be soft and too wet to knead (add more later if

necessary).

Let the dough rest in a bowl for about 15 minutes.

Transfer the dough to the greased loaf pan, cover loosely with a damp towel, and set in a warm place to rise for about 20 minutes. ("The bread should be what we call 'proud'," says Tim Allen, "just beginning to peer over the top of the pan.")

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 450°F/230°C (Gas Mark 8).

Bake the bread for 20 minutes, then lower the oven temperature to 400°F/200°C (Gas Mark 6) and bake for 35 to 45 minutes more. If you like a crisp crust, remove the bread from the pan about 10 minutes before it's done, then return it to the oven, placing it upside down directly on the oven rack to finish cooking.

Roast Pike with Lamb Sauce, Lovage and Bacon



Coleman Andrews says, "Pike was once abundant in Irish lough and rivers and is still fished regularly. One old account claims that a 350-pound/160-kilo specimen was once caught in County Down (highly unlikely); however, a 90-pound/40-kilo pike caught in Lough Derg in 1862, on the other hand, has been documented. Today, 8 to 12 pounds/3.5 to 5.5 kilos is the usual weight. For some reason, while the Irish like to catch them, the idea of eating pike has rarely appealed to them. That may have something to do with its forbidding appearance: Ian Hill, in his book *The Fish of Ireland* (1992), describes the creature as resembling 'a mottled-olive carnivorous torpedo,' and notes that a bone in the fish's head takes the form of a cross and was once work to ward off epilepsy and vex witches. The pioneering modern Irish chef Gerry Galvin created this unusual recipe. He suggests serving it with a mixed green salad enhanced with watercress, sorrel and thinly sliced apple."

Serves 4

- 4 Tbsp butter
- Four 6- to 8-ounce/175- to 250-gram pike fillets
- Flour for dusting
- Salt and pepper
- Canola or vegetable oil for greasing the baking dish
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- Juice of ½ lemon
- 1 cup/240 mL lamb juices, *or*
2½ cups/600 mL lamb stock reduced over medium heat to about 1 cup/240 mL
- 1 Tbsp chopped fresh lovage or celery leaves
- 1 Tbsp balsamic vinegar
- 4 strips bacon, cooked until crisp, drained and coarsely chopped

Preheat the oven to 400°F/200°C (Gas Mark 6).

Melt the butter in a large sauté pan over medium-high heat.

Dust the pike fillets lightly on both sides with flour, season with salt and pepper, then sear them lightly for about 30 seconds on each side. Remove from the pan and transfer to a lightly oiled glass or ceramic baking dish.

Stir the garlic into the lemon juice in a small bowl, then drizzle it over the fish. Roast the fish in the oven for about 8 minutes.

Meanwhile, warm the reduced lamb stock in a small saucepan, then stir in lovage leaves and balsamic vinegar.

Keep warm.

To serve, divide the fish between 4 plates, scatter the servings equally with chopped bacon, and serve with the sauce on the side.

Tony's wine recommendation:

Chablis, unoaked Chardonnay, Soave or Gavi

Lamb's Liver with Whiskey Cream Sauce

We love liver in any form, and so does

Coleman Andrews. He first tasted this dish at Peter and Mary Ward's house in Nenagh, County Tipperary, and had several restaurant versions since, but prefers the simplicity of this one. We found the addition of a wee dram of Irish whiskey transformed this simple peasant dish into royalty! Your butcher can provide you with lamb's liver; plan this recipe ahead to soak the liver.



Serves 4

- 1 lb/500 g lamb's liver, membrane removed, sliced crosswise into ¼-inch /6.5 mm slices
- 2 cups/475 mL milk
- Salt
- ½ cup/125 g butter
- 1 onion, minced
- 2 Tbsp Irish whiskey
- ½ cup/120 mL heavy cream
- 1 Tbsp whole grain mustard
- 1 Tbsp chopped fresh chives
- Pepper

Put the liver into a shallow dish large enough to hold it in a single layer; then cover with the milk and sprinkle lightly with salt. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Rinse the lamb's liver, discarding the milk, and pat dry with paper towels. Melt half the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Cook the onions, stirring frequently, until soft and beginning to brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Remove the onions from the skillet with a slotted spoon and set aside. Melt the remaining butter in the same skillet and, working in batches, sear the liver over high heat for about 1½ minutes on each side. As the liver is done, transfer to a plate and set aside.

Pour the whiskey into the pan, warm it for about a minute, then carefully ignite it with a kitchen match. When the flames die down, stir in the cream and mustard, scraping up and browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Cook for about 1 minute, then return the onions and liver to the skillet, along with any juices that may have accumulated.

Stir well, season to taste with salt and pepper, and cook for 1 to 2 minutes or until the liver is heated through. Garnish with the chives.

Tony's wine recommendation:

Oregon or New Zealand Pinot Noir, California Merlot

Rhubarb-Ginger Crumble



Parts of Ireland must have seemed like paradise to the island's early inhabitants, with their fields full of wild berry bushes, nuts and acorns, plus stands of crabapples and other flowering trees. Cultivated apples date back to early Christian times, and there is a tradition that St. Patrick himself once planted an apple tree! Many other kinds of fruit have been grown in Ireland for centuries, too, including both red and black currants, plums, peaches pears, cherries, apricots, rhubarb, figs and melons. It is no wonder that recipe manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries are full of fruit recipes, including those for preserves and chutneys, fools, puddings pies and more...

And here is one of the best!

Serves 6 to 8

Crumble is served the year around at Country Choice in Nenagh, Country Tipperary, with the fruit changing according to the season and the spice or flavoring changing according to the fruit. This is a springtime version – in the summer it might be made with plums poached with cinnamon.

Crumble is particularly good served with clotted cream!

- 2 lb/1 kg rhubarb stalks, cut into 1-inch/2.5 cm pieces
- 2 Tbsp minced fresh ginger
- 2½ cups/500 g sugar
- 2 cups/200 g flour
- Pinch of salt
- 14 Tbsp cold butter, cut into small pieces

Preheat the oven to 350°F/175°C (Gas mark 4).

Combine the rhubarb and ginger in a medium bowl and mix well. Transfer to a large glass or ceramic baking dish. Sprinkle 2 cups/400 g of the sugar over the rhubarb and set aside.

Whisk the flour, salt, and the remaining ½ cup/100 g of the sugar together in a medium mixing bowl. Using a pastry cutter or 2 table knives, cut the butter into the flour mixture until it resembles coarse meal flecked with pea-sized pieces of butter. Scatter the mixture evenly over the rhubarb.

Bake for about 1 hour and 15 minutes, or until the topping is golden brown and the rhubarb is soft. Set aside to cook slightly, and serve warm. Or allow to cool to room temperature before serving.

And don't forget the clotted cream...

Tony's wine recommendation:

Late Harvest Riesling, Vidal Icewine

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Happily enjoyed by Helen Hatton and Ron Morris.

