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We are Family!

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RTE Guide

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We are family!

Myrtle Allen must be one of the country’s most culturally significant figures of the past 50 years. She has had a profound influence on what we eat, how we eat and on how Irish food and Irish cuisine are perceived at home and internationally. A huge number of chefs, cooks and producers started their careers at Ballymaloe, which is nestled in Shanagarry, Co Cork.

The famous cooks who married into the food dynasty, Darina Allen and Rachel Allen, credit the family’s matriarch with starting their love affair with food, and as her highly regarded Ballymaloe Cookbook is re-issued this month, the three women of Ballymaloe are only too happy to reflect on a place and an ethos that has so influenced Irish food.

“I feel very proud and honoured to be involved in the business for what’s nearly 24 years now,” says Rachel. “It’s been an amazing experience – you never stop learning from someone like Myrtle”, she adds of her grandmother-in-law.

She goes on to recall her first encounter with Myrtle: “I was never intimidated by Myrtle – it was more that I had so much respect for her and still do. Everything she says, there’s a very good reason for it – she just makes complete sense. I remember my first week there and realising it was going to have much more of an effect on me and my life than I had anticipated.”

Darina is quick to add her praise for Myrtle, her mother-in-law.

“She’s been one of the biggest, if not the biggest, influences on my life and career. When I came to Ballymaloe from catering college in the late ‘60s I was enchanted by her philosophy and way of life. I couldn’t believe my luck to have stumbled upon the place. I came from a big family as well, I’m the eldest of nine children so we had our own home-grown vegetables and my mum cooked lovely nourishing food too. So when I met Myrtle she totally reinforced my mother’s values.”

When Myrtle, who is now at the remarkable age of 90, opened the restaurant at Ballymaloe in 1964, the food served in Irish restaurants was universally regarded as terrible.

As Myrtle Allen’s book The Ballymaloe Cookbook is re-issued, Janice Butler chats to the famous cook and her in-laws Darina and Rachel about the influence she’s had on the food culture in Ireland.

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— Darina Allen

in Dublin hotels, served a second-rate attempt at French cuisine. Right from the start, Myrtle was a champion of using local, seasonal food which, at the time, was a radical departure from the norm. She not only used local artisan produce, she credited the producers on her menu – something which is quite common now but utterly unknown in the mid-1960s.

Myrtle (née Hill), an architect’s daughter, was born in Cork city in 1928, marrying a progressive fruit
I was always quite clear about what I was doing – it was the life that I was given, or fell into my lap

– Myrtle Allen

and vegetable farmer, Ivan Allen, in 1943 when she was only 19. In 1948, they bought a farm at Ballymaloe, in east Cork, which included the manor home that was to become the renowned Ballymaloe House. When the Farmer’s Journal asked her to pen a column on art, she suggested food instead and the rest is history. She’s known for her casual, friendly way of writing and relating to her readers.

“It probably came from my childhood and school, but I was always good at writing and liked it”, says Myrtle of her days as a columnist.

“When I was a teenager I kept a diary so it wasn’t a new thing for me. I don’t do it so much any more, I don’t have the need.”

She laughs when she thinks of the calls she’d receive on Christmas morning with a frantic query from a distressed cook.

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“We had to live up to the food that they were used to eating in Paris and London and around the world and that was a bit of a challenge. We were worried about how to present the food but we had to just let it speak for itself.”

So with a career spanning almost 70 years behind her, Myrtle is now letting her protégées handle the business. A humble woman, it seems she’s unaware of the influence she’s had on people and the food industry and as she fondly paints a picture of her perfect day, it’s hard not to be infected by her enthusiasm for the world around her.

“We’re very nicely situated between Ballycotton Bay and Knockadoon Head, which isn’t as remote as it used to be. In between the two headlands there’s five miles of sand and to this day my son goes out on the water with his little boat to catch mackerel and comes back in about eight in the evening and I’ll cook it for dinner. That’s what I love about living here.”

The Ballymaloe Cookbook by Myrtle Allen is on sale now (published by Gill & Macmillan)

Ballymaloe brown yeast bread

Darin says: “When making Ballymaloe brown yeast bread, remember that yeast is a living organism. In order to grow, it requires warmth, moisture and nourishment. The yeast feeds on the sugar and produces bubbles of carbon dioxide which causes the bread to rise. Heat of over 50°C will kill yeast. Have the ingredients and equipment at blood heat. White or brown sugar, honey golden syrup, treacle or molasses may be used. Each will give a slightly different flavour to the bread. Ballymaloe we use treacle. We use a stoneground wholemeal. Different flours produce breads of different textures and flavour. The amount of natural moisture in the flour varies according to atmospheric conditions. The quantity of water should be altered accordingly. The dough should be just wet to knead – in fact it does not require kneading. The wholemeal flour, treacle and yeast are highly nutritious.”

Note: Dried yeast may be used instead of baker’s yeast. Follow the same method but use only half the weight given for fresh yeast. Allow longer to rise. Fast acting yeast may also be used, just follow the instructions on the packet.

Notes:

1. 1 loaf
2. 400g strong (stone-ground) wholemeal flour plus 50g strong white flour
3. 425ml water at blood heat
4. 1 teaspoon black treacle or molasses
5. 1 teaspoon salt
6. 20g-25g fresh non-GM yeast
7. Sesame seeds – optional
8. 1 loaf tin, approx. 13x20cm
9. Sunflower oil

METHOD

1. Pre-heat the oven to 230°C (450°F, gas mark 8).
2. Mix the flour with the salt. The ingredients should all be at room temperature. In a small bowl or Pyrex jug, mix the treacle with some of the water (150ml)
3. for 1 loaf and crumble in the yeast.
4. Sit the bowl for a few minutes in a warm place to allow the yeast to start to work. After about 2-5 minutes it should have a creamy and slightly frothy appearance on top.
5. Meanwhile, brush the base and sides of the bread tins with a good sunflower oil. Scoop the mixture into the greased tin. Sprinkle the top of the loaves with sesame seeds, if you like. Put the tin in a warm place somewhere close to the cooker or near a radiator. Cover the tin with a tea towel to prevent a skin from forming. Just as the bread comes to the top of the tin, remove the tea towel and pop the loaves in the oven at 230°C (450°F, gas mark 8) for 20 minutes, then turn the oven down to 200°C (400°F, gas mark 6) for another 40-50 minutes or until it looks nicely browned and sound hollow when tapped. The bread will rise a little further in the oven. This is called ‘oven spring’. If you allow the bread to rise to the top of the tin before it goes into the oven it will continue to rise and flow over the edges.

Note: We usually remove the loaf from the tin about 10 minutes before the end of cooking and put them back into the oven to crisp all round, but if you like a softer crust there’s no need to do this.