
The Allen Family

People

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We are Family!

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RTE Guide

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Watch it! Rachel Allen, weekdays, Good Food



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



We are family!

Myrle 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. The top Irish restaurants, usually

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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 menus – 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

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– 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.

“People would call Christmas morning asking when they should take the turkey out of the oven. It's nice that people feel they can ring like that and that they'll find

somebody at the end of the phone.”

Myrtle has six children and 22 grandchildren; Darina is married to Myrtle's son Tim and Rachel is married to Darina and Tim's son, Isaac. Speaking of whether Rachel thinks her own children will follow in the family footsteps, Rachel seems pretty confident of it. “Absolutely. Who knows whether it will be our boys, or my daughter or someone they marry? I would be surprised if one of my children didn't go into the family business, but I can't carve out their futures, all I can do is be there and support them in whatever they want to do. But I hope and am sure that quite a few of the next generation of the Allen clan will get involved in Ballymaloe – there's such love and respect for the place and everything that's been nurtured there.”

While Ballymaloe as a brand is now an enormous success, Myrtle is very honest about how much work has been involved. “It did get exhausting from time to time. You have to be prepared to work very hard for somewhere like this to work. But I was always quite clear about what I was doing – it was the life that I was given, or fell into my lap. I was so young getting married and found myself in this farming area in east Cork, so straight away I had this world of wonderful food around me.”

Speaking of her greatest challenge, the cook recalls trying to impress what she calls the “high-powered customers” that used to come to Ballymaloe for functions.



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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

Darina 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. At 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 too 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.

Makes 1 loaf

INGREDIENTS

400g strong (stone-ground) wholemeal flour plus 50g strong white flour
425ml water at blood heat
1 teaspoon black treacle or molasses
1 teaspoon salt
20g-25g fresh non-GM yeast

Sesame seeds – optional

1 loaf tin, approx. 13x20cm
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

for 1 loaf) and crumble in the yeast.

3 Sit the bowl for a few minutes in a warm place to allow the yeast to start to work. After about 4 or 5 minutes it should have a creamy and slightly frothy appearance on top.

4 When ready, stir and pour it, with all the remaining water (275ml), into the flour to make a loose, wet dough. The mixture should be too wet to knead. Allow to sit in the bowl for 7-10 minutes (time varies depending on room temperature).

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.