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The Pig in Irish Cuisine past and present

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Abstract

The inspiration to research and present this paper came from a folklore tale about how Saint Martin created the pig from a piece of fat. The paper will explore the pig in Irish cuisine and culture from ancient times to the present. The paper will discuss the pig in Irish literature and mythology; outline the role the emergence of the potato had on domestic pig keeping, and trace the rise of commercial processing in the nineteenth century to the present day. It will highlight a number of traditional Irish dishes using pig meat and illustrate how today's chefs have incorporated the pig into their menus. The paper will discuss how scientists have developed leaner, low-fat pigs that contain only half the salt compared to thirty years ago. The paper will also highlight the small breed of artisan pork butchers who are trying to re-create the taste of bygone days whilst keeping the quality of modern day standards.

In Ireland today we eat more pork per capita, approximately 40.6 kg, than any other meat, yet you would very seldom if ever see a pig. Fat and flavour are two words that are synonymous with pig meat, yet scientists have spent the last thirty years cross breeding to produce leaner, low-fat pigs. Today's pig professionals prefer to use the term 'pig finishing' as opposed to the more traditional 'pig fattening'. The pig evokes many themes in relation to cuisine. Charles Lamb (1775-1834), in his essay *Dissertation upon Roast Pig*, cites Confucius in attributing the accidental discovery of the art of roasting to the humble pig. The pig has been singled out by many cultures as a food to be avoided or even abhorred, and Marvin Harris illustrates the environmental effect this avoidance can

have by contrasting the landscape of Christian Albania with that of Muslim Albania (Harris, 1997). In this paper I will focus on the pig in Irish Cuisine and culture from ancient times to the present day. The inspiration to research and present this paper came from a folklore tale about how Saint Martin created the pig from a piece of fat.

It was in a book on Irish proverbs written by my father that I came across this story taken from the famous Kerry storyteller, Seán Ó Conaill. The story details the origins of not only pigs, but mice, rats and cats. The story goes as follows:

‘From St Martins fat they were made. He was travelling around, and one night he came to a house and yard. At that time there were only cattle; there were no pigs or piglets. He asked the man of the house if there was anything to eat the chaff and the grain. The man replied there were only the cattle. St Martin said it was a great pity to have that much chaff going to waste. At night when they were going to bed, he handed a piece of fat to the servant-girl and told her to put it under a tub turned upside down, and not to look at it at all until he would give her the word next day. The girl did so, but she kept a bit of the fat and put it under a keeler to find out what it would be.

When St Martin rose next day he asked her to go and lift up the tub. She lifted it up, and there under it were a sow and twelve piglets. It was a great wonder to them, as they had never before seen pig or piglet.

The girl then went to the keeler and lifted it, and it was full of mice and rats! As soon as the keeler was lifted, they went running about the house searching for any hole that they could go into. When St Martin saw them, he pulled off one of his mittens and threw it at them and made a cat with that throw. And that is why the cat ever since goes after mice and rats (Mac Con Iomaire, 1988).’

The place of the pig has long been established in Irish literature, and longer still in Irish topography. The word *torc*, a boar, like the word *muc*, a pig, is a common element of

various Irish placenames, from Kanturk (boar's head) in West Cork to Ros Muc (headland of pigs) in West Galway. The Irish pig had its place in literature well established long before George Orwell's English pig, Major, headed the dictatorship in *Animal Farm*. It was a wild boar that killed the hero Diarmaid in the Fenian tale *The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, on top of Ben Bulban in County Sligo (Mac Con Iomaire, 1988). Wild boars were hunted with great fervour, and the prime cuts were reserved for the warrior classes, and certain other individuals. Pig meat in the form of pork, ham and bacon has been one of the most traditional of Irish foods since prehistoric times. At a feast, a leg of pork was traditionally reserved for a king, a haunch for a queen, and a boar's head for a charioteer. The champion warrior was given the best portion of meat (*Curath Mhir or Champions Share*), and fights often took place to decide who should receive it. In the ninth century tale 'The story of Mac Dathó's Pig', Cet mac Matach, got supremacy over the men of Ireland:

'Moreover he flaunted his valour on high above the valour of the host, and took a knife in his hand and sat down beside the pig. 'Let someone be found now among the men of Ireland', said he, 'to endure battle with me, or leave the pig for me to divide!'(Gantz, 1981)

It did not take long before the wild pigs were domesticated. Whereas cattle might be kept for milk and sheep for wool, the only reason for pig rearing was as a source of food. Up to the late medieval times the 'domesticated' pigs were fattened on woodland mast, the fruit of the beech, oak, chestnut and whitethorn, giving their flesh a delicious flavour. So important was this resource that it is acknowledged by an entry in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* for the year 1038:

'There was such an abundance of ackornes this yeare that it fattened the pigges [runts] of pigges' (Sexton, 1998).

In another mythological tale, two pig keepers, one called '*friuch*' after the boars bristle (pig keeper to the king of Munster) and the other called '*rucht*' after its grunt (pig keeper

to the king of Connacht), were such good friends that the one from the north would bring his pigs down with him when there was a mast of oak and beech nuts in Munster. If the mast fell in the north the pig-keeper from the south would travel northward. Competitive jealousy sparked by troublemakers led to the pig keepers casting spells on each other's herds that no matter what mast they eat they would not grow fat. Both pig keepers were practiced in the pagan arts and could form themselves into any shape, and after being dismissed by their kings for the leanness of their pig herds due to the spells, they eventually formed themselves into the two famous bulls that feature in the Irish Epic 'The Táin'.

In the witty and satirical twelfth century text, *The Vision of Mac Conglinne (Aisling Mhic Conglinne)*, many references are made to the various types of pig meat. Bacon, hams, sausages and puddings are often mentioned, and the gate to the fortress in the visionary land of plenty is described thus:

'there was a gate of tallow to it , whereon was a bolt of sausage'

Although pigs were always popular in Ireland, the emergence of the potato resulted in increasing both human and pig populations. The Irish were the first to seriously consider the potato as a staple food. By 1663 it was widely accepted in Ireland as an important food plant and by 1770 it was known as the Irish Potato (Linnane, 2001). The Potato transformed Ireland from an under populated island of 1 million in the 1590's to 8.2 million in 1840, making it the most densely populated country in Europe (Phillips and Rix, 1995). Two centuries of genetic evolution resulted in yields growing from 2 tons per acre in 1670 to 10 tons per acre in 1800. A constant supply of potato, which was not seen as a commercial crop, ensured that even the smallest holding could keep a few pigs on a potato-rich diet. Pat Tuite, an expert on pigs with Teagasc, the Irish Agricultural and Food Development Authority, reminded me that the potatoes were cooked for the pigs and that they also enjoyed whey, the by products of both butter and cheese making. Arthur Young, whilst travelling through Ireland commented in 1770 that in the town of Mitchelstown in County Cork there seems to have been more pigs than human beings. So

plentiful were pigs at this time that on the eve of the Great Famine in 1841 the pig population was calculated to be 1,412,813 (Sexton, 1998). Some of the pigs were kept for home consumption but the rest were a valuable source of income and were shown great respect as the ‘gentleman who paid the rent’. Until the early twentieth century most Irish rural households kept some pigs.

Pork had been popular and seemed to have been the main meat eaten at all feasts in the main houses; indeed a feast was considered incomplete without a whole roasted pig. In the poorer holdings fresh pork was highly prized, as it was only available when a pig of their own was killed. Most of the pig was salted, placed in the brine barrel for a period or placed up the chimney for smoking. Certain superstitions were observed concerning the time of killing. Pigs were traditionally killed only in months that contained the letter ‘R’, since the heat of the summer months caused the meat to turn foul. In some counties it was believed that pigs should be killed under the full moon (Mahon, 1998). The main breed of pig from the medieval period was the Razor Back or Greyhound Pig, and it was very efficient in converting organic waste into meat. The killing of the pig was an important ritual and a social occasion in rural Ireland, for it meant full and plenty for all. Neighbours who came to help brought a handful of salt for the curing, and when the work was done each would get a share of the puddings and the fresh pork. There were a number of days where it was traditional to kill a pig, the Michaelmas feast (29th September), Saint Martins Day (11th November) and St Patrick’s Day (17th March). Olive Sharkey gives a great description of the killing of the ‘barrow pig’:

‘The local slaughterer (*búistéir*) a man experienced in the rustic art of pig killing, was approached to do the job, though some farmers killed their own pigs. When the *búistéir* arrived the whole family gathered round to watch the killing. His first job was to plunge the knife in the pig’s heart via the throat, using a special knife. The screeching during this performance was something awful, but the animal died instantly once the heart had been reached, usually to a round of applause from the onlookers. The animal was then draped across a pig-gib, a sort of bench, and had the

fine hairs on its body scraped off. To make this a simple job the animal was immersed in hot water a number of times until the bristles were softened and easy to remove. If a few bristles were accidentally missed the bacon was known as 'hairy bacon!' (Sharkey, 1985)

During the killing of the pig it was imperative to draw a good flow of blood to ensure good quality meat. This blood was collected in a bucket for the making of puddings. The carcass would then be hung from a hook in the shed with a basin under its head to catch the drip, and a potato was often placed in the pig's mouth to aid the dripping process. After a few days the carcass would be dissected. It was said that each pound weight in the pig's head corresponded to a stone weight in the body. The body was washed and then each piece that was to be preserved was carefully salted and placed neatly in a barrel and sealed. Some places added brown sugar to the barrel at this stage, whilst others used juniper berries in the fire when hanging the hams and flitches wrapped in brown paper up the chimney for smoking. Whilst the killing was predominantly man's work, it was the women who took most responsibility for the curing and smoking. Puddings have always been popular in Irish Cuisine. The pig's intestines were washed well and soaked in a stream, and a mixture of onions, lard, spices, oatmeal and flour were mixed with the blood and the mixture was stuffed into the casing and boiled for about an hour, cooled and the puddings were divided amongst the neighbours.

The pig was so palatable that the famous gastronomic writer Grimod de la Reyniere once claimed that the only piece you couldn't eat was the 'oink'. Olive Sharkey remembers her father remarking that had they been able to catch the squeak they would have made tin whistles out of it! No part went to waste; the blood and offal were used, the trotters were known as Crubeens (from *crúb*, hoof), and were boiled and eaten with cabbage. In Galway the knee joint was popular and known as the Glúiníns (from *glún*, knee). The head was roasted whole or often boiled and pressed and prepared as Brawn. The Chitterlings were meticulously prepared and were once a popular bar food in Dublin. Pig hair was used for paintbrushes and even the bladder was usually inflated, using a goose quill and ended up being kicked around as a football by the children.

From around the mid 18th century commercial salting of pork and bacon grew rapidly in Ireland. 1820 saw Henry Denny begin operation in Waterford where he both developed and patented several production techniques for bacon. Bacon curing became a very important industry in Munster culminating in the setting up of four large factories: Matterson's, Denny's, O'Mara's and Shaws. Stan de Lacy who joined the Matterson's bacon factory at the age of 16 as an office boy and climbed to become Managing Director explains that in the heyday of the bacon industry in Limerick city, the Matterson's workforce would rise to over 400 at peak periods when over 1,000 pigs a day were killed in the factory. Their smoked bacon was exported all over the world (Woulfe, 1999).

Irish bacon was the brand leader and the Irish companies exported their expertise. Denny set up a plant in Denmark in 1894 and introduced the Irish techniques to the Danish industry, whilst O'Mara's set up bacon curing facilities in Russia in 1891 (Cowan and Sexton, 1997). Ireland developed an extensive export trade in bacon to England, and hams were delivered to the Parisian, Indian, North and South American markets. The sandwich method of curing was used up until 1862 when the method of injecting strong brine into the meat by means of a pickling pump was adopted by Irish bacon-curiers. 1887 saw the formation of the Bacon Curiers' Pig Improvement Association and they managed to introduce a new breed, the Large White Ulster into most regions by the turn of the century. This breed was suitable for the production of 'Wiltshire' bacon. Cork, Waterford Dublin and Belfast were important centres for bacon but it was Limerick that dominated the industry and a department of agriculture document from 1902 suggests that the famous 'Limerick cure' may have originated by chance:

'1880... Limerick producers were short of money...they produced what was considered meat in a half-cured condition. The unintentional cure proved extremely popular and others followed suit. By the turn of the century the mild cure procedure was brought to such perfection that meat could...[be] sent to tropical climates for consumption within a reasonable time.'(Cowan and Sexton, 1997)

Failure to modernise led to the decline of bacon production in Limerick in the 1960's and all four factories closed down. The Irish pig market was protected prior to joining the European Union, there were no imports, and exports were subsidised by the Pig and Bacon Commission. The Department of Agriculture started pig testing in the early 1960's and imported breeds from the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. The two main breeds were Large White and Landrace. Most farms kept pigs before joining the EU but after 1972, farmers were encouraged to rationalise and specialise. Grants were made available for facilities that would keep 3000 pigs and these grants kick started the development of large units.

Pig keeping and production were not only rural occupations; Irish towns and cities also had their fair share. Pigs could easily be kept on swill from hotels, restaurants, not to mention the by-product and leftovers of the brewing and baking industries. Ed Hick, a fourth generation pork butcher from south county Dublin recalls buying pigs from a local coal man and bus driver and other locals for whom it was a tradition to keep pigs on the side. They would keep maybe six or eight pigs at a time and feed them on swill collected locally. Legislation concerning the feeding of swill introduced in 1985 (S.I.153: 1985) and an amendment in 1987 (S.I.133: 1987) required all swill to be heat-treated and resulted in most small operators going out of business. Other EU directives led to the shutting down of thousands of slaughterhouses across Europe. Small producers like Hick who slaughtered at most 25 pigs a week in their family slaughterhouse, states that it was not any one rule but a series of them that forced them to close. It was not uncommon for three inspectors, a veterinarian, a meat inspector and a hygiene inspector to supervise himself and his brother at work. Ed Hick describes the situation thus; 'if we had taken them on in a game of football, we would have lost, we were seen as a huge waste of veterinary time and manpower'.

Sausages and rashers were always popular in Dublin and are the main ingredients in the city's most famous dish 'Dublin Coddle'. Coddle is quite similar to an Irish stew except that it uses rashers and sausage instead of lamb. It was a traditional Saturday night dish

when the men came home from the public houses. Terry Fagan has a book on Dublin Folklore called 'Monto: Murder, Madams and Black Coddle'. The black coddle resulted from soot falling down the chimney into the cauldron. James Joyce describes Denny's sausages with relish in Ulysses and like many other Irish immigrants, he would welcome visitors from home only if they brought Irish sausages and Irish whiskey with them. Even today, every family has its favourite brand of sausages: Byrne's, Olhausens, Granby's, Haffner's, Denny's Gold Medal, Kearns and Superquinn are among the most popular. Ironically the same James Joyce, who put Dublin pork kidneys on the world table in Ulysses, was later to call his native Ireland 'the sow that eats her own farrow'.

The last thirty years have seen a concerted effort to breed pigs that have less fat content and leaner meat. There are no pure breeds of Landrace or Large White in production today for they have been crossbred for litter size, fat content and leanness. Many experts feel that they have become too lean, to the detriment of flavour and that the meat can tend to split when cooked. Pig production is now a complicated science and tighter margins have led to only large-scale operations being financially viable (Whittemore, 1998). The average size of herd has grown from 29 animals in 1973, to 846 animals in 1997, and the highest numbers are found in counties Cork and Cavan (Lafferty et al., 1999). The main players in today's pig production/processing are the large Irish Agribusiness Multinationals Glanbia, Kerry Foods and Dairygold. Pat Tuite expressed worries among the industry that there may be no pig production in Ireland in twenty years time, with production moving to Eastern Europe where feed and labour are cheaper. When it comes to traceability, in the light of the BSE and Dioxin scares, many feel that things were much better in the old days. Butchers like Ed Hick slaughtered animals that were bought locally and then sold them back to the local people.

Although bacon and cabbage, and the full Irish breakfast, with its rashers, sausages and puddings are considered to be some of Ireland's most well known traditional dishes, there has been a growth in modern interpretations of traditional pork and bacon dishes in the repertoires of our ever growing number of talented chefs. Michael Clifford popularised Clonakilty Black Pudding as a starter in his Cork restaurant in the late 1980's, and its use

has become widespread since, as a starter or main course often partnered with either caramelised apples or red onion marmalade. Crubeens have been modernised ‘a la Pierre Kaufman’ by a number of Irish Chefs, and Kevin Thornton, the first Irish Chef to be awarded two Michelin stars, has roast suckling pig as one of his signature dishes. Eleanor Walsh serves Ed Hick’s sausages with thyme mash and onion gravy in Eden Restaurant in Dublin’s Temple Bar, and for years John Howard’s signature vegetable dish in Le Coq Hardi was cabbage sweated with streaky bacon. Antony Ely, Chef at the U2 owned Clarence Hotel, serves deep fried potato and bacon cakes with buttered curly kale and caper sauce. Richard Corrigan is keeping the Irish flag flying in London in his Michelin starred Soho restaurant, Lindsay House, where traditional pork and bacon dishes from his childhood are creatively re-interpreted with simplicity and taste. Pig’s head and trotters can no longer be considered poor man’s food when Aiden Byrne, Ireland’s newest Michelin starred chef charges 28 Euro for a starter of ‘Warm Pressed and Braised Pig’s Head with Gribiche Mayonnaise’, and 36 Euro for a main course of ‘Stuffed Pig’s Trotter with Sweetbreads and a Lasagne of Morels and Broad Beans’ in The Commons Restaurant on Dublin’s St. Stephen’s Green.

Pork, ham and bacon are, without doubt, the most traditional of all Irish foods, featuring in the diet since prehistoric times. Although these meats remain the most consumed per capita in post ‘Celtic Tiger’ Ireland, there are a number of threats facing the countries pig industry. Large-scale indoor production necessitates the use of anti-biotics. European legislation and economic factors have contributed in the demise of the traditional art of pork butchery. Scientific advancements have resulted in leaner low-fat pigs, many argue, to the detriment of flavour. Alas, all is not lost; I have illustrated how many of Ireland’s Chefs have incorporated the pig into their menus. Today’s bacon contains only half the salt compared to thirty years ago. There is a growth in consumer demand for quality local food, and some producers like J. Hick & Sons, and Prue & David Rudd and Family are leading the way. Rudd’s who are based in county Offaly process and distribute branded anti-biotic free pig related products with the mission of ‘re-inventing the tastes of by gone days with the quality of modern day standards’. Few could argue with the late Irish writer

John B. Keane: 'When this kind of bacon is boiling with its old colleague, white cabbage, there is a gurgle from the pot that would tear the heart out of any hungry man'.

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