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Ireland

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Articles

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Ireland

Overview

Ireland is the most westerly country in Europe, and part of the British Isles. For many centuries, the British Crown has exercised dominion over parts of the island and at times the whole. The island of Ireland has thirty-two counties, six of which form Northern Ireland which is part of the United Kingdom. The other twenty-six counties gained independence from Great Britain in 1921 and the division of the island into two countries has been contentious ever since. Ireland has a mild temperate climate in which grass grows nearly all year long. Ireland also has over 3,500 miles of coastline which is teeming with fish. Colman Andrews suggests that the Irish are more 'intimately and pervasively connected to the land' than any other Western European nation. Although there are only five million people currently living on the island of Ireland, there are over eighty million people around the world that claim Irish lineage.

Ireland has one of the most interesting culinary traditions in Western Europe, which has been influenced by the interaction of climate, geographic location, geology, tradition, conquest and colonisation, and commerce. Ireland was the first European country to adopt the potato as a staple crop, which transformed Ireland from an underpopulated island of 1 million in the 1590s to 8.2 million in 1840, making it the most densely populated country in Europe. The overdependence on the potato, particularly on one variety, the Lumper, which was not resistant to the fungal disease *Phytophthora Infestans* led to the disaster known today as 'The Great Famine' (1845-1849) with the result that by 1851, at least one million of the Irish poor had died and another million had emigrated. Long before the introduction of the potato to Europe, however, the Irish were renowned for their tradition of hospitality which was enshrined in the ancient Gaelic laws. It is important to point out that parallel food traditions existed in Ireland before, during, and after the Famine where the middle classes and the Anglo-Irish gentry enjoyed a varied diet that would be hard to surpass in contemporary rural France or Britain. Traditional Irish food is essentially solid country cooking using the freshest of ingredients and treating them simply, letting the food speak for itself. The tradition of fresh home-baked breads and scones served with butter, jams and marmalades form a staple of Irish cuisine. The Irish attitude to food

has transformed dramatically, particularly in the last twenty years. In 2005, Irish people for the first time in history spent more on food to eat outside the home than they did on eating in the home.

Vignette

Fergus and Niamh Dunne are a typical middle class family with two children living in Dublin. Their breakfast consists of either porridge (oatmeal) or breakfast cereals such as Shredded Wheat which is served with milk and sugar. Beverages at breakfast time include orange juice and either tea or coffee. Lunch for both the children and Fergus normally consists of a sandwiches (ham or cheese filling) served with a fruit smoothie (fruit pureed with natural yoghurt and fruit juice) and perhaps some popcorn. Niamh would normally eat some pita bread with hummus or some cream cheese, apple and crackers for her lunch. As a family they go through phases of using their fruit juicer or the bread maker but then don't use them again for a while. Like many families, the evening dinner follows a weekly pattern where meat, potatoes and vegetables (i.e. chicken breasts, mashed potatoes and broccoli) would be served around three times a week, with either spaghetti bolognese or Lasagne on another day, fish (salmon normally) served with potatoes and vegetables on Wednesdays, and Thursdays they make home-made pizza. One day a week, they would eat dinner from either, a fish and chip shop, an Indian or a Chinese take-away. Dinner is usually completed by a cup of tea and some biscuits or a slice of cake. Once a week, the children might also eat pasta, chicken nuggets, or slices of pizza when they return from school.

They purchase their main supermarket shopping online and have it delivered. This includes their breakfast cereals, milk, sugar, oil, rice, pasta, fruit (apples, oranges and bananas), fresh vegetables, frozen foods (peas, sweet corn), jams and cleaning products. This main weekly shopping is supplemented by about four other visits to smaller local shops including a local butcher, convenience store and a weekly farmer's market. During the summer months, salads feature within their diet and they grow lettuce in the back garden. The children dictate much of the diet, since Niamh and Fergus don't eat as much of the ratatouille or stir fry's they used to eat before the children came along. Fergus makes home-made soup once a week and they would entertain friends with dinner about twice a month. Daily guests, however, are always

offered a cup of tea or coffee which would normally be accompanied with some biscuits or a slice of cake.

Major Foodstuffs

Potatoes, dairy produce, cereals, meat and vegetables remain the staples of Irish cuisine, despite the wave of immigration the country experienced in the last two decades. Ireland is now a truly multicultural country where dishes such as Lasagne, Chicken Tikka Massala, Fajitas or Thai Green Curry are as much part of the Irish culinary canon as Bacon and Cabbage, Irish Stew, or Shepherd's Pie. Ireland is among the highest per capita consumers of tea, butter, potatoes, pig meat and milk in the world. Some foodstuffs, which historically had been luxury items, such as chicken, beef and salmon have become increasingly popular and affordable in the last few decades. Oatmeal porridge, which has been eaten in Ireland since ancient times, remains a popular breakfast dish, often served with cream and honey. Despite its island location and the richness of its coastal waters, the Irish have never fully exploited its marine resources. The majority of the Irish catch is exported and Ireland is on par with landlocked Austria in per capita consumption of seafood.

Irish cuisine has been influenced by history over the centuries. The Vikings helped to popularise seafood, whereas the Normans introduced new varieties of animals, birds and fish, including the white-fleeced sheep, domesticated duck, mute swan – as opposed to the native Hooper swan, pike, rabbits, pheasants, pigeons and fallow deer. By the late medieval period, a number of dietary systems were in place in Ireland, according to social rank, region and access to the market. Areas of direct Norman influence aligned their palate to the medieval European norm. Trade records testify to the use of imported luxury goods like spices, sugar, almonds, pepper, figs, verjuice and rice. Almonds were used on fast days to make almond milk as a substitute for dairy milk. The older Gaelic diet of dairy produce, oats and salted meats co-existed with the newer more elaborate Norman diet.

Detailed accounts of food eaten before the arrival of the potato in the seventeenth century exist. Among the vegetables, wild and cultivated, listed are watercress (*biolar*), sorrel (*samhadh*), nettles, celery, parsley, charlock (*praiseach*), kale and cabbage, shamrock, wild garlic, leek, onion, chives (*folt-chep*), peas and beans, carrot

and parsnip (*meacan*), beet (*biatas*), dulse (*duileasc*) and sloke (*sleabhacán*). Fruits listed include blackberry, sloe, wild cherry, raspberry, strawberry, rowan, crabapple, elderberry, whortleberry and cranberry. Native hazel nuts and imported walnuts are mentioned but the most frequently mentioned fruit in the early Irish documents is the apple. Orchards were widely distributed, particularly in Leinster but also in the counties of Donegal, Mayo, Armagh and Fermanagh. Apple tarts and crumbles remain extremely popular as sweet dishes with the Irish, with rhubarb, strawberries and blackberries also popular when in season.

Potatoes

There are four main phases of acceptance of the potato into the general Irish diet. Stage one (1590-1675) sees the potato used as a supplementary food and standby against famine; Stage two (1675-1750) the potato is viewed as a valuable winter food for the poorer classes; Stage three (1750-1810) the poorer classes become dangerously reliant on potato as staple for most of the year; Stage four (1810-1845) sees mounting distress as localised famines and potato failures become commonplace. Two centuries of genetic evolution resulted in yields growing from two tons per acre in 1670 to ten tons per acre in 1800. The potato was useful for cleaning, restoring and reclaiming the soil, and also for fattening pigs. It has been suggested that increased potato consumption may simply and paradoxically reflect the fact that cereal cultivation intensified in the 1750s and 1760s, resulting in a growing reliance on the potato as a cleaning restoring root crop. The potato provided food for the growing labour force needed for the move from pasture to tillage that occurred at this time, but resulted in high levels of unemployment following the Battle of Waterloo when the demand for grain exports fell. During the eighteenth century there was a steady export demand for Irish salt beef and butter. As dairy herds grew, cattle were drawn out of the poorer household, denying them of an important food source, but this gap was filled by the potato which was a non-commercial subsistence crop.

By the nineteenth century the potato had established itself as a staple of one third of the population, an overdependence that led to the devastation of the Famine in the 1840s when successive harvests failed. The period 1810-1845 saw the adoption of new inferior varieties of potatoes, notably the Lumper, which promised excellent yields. With this new variety, a family of six could exist for a whole year from one

acre of even the poorest land that had been well manured. However, the Lumper was not resistant to the potato blight, and this resulted in the dramatic potato failures of 1845, '46 and '47.

The potato was enjoyed by rich and poor alike. The custom of preparing potato puddings, both sweet and savoury, was particularly noticeable among the wealthy, where extra ingredients like saffron, sugar and spices differentiated this potato dish from the plain boiled potatoes of the cottiers. Among the poorer classes, who consumed an average of 5kg potatoes each a day, it was not uncommon to see individuals 'eating one potato, peeling a second, have a third in his fist and an eye on the fourth'. Boiled potatoes were eaten with a restricted variety of foods – butter, buttermilk, occasional bacon, herrings, and seaweed (dulse and sloke) and shellfish in coastal areas. The Irish have traditionally favoured floury potatoes to waxy potatoes. Mashed potato dishes such as Champ (with spring onions), Colcannon (with shredded cabbage), and Kala (with onions and soft boiled egg) were popular with those of moderate means and have become very popular in recent times on the menus of Irish restaurants. Another traditional Irish potato dish that remains most popular in the north western counties of Ireland is Boxty, which is made from a mix of cooked and grated raw potatoes. In 1845 there were 829,875 hectares under potato cultivation, but this had fallen to 20,000 hectares in 1991. Popular potato varieties in Ireland include Kerr Pinks, Wexford Queens, Records, Pentland Dells, Golden Wonders, but the most widespread variety is an all purpose potato called the Rooster which was developed in Oak Park, County Carlow. However, pasta, rice, and noodles are beginning to challenge the dominance of potatoes on the carbohydrate front.

Pig Meat

In Ireland today, we still eat more pig meat per capita than any other meat. It is eaten in a number of forms ranging from fresh pork steaks and chops, pork sausages, bacon, hams, gammons, rashers and both black and white puddings. Historically, potatoes were cooked as feed for pigs. Pigs were also fed whey, the by products of both butter and cheese making. 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. From around the mid 18th century commercial salting of pork and bacon

grew rapidly in Ireland. Irish bacon was the brand leader and the Irish companies exported their expertise to countries like Denmark and Russia. Nowadays, pigs are reared mostly in large indoor units. Pig meat features strongly in both the Irish breakfast, sandwiches at lunch time, and in the famous Dublin dish ‘Coddle.’ The popularity of pig meat products became particularly apparent by the amount of empty shelf space in Irish supermarkets in December 2008 when there was a food scare concerning dioxins in pig meat and all products were recalled.

Milk and Dairy

Ireland traditionally has excelled in the production of dairy produce – milk, sour milk, butter, buttermilk, curds and both soft and hard cheeses. Evidence of the Irish fondness for *bánbidh*, ‘white foods’ is found in the 12th century poem *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* where reference is made to a delectable drink ‘of very thick milk, of milk not too thick, of milk of long thickness, of milk of medium thickness, of yellow bubbling milk, the swallowing of which needs chewing’. It is noted that in both the medieval and the early modern periods that the Irish were the highest per capita consumers of butter in the world. Irish butter is sold under the ‘Kerrygold’ label all around the world. Cheese making has an ancient tradition in Ireland which had all but disappeared until the resurgence of an artisan farmhouse cheese industry by a number of farmers’ wives who had more milk than the European Union quotas allowed them to sell. Prior to this, the cheese industry in Ireland was almost exclusively confined to large-scale factory production of mainly cheddar cheese, mostly owned by dairy cooperatives. Ireland today has over three hundred types of farmhouse cheese, which on a per capita basis is higher even than France. The most popular of these are Cashel Blue, Gubbeen, Milleens, Ardsallagh, Gabriel, Durrus and Coolea.

Tea, Breads and Cakes

From ancient times in Ireland, oat cakes, flat breads and griddled breads were popular staples. There was no evidence of the built up oven until the Norman arrival and leavened yeast bread was only common to areas of Norman influence. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was a general growth in food related stores and in the amount of commercial bakeries and dairies in particular. During this time two items that had been the prerogative of the wealthy, white yeast-leavened baker’s bread and tea, became increasingly popular among the working classes. White bread

was held in esteem over homemade bread and was offered at special occasions such as wakes, Christmas, Easter, or when special guests such as a priest visited the home.

A parallel development was the appearance of raised wheaten soda bread which was produced on the open hearth in a bastible pot (a type of Dutch oven), due to the increased availability of chemical leavens (particularly bicarbonate of soda) which along with the soft flour and buttermilk produced a product that is considered to be uniquely Irish. The addition of other ingredients, eggs, butter, dried fruit, and spices led to the growing repertoire of Irish breads, scones and cakes. Some regional variation was also evident with potato breads such as boxty most popular in the north-western counties. A yeast leavened bread bap called 'blaa' is considered to be unique to Waterford and may be Norman in origin. Soda farls (a type of scone cooked on a hotplate rather than the oven) are particularly popular in Northern Ireland and form part of the famous Ulster fry, along with fried bread. Two Irish brands of tea, Barry's and Lyons, dominated the market from the early twentieth century to the present day, with Ireland still the highest per capita consumers of tea in the world today.

Cooking

Roasting, boiling, baking, stewing and frying are the main methods of cookery used in Irish cuisine. The prime cuts of meats (beef, lamb, pork) are roasted and often served with roasted potatoes and roasted root vegetables (carrots, parsnips and turnips). Most vegetables are boiled, although some people prefer to steam floury potatoes. Bacon and corned beef are boiled and the cooking liquor is often used to cook the accompanying cabbage or as an addition to the parsley sauce. Stewed meats are particularly popular in winter time, with the most famous Irish stew classically containing only mutton, onions, potatoes and water. Stewed apples are very popular as a sweet, scented with some cloves and served with custard. The frying pan holds pride of place in the Irish household, for it is used to fry sausages, rashers, eggs, black pudding and tomatoes for the famous Irish cooked breakfast, commonly called a 'fry'. The more health conscious grill their breakfast, and some lamb cutlets with butter, pepper and mustard are also commonly cooked under the grill. Many children learn to bake by making fairy cakes (little buns) and gradually progress to sponge cakes, apple tarts and crumbles. It is hard to beat the taste of oven fresh scones with fresh butter and strawberry jam, washed down with a nice cup of tea.

Typical Meals

The typical meals in Ireland are breakfast (7.30 -9.00am), lunch (1-2pm), and dinner (6-7pm). Some people also take a supper (9.30-10pm). There has been changes in the meal times and structure in recent years due to the rising female participation in the work force. Many families ate their main meal in the middle of the day and then took a meal they called tea in the evening. The main family meal is now most commonly eaten in the evening time (albeit sometimes in front of the television!).

Breakfast can include one or many of the following: fruit juice, breakfast cereal (Corn Flakes, Weetabix, Special K, Rice Krispies etc.), oatmeal porridge, toast, scones, brown or white soda bread with butter, jam or marmalade, yoghurt, fruit, croissants and Danish pastries. A hot full Irish breakfast includes sausages, rashers (fried bacon slices), fried eggs, grilled tomato, black and white pudding, and mushrooms. The Ulster Fry also includes soda farls and fried bread. Boiled eggs or poached eggs are also popular breakfast items served with toast and butter. Omelettes are occasionally served for breakfast as are fried kippers or dishes such as kedgerree (this would be more common at weekends, particularly as a form of brunch on Sunday). Breakfast beverages include tea, coffee and fruit juices.

The traditional main meal based around meat and two vegetables has not disappeared despite the growing popularity of ethnic dishes such as Thai Curry, Lasagne or Chilli Con Carne. The most popular meats are bacon (with parsley sauce), chicken (normally roasted with stuffing and gravy), beef (with horseradish sauce), lamb (with mint sauce), and pork (with apple sauce). Smaller cuts of meat are also popular either as beef steaks, pork chops, lamb chops and cutlets, and individual chicken breasts, thighs or drumsticks. Minced beef is very popular and is used by most families at least once a week to make burgers, shepherd's pie, spaghetti bolognese, lasagne, meatballs or chilli. Mutton is not as widely available or as popular as in previous times. There has been a decrease in the consumption of offal (liver, kidneys, heart, oxtail, tongue, pigs trotters) among the native Irish in the last two decades, but they have become more visible in butchers shops due to the growing multi-ethnic population (or the new Irish as they are known) that still value offal for both culinary and economic reasons.

Potatoes are served boiled, steamed, baked, and mashed. Deep fried chipped potatoes, known as chips, are particularly common but are usually purchased alongside fried fish in batter from Fish and Chip shops. Common vegetables include cabbage, carrots and parsnips, turnips, broccoli, cauliflower, French beans and peas. Onions, celery and carrots are particularly popular as a base for stews (both brown and white). Casseroles are also popular one-pot dishes, particularly in winter time. It is customary to finish dinner with a cup of tea which is normally accompanied by a biscuit or a slice of cake. Apple tarts or crumbles might be served with whipped cream or with custard. Sponge cakes and fruit cakes are also popular.

Children are being increasingly fed separate food from their parents, with pizza, pasta, noodles, chicken nuggets, chips and potato waffles well established as food most Irish children regularly eat. Another regular snack for children are crisps (potato chips in America) which come in cheese and onion, salt and vinegar, prawn cocktail, and barbeque beef flavours mostly. Most primary (elementary) schools now take part in a government scheme in which the children grow some food in their school yard or classroom. Milk is also delivered free of charge to primary schools to encourage dairy consumption for calcium intake and healthy bones. Childhood obesity and related diseases are, however, becoming an increasing issue in Ireland.

Eating Out

There has always been a market for eating outside the home in bars, taverns, eating-houses, restaurants, cafés, canteens, and clubs. This market grew dramatically from the 1970s and in the last 15 years, eating out moved from an occasional to a regular past time for most Irish people. In 2005, for the first time in history, Irish people spent more money on food consumed outside of the home. Many Irish public houses (pubs) sell food as well as alcoholic beverages. The most common form is the carvery, where roast meats are carved to order and served with potatoes, vegetables, stuffing and gravy. Wet dishes such as stews and curries are also served at a carvery. It is at a carvery that you will get the closest public form of Irish cuisine. Most Irish people prefer to go to a Chinese, Thai, Italian, Indian or French restaurant when dining out. There is also a gradual growth in sushi bars and in bagel bars in the large cities. Ireland now has some excellent restaurants and is steadily building a reputation as a culinary destination for travellers. There are a growing number of restaurants that

serve what is called 'modern Irish cuisine', where the best of Irish produce is cooked and served using contemporary techniques. There has been a long tradition of a café culture in Irish cities, but in recent years the famous cafés such as Bewley's where a pot of tea and an almond bun might be consumed have been replaced by smaller cafés where cappuccinos and Danish pastries or Muffins are more popular.

Fast food restaurants such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken are popular in Ireland, but some indigenous chains such as Supermac's and Abrekebabra have also proved to be equally popular serving particularly Irish versions of fast food items such as curry chips, taco fries, or garlic and cheese fries. Most Chinese and Indian restaurants also offer take-away menus. The most common take away in Ireland is the fish and chip shops which are mostly run by Italian families. These establishments serve deep fried fish in batter, battered sausages and onion rings, burgers, southern fried chicken and sometimes also kebabs. Chips are usually served with salt and malt vinegar. Another source of food outside the home which has become extremely popular in recent years is the deli counters in convenient shops where fresh sandwiches, rolls and wraps are made to order. At lunch time, there are regular queues at such counters throughout the country. A particularly Irish morning offering popular in such establishments is the Jumbo breakfast roll (two sausages, two slices of bacon, and black pudding placed in a buttered bread roll with tomato ketchup).

Special Occasions

There are a number of special occasions within the year or social calendar that call for specific foods. Christmas time revolves around the family and the traditional Christmas dinner of roast goose has been replaced by turkey and ham with stuffing, cranberry sauce, roast potatoes and vegetables and gravy. This meal is often preceded by some smoked salmon on brown bread or a prawn cocktail (cooked prawns on shredded lettuce topped with a cocktail sauce). The Christmas meal is followed by Christmas pudding, also known as plum pudding, which is a rich fruit based boiled or steamed pudding served with either brandy butter or custard. Later on, with the cup of tea or coffee, you might be offered a slice of Christmas cake which is a rich baked fruit cake topped with both almond and royal icing. Another popular Christmas food is spiced beef which was traditionally eaten on Christmas Eve. Both the spiced beef

and the turkey and ham are excellent for either cold salads or sandwiches when guests come to visit at Christmas time. Another popular sweet served at Christmas is sherry trifle. The turkey and ham meal is also often served at family occasions such as weddings or at funerals. Families often invite mourners back to a hotel for either soup and sandwiches or a sit down meal after a funeral. At other occasions such as christenings, first communions, confirmations, or twenty-first birthday parties, it is more common to serve either a cold salad buffet or a hot dish such as chicken curry with rice.

The next food related date in the calendar is Shrove Tuesday which marks the beginning of Lent (forty days of fasting from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday). On this day it is customary to eat pancakes which originated in the using up of eggs which would not be eaten again until Easter Sunday. Pancakes were eaten with sugar and lemon or with honey, but nowadays children increasingly prefer nutella (a hazelnut chocolate spread) on their pancakes. Ash Wednesdays, Good Fridays, Holy Thursdays were all traditionally black fast days where no meat was consumed. Fridays were also traditionally fast days where fish was normally consumed, but these traditions are quickly being lost in a growing secular Ireland. Many Irish peoples still continue the tradition of abstaining from some foodstuff during Lent, normally sweets, sugar, cakes or alcohol. Saint Patrick's Day falls in the middle of Lent and Irish people are given a special dispensation from whatever they avoided for Lent on this day. On Good Friday, it is customary to eat hot cross buns (yeast leavened spiced fruit buns topped with a cross of pastry), and the tradition of eating many eggs on Easter Sunday has been almost replaced by the gifts of chocolate eggs for children. On Easter Sunday it is customary to eat roast leg of spring lamb which is seasonal.

The arrival of summer is marked with the availability of fresh strawberries and of new potatoes which are as welcomed in Ireland as the French celebrate the *Beaujolais Nouveau*. New potatoes are often eaten simply with their skins still on, with butter and salt. Summer is also about eating wild salmon, which unfortunately is becoming less available due to overfishing. Rhubarb and blackberries are at their best in the summer months also. The tradition of eating goose at Michaelmas (29th September) is all but disappeared but the game season (venison, pheasant, grouse etc.) in the winter months is still influential to the diet of the countryside and in gourmet restaurants. The next

special occasion for food is the festival of Halloween (31st October / 1st November). There are many foods and food rituals associated with this festival. Many of the traditions are linked to divining the future. From the mid-eighteenth century, colcannon, which is a dish made from mashed potatoes with curly kale or cabbage, was a traditional supper dish on Halloween Night, often containing items such as a coin, stick, or rag etc. to predict the future prospects of the consumers. Another traditional foodstuff at Halloween is barmbrack which comes from the Gaelic *bairín breac* or speckled loaf. The fruit loaf traditionally contains charms which foretell future events. Finding a ring in the cake meant marriage within the year, a rag symbolised poverty, a bean meant riches whereas a pea meant poverty, a stick forecasted a future beating by one's spouse, and a thimble discovered by an unmarried girl indicated life as a spinster. Most barmbracks nowadays only contain a ring! It is worth noting that the American Halloween tradition of the Jack O' Lantern made from pumpkins is Irish in origin, The Irish used to carry a sod of turf from a sacred fire to their houses inside a hollowed out turnip (rutabaga) and this tradition was carried on by Irish immigrants in America using the pumpkin where no turnip was available.

Diet and Health

Cardiovascular disease is the main cause of death in Ireland accounting for 36% of all deaths ranging from heart attacks, strokes, and other circulatory diseases. The government has been working with the food industry to reduce salt levels in processed food and is involved in promoting a more active lifestyle among the population. Research shows that certain segments of the community are more likely to suffer from diet related illnesses. In a recent study, the contribution of fat to total energy intake increased with decreasing socioeconomic groupings, a finding reflective of the higher consumption levels of foods high in fat by respondents from socially disadvantaged groups. Energy from carbohydrates was greatest among those from socially advantaged groups, and was close to the recommended 50% of the total energy intake. Conversely, energy from protein decreased with increasing social status groups. The mean intake of vitamins and minerals was generally close to or above the recommended values. Another diet related health issue in Ireland is the amount of alcohol consumed, which is significantly higher than the European average.

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