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Preface: The History of Black Pudding in Ireland

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Preface

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It is hard to imagine an Irish breakfast without black and white puddings to go with the sausages, rashers and eggs, but what is the history of these puddings, particularly in Irish cuisine? And how did the town of Clonakilty become synonymous with black pudding?

One of the earliest literary references to puddings is to be found in Homer's *Odyssey*, the Greek classic dating from the 8th century BC. The hero, Odysseus, fights over a stomach stuffed with pig blood and fat. Book II of the 1st Century AD Roman cookbook *Apicius*, features meat puddings, blood sausages, and a '*botellum*' which is generally translated as black pudding and is made from blood, mixed with onions and leeks, thickened with cooked egg yolks, stuffed into casings and cooked in broth and wine. There is evidence to this day of black puddings in cultures from all over the world ranging from the Spanish '*morcilla*', the French '*boudin noir*', the German '*blutwurst*' to the Tibetan '*gyurma*', all varying based on local ingredients, be it Yak blood and rice in Tibet, or barley, pine nuts, rice, potatoes or almonds in other cultures.

From an Irish perspective, the earliest documentary evidence we have for puddings within the native diet comes from a magical Middle Irish tale of anonymous authorship, generally believed to have been written in the late 11th/early 12th century, *Aisling Meic Conglinne* (The Vision of Meic Conglinne). In this story the monks of Cork display a lack of hospitality to Ainiér Mac Conglinne, a scholar from Armagh, who composes a satire on them resulting in his being whipped and his crucifixion being proposed. That night Ainiér has a vision of a land made entirely of food which leads him to be brought to help rid the King of Munster, Cathal MacFinginne, of the 'demon of gluttony' that lives in his throat, in exchange for his freedom. In this magical land made of food he describes two particular foodstuffs as *maróc* and *indreachtán* which are clearly puddings but the contents of each is not elaborated. Another pudding called *dressán* is mentioned leading to speculation that drisheen may have been available in Cork since the 11th century. Another Irish literary source for puddings made from sheep and cows' blood (*putóga caora agus bó*) is found in the 17th century satire *Pairlimint Chlainne Thomáis* (Parliament of the Plebs). Puddings could be made from the blood of cattle, sheep or pigs. Theodora Fitzgibbon remembers making blood puddings with turkey or goose blood, and her own recipe for blood pudding in *Irish Traditional Food* (1983), calls for pig's

or sheep's blood, kidney suet, milk, breadcrumbs, onion, spices and tansy. Maura Lavery's recipe for black pudding in *Full and Plenty* (1960) uses sheep's or pig's blood, with onions, flour and oatmeal and uses intestines for the casings.

Cattle in ancient Ireland were highly prized for their milk and associated products (butter, curds, whey, cheese) collectively known as '*bán bidh*' or white meats. Cows were rarely killed for meat unless they were old and yielded no more milk. Saint Martin's Day or Martinmas on the 11th November is associated with spilling of blood and killing animals that had either been fattened for the table or would not survive the harsh winter. Puddings were therefore associated with Martinmas and it was traditional to share excess meat with your poorer neighbours on this feast day. Before the advent of refrigeration and freezers, cattle were more likely to be killed in towns and cities where there was a large population that could consume the enormous amount of fresh meat supplied by any one carcass. Although there was a tradition of bleeding live cattle without killing them and mixing the blood with oatmeal and butter to make a form of pudding, beef blood puddings in animal casings, mixed with oatmeal and spices, are more associated with butchers and with towns and cities than with rural homesteads. Up until recent decades, each town would have a beef and lamb butchers as well as a pork and bacon butchers. They were effectively different trades belonging to separate guilds.

In rural areas, most families would kill a pig or a sheep at least once a year. The fresh pork fillets would be shared among the neighbours and fresh black puddings, made with various cereals, onions or spices, would be produced at killing time. Other parts of the pig would have been salted and smoked to preserve them. Sheep didn't salt well, and the meat would have been shared among the community and there is a tradition all over the country of making a large pudding from the sheep's blood using the stomach rather than the intestines as casing. In Achill Island this is still called 'belly', while equally in North Mayo and in Connemara the same practice occurred but was called '*putóg*' or pudding. Drisheen, which is particularly associated with Cork, is made slightly differently. It has a gelatinous texture where the blood is mixed with salt and milk and cooked in the animal casings and is often flavoured with tansy, a perennial herbaceous plant. In Cork and Limerick, it is often served with tripe, sometimes known as 'packet and tripe'.

The associated history of Cork and black puddings stems back to the Cattle Acts of the 1660s, where the English Parliament passed legislation banning the export of live cattle from Ireland to protect the livelihoods of the English cattle farmers. This led to the building of slaughter houses in many Irish port cities and the development of the Corned Beef industry. From the seventeenth century to 1825, Cork city was the largest centre for the export of salted beef in the British Isles. This was the period when offal became widely available and popular among the city's population and also when the making of puddings from the large quantities of blood coming from the abattoirs developed into such a booming industry. It was a busy time for butchers. The link between drisheen and Cork is enshrined in the anonymous Cork ballad *The Boys of Fairhill*:

‘If you come to Cork you will get drisheen,
Murphy’s stout and pig’s crubeens,
Here’s up them all says the boys of Fairhill’.

The history of Clonakilty Black Pudding stems from the 1800s and a local butcher Philip Harrington whose butcher shop was at 16 Sovereign Street (now Pearse Street). He provided a secret spice mix to Joanna O’Brien who began making puddings in her home. On her retirement in the 1880s, Harrington took over the production of the black puddings in his butcher’s shop and the famous pudding was often sent overseas to emigrants who longed for the taste of home. The pudding continued to be made by the Harrington family until the sale of the business in the 1960s to Patrick McSweeney who sold both the business and the unknown asset of the ‘secret recipe’ on to his nephew Edward Twomey in 1976. Both Harrington and Twomey are immortalised in Jimmy Crowley’s modern song *Clonakilty Blackpudding* extolling the celebrated Cork delicacy. The chorus goes:

‘Clonakilty Blackpudding, ‘tis me daza, full of pep,
To put the lead back in your pencil and the spring back in your step.
Heaven knows what herbs and spices are inside the saucy skin
But it brings a smile to Erin’s Isle – *agus fágfimid mar sin*’.

Initially, Edward Twomey had no interest in continuing making the black pudding but his customers demanded it. Before long, people were travelling from around Munster, pensioners using their free bus pass to travel to purchase Clonakilty black pudding. Edward and his wife

Colette soon realised the drawing power of their secret recipe which is, to this day, guarded with near religious secrecy. The other ingredients include beef blood, beef meat and fat, pinhead oatmeal, onion, salt and pepper. With rising demand, expansion was on the cards, and a local sign-writer Tomás Tuipéar was charged with incorporating the family business's values of tradition, quality and local pride into the company logo and label. Vans were put on the road to distribute the pudding and with that came the development of the product range to include white puddings, sausages and rashers. Edward passed away in 2005 and his wife Colette is now the sole keeper (apart from her solicitor) of the unique secret spice mix. The Clonakilty Food Company has recently added a delicious vegetarian 'veggie' pudding to their product collection, demonstrating the Twomeys' capacity to stay abreast of local and global trends.

In the history of Irish restaurants, Cork plays an important part in promoting a self-confident Irish local food tradition and cuisine. Myrtle Allen was well ahead of her peers when in 1964 she opened her dining room in Ballymaloe House serving Irish country house cooking relying on local farmers, fishermen and food producers. In 1974, when the *Michelin Guide* first covered Ireland, Arbutus Lodge in Cork was one of only two restaurants awarded a star (the other was the Russell in Dublin that closed that same year). Brothers Michael and Declan Ryan ran Arbutus Lodge and one of their signature dishes was 'drisheen served with a tansy sauce'. One of the Ryans' protégés was Michael Clifford who won a Michelin star for them as head chef in the Ryan managed Cashel Palace Hotel in Tipperary in 1982 and 1983. Clifford went on to open 'Whites on the Green' in Dublin for the White family before returning to Cork and opening his own restaurant 'Cliffords' on Lancaster Quay (in the building which now houses Café Paradiso). One of Clifford's signature starter dishes was 'Gateau of Clonakilty black pudding'. Michael Clifford was a role model for the next generation of Irish chefs and his signature use of Clonakilty black pudding opened the door for many chefs in using the pudding in warm salads, on canapés matched with red onion marmalade, or paired with pan-seared scallops and beetroot.

This book of recipes celebrates the legacy of the Harrington and Twomey families and also showcases how far the ripples have travelled from when Michael Clifford first proudly championed Clonakilty black pudding on his menu in the late 1980s. The creativity of our current chefs (including Michael's son), celebrities and food bloggers jumps from the pages of this fine book, so sit back, enjoy reading and get cooking!