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## Review of *The Irish Cookbook* by J.P. McMahon

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Irish Cookbook**, by Jp McMahon, London: Phaidon, 2020, 431pp., ISBN 9781838660567.



For his new cookbook, Michelin-star chef, restaurateur, author, culinary director of the EATGalway restaurant group and founder of the annual Food on the Edge symposium, Jp McMahon decided to focus on an Irish food history which was “separate to the famine history taught at school.” “Rightly or wrongly”, he writes, “Irish food – and Ireland - is associated with the potato”. Recalibrating Irish food history to include “the first settlers who migrated to these lands” some 10,000 years ago, McMahon believes that Irish food is “the sum of the food consumed on the island of Ireland regardless of what tribe, class or ethnic group may have cooked it.”

He began by researching recipes at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin, then sought to adapt some of them while establishing new configurations for ingredients which were available during certain periods of Irish history. His purpose was threefold. First, to distinguish the foods found and consumed on the island of Ireland. Second, to reflect on new trends in cooking in Ireland with a particular focus on *terroir*. Third, “to educate and inspire people to examine their native wild ingredients and learn a little more about their landscape.”

Rather than offering a collection of traditional dishes associated with Ireland as other titles with the words “Irish” and “cookbook” might do, taking a historical approach, McMahon set himself the task of defining an Irish food culture based on Ireland’s native ingredients from the time of the first settlers. They ate oysters, he tells us in the opening section, as well as seaweed, nuts, berries, sea and river fish, all of which were available as part of the island’s indigenous larder, and all of which are available today. It is this, the wealth of ingredients available in Ireland’s natural larder from that early period right up to the present day, that becomes the central and binding theme of the book and which he uses to create and record the dishes which make up *The Irish Cookbook*.

McMahon's three purposes are reflected in a tripartite division of the book into an introduction and background to the history of Irish food, the recipe section, itself subdivided into "larder" sections, and a comprehensive index and guide to wild plants, seaweed and fungi available on the island, with seasonable and harvesting information for potential foragers.

### **A Little History of Food in Ireland**

Echoing Regina Sexton's title in her *A Little History of Irish Food* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), McMahon's "Little History of Food in Ireland" section moves through descriptions of the island's ancient forests, the first migrants, the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze ages through to the Iron Age and the arrival of the Celts. While never invaded by the Romans, McMahon hints that his sympathy lies with J. P. Mallory's (*The Origins of the Irish*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2013) assessment of the importance of Roman influence, largely exercised through trade, on food culture on the island. By the seventh century monastic influence is evident; orchards are planted, bees are kept, and more systematic methods of grain production and farming are evident. The narrative then moves through Viking, Norman and English invasions, concluding with the caveat, based on an appreciation of this span of historical influences, that there are in fact "many different food histories of Ireland and all are equally relevant."

### **Ireland's Natural Larder**

The principle section is a collection of 480 recipes, subdivided into fifteen larder sections. Each section begins with an extended account of that item's role in Ireland's food history and includes a mix of anecdotes and personal stories.

The recipes range from the simple to the more adventurous. They open with small anecdotes or include advice and additional instructions, as well as offering potential variations or twists. For example, in the first chapter, "Eggs and Dairy", the traditional herb omelette of three eggs, butter, and a handful of chopped herbs can be varied by adding wild garlic when in season or wild watercress, or even nettles. The numerous possibilities that the egg provides are covered, whether fried with ceps, scrambled with chorizo and goat's cheese, baked in ashes, served as Scotch eggs or served with smoked eel and asparagus on sourdough bread. McMahon also demystifies the task of making cultured butters, yogurt, cheese or curds, offering contemporary recipes and variations on each. "A Fair White Porridge Made with Sheep's Milk" anyone? With McMahon's recipe in hand the reader can create a modern version of this twelfth century dish from *The Vision of Mac Conglinne* using rolled oats, sheep's milk, sheep's yogurt and sea salt.

The entire fifteen-chapter "larder" is laid out in this manner, each section focusing on a particular ingredient or set of ingredients, detailing that item's role in Irish food history followed by a number of recipes, some traditional while others avail of lesser-

known ingredients. Each has a (relatively) short list of ingredients, and a concise set of instructions. The ingredients are available in Ireland, most of them indigenous to the Irish landscape, and if not grown in Ireland, can be resourced with relative ease.

Readers will recognise dishes such as boxty, bacon and cabbage with parsley sauce, coddle, beef cheeks, and ox tongue and gooseberry and elderflower fool. The other recipes have either been developed by McMahon, from the material from the National Library or are variations on recipes attributed to other authors and to whom McMahon duly gives credit throughout. These include dishes such as langoustine cooked in blackcurrant leaves, hay-smoked chicken with wild mushroom barley, boar's head with pistachios, and sheep's yogurt ice cream. McMahon has also made a point of including indigenous grains such as spelt, barley, and oats in many dishes, and has not excluded the potato, which, after all, is part of Ireland's culinary culture. All of the food groups and cooking techniques are covered within these pages, including extended sections on pickling and preservation as well as drinks, shrubs and syrups.

#### **An Index of Wild Plants, Seaweed and Fungi**

The final portion of the book fulfils McMahon's ultimate objective for the project, namely, to provide a contemporary record of the indigenous wild foods and seaweed used in new Irish cooking. This portion of the book is divided into five sections: Wild Herbs and Flowers; Wild Nuts, Fruits and Trees; Sea Herbs; Seaweed, and Wild Mushrooms. He provides the English, Irish and Latin names of each, a little of the historical detail pertaining to each one, along with the flowering period (in the case of herbs and flowers), the fruiting period (for fruits, nuts, and trees) or the range of months when the ingredient can be harvested (seaweed), or found (wild mushrooms).

This "index" is extensive with familiar items such as borage, elderflower, dilisk, sea kale, hazel, and Carrageen moss while others carry interesting names such as Babington's leek, Velvet horn, Dryad's saddle, Puff ball and Scarlet elf cup. According to McMahon, they have all formed an important part of the Irish diet or had medicinal purposes at some point but have fallen out of use and out of common knowledge. Many have been used in his restaurant, and he explains to the reader how each might be used to enhance flavour as well as adding texture and colour.

If this reviewer has any criticism, it is from an academic rather than a chef's point of view. It would have been interesting to know more about the specific archival material selected from the National Library and the process by which it was transformed into the recipes which made their way into the final publication. In addition, the subchapter entitled "A Little History of Food in Ireland" would have benefitted from some specific referencing within the text to the sources for the many points made. Given this lack of referencing, the book becomes more a recipe book than a history of Irish food.

As cookbooks go, however, this one will be a happy addition to the repertoire of the confident cook and professional chef. It contains over 150 photographs of finished dishes and is peppered throughout with interesting quotes from food authors, many of whom are well known within and beyond these shores. Not surprisingly, one of the best is attributed to the late Myrtle Allen of Ballymaloe House in Country Cork, described by McMahon as the doyenne of Irish cooking. In her distinctive and philosophical manner of speaking about Irish ingredients, she makes a comment on Irish tomatoes and French dressing which will make readers smile when they come across it.

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