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Spelt

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FRICOT EUROPE

TRADITIONAL TREATS | INDIGENOUS INGREDIENTS | FABULOUS FOOD … WITH NEWS, FEATURES, INTERVIEWS AND STORIES ABOUT EUROPE'S TRADITIONAL FOOD CULTURE, WITH REVIEWS OF FAIRS AND MARKETS, CAFES AND RESTAURANTS, COOKERY, FOOD AND RECIPE BOOKS

DERMOT SEBERRY

SPELT

Andrew Workman surveys one of his spelt fields in Dunany, county Louth, Ireland

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was the most distinguished of the Spanish writers of the Roman imperial age.

Born in Corduba in Andalucia to a Roman equestrian family, Seneca was brought to Rome as a child and seemed destined for a political career. Instead, he became a stoic philosopher, producing wise words that carry moral echoes down the ages to us.

Seneca grew up in a Rome that distributed welfare in the form of free grain, spelt among barley and emmer, an expedient consequence of the food riots, 60 years before he was born, in 59 BC.

An ancient hardy grass thought to be native to both Persia 8,000 years ago and south-eastern Europe 4,000 years ago, spelt was cultivated throughout the continent from the Caucasus to Scandinavia.

Three thousand years ago, river valley communities in the south of Ireland were cooking with spelt berries.

The ancient Greeks and Romans expanded its use. Roman armies lived on spelt (along with barley), making an early version of polenta.

Nearly one thousand years ago, Abbess Hildegard von Bingen of Rupertsberg wrote enthusiastically about spelt. ‘It makes people cheerful with a friendly disposition,’ she said. ‘Those who eat it have healthy flesh

and good blood.'

Spelt has been making a comeback in recent decades, largely in southern Germany and in nothern Switzerland, where older varieties have been cultivated.

Known as urdinkel (old spelt), the range of flours milled from spelt are going into every type of bread and pastry, replacing wheat in many recipes.

It is also becoming increasingly popular in Ireland, where Andrew and Leonie Workman grow, mill and package spelt berries and flour from their farm in Dunany, on the coast below the ancient land of Oriel above the Boyne Valley.

Spelt, with barley, einkorn and emmer wheat, remained a staple in Europe until the 20th century, when it fell out of favour for numerous reasons, not least the problems associated with harvesting, separating and milling it into flour.

The Workmans have got round these problems with modern machinery. Now spelt is one of their biggest sellers and they have high hopes for the berries, which can be used in salads and stews, to make risotto and soaked whole to be baked in bread.

Spelt Berries

Dominick Gryson, a Louth man who has experimented with ancient grains to find strong shafts for thatching, believes the Workmans have found a great artisan product.

'Spelt does not give the same yield as modern wheats, which do not grow well here in our climate,' he says. 'Spelt, on the other hand, is suited to the soil and the climate and can be sold as a high-value organic product.'

Dermot Seberry, who champions the Workmans' produce in his book, A Culinary Journey in the North-East (of Ireland), agrees. 'They fit in with the super food group and are a substitute for risotto rice and barley in the likes of stews and black pudding,' he says.

'For me, it is personal. They are low-gluten and have high nutritional content, particularly for the over-thirties, who have become hyper aware of inner health. Not a trending product but very much the next big little food!'

Spelt contains beneficial minerals, unsaturated fatty acids, vitamins (B and E), and has six of the eight essential amino acids that stimulate the

production of happiness hormones, just as the abbess said.

But it is the low GI (glycaemic index of carbohydrates) that makes spelt a primary health product. With 35 compared to 40 for wheat and 70 for rice, spelt releases glucose more slowly into the bloodstream, balancing out blood sugar levels.

Spelt saved the early Roman Empire but it also sustained the tribes of barbarians who brought about the fall of Rome and allowed their descendants to supplant Roman power throughout Europe.

Something that powerful is worth promoting, especially now that modern wheat has lost its allure and the wisdom of the ancients, Seneca and von Bingen among them, is finally being listened to.

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Tagged A Culinary Journey in the North-East, Abbess Hildegard von Bingen of Rupertsberg, Andrew and Leonie Workman, Dermot Seberry, Dunany, Germany, happiness hormones, Ireland, Louth, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Rome, Spelt, spelt berries, Switzerland, Urdinkel

A CULINARY JOURNEY IN THE NORTH-EAST OF IRELAND

BOOK REVIEW

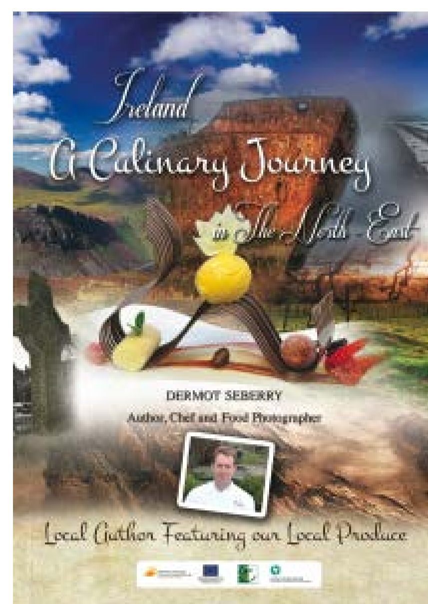
Not since Theodora Fitzgibbon compiled A Taste of Ireland in the 1960s has a food writer produced a book that can be described as a cultural event even before the first page is turned.

Chef, food photographer and writer Dermot Seberry doesn’t suffer fools in the food industry. After several years working as a chef (in Ballinahinch Castle in

Galway, Mount Juliet Hotel in Kilkenny, Cascades in Sun City, the Savoy and Smollenskys in London), he found himself training the chefs of the future.

As a head chef he had been unhappy with the standard of trainee chefs from the London colleges and when he approached them to ask what they were teaching he was asked to take some classes.

After a spell as a manager in Westminster- Kingsway College of Catering in London, he was invited to lecture in the advanced culinary arts course at DIT, Cathal Brugha Street in Dublin, where he helped set up the artisan entrepreneurship course.



Meanwhile, back in his home county of Louth, the landscape had changed. Seberry was philosophical. 'The M1 motorway put many pubs and restaurants out of business for sure but also put an end to rubbish family run food.'

Restaurants were now using fresh, local produce cooked by knowledgeable and imaginative chefs who understood seasonality and knew that was the key to taste.

This quiet revolution had started in the Scandinavian countries, where the artisans and chefs set the agenda and the menu, which always stated where ingredients were from.

Imaginative cooks, visionary chefs and innovative bakers gave preference to indigenous produce and products with their own distinctive flavours. Ultimately this approach began to influence those who ran the catering colleges.

'Peer pressure has forced some colleges to rethink their approach to training chefs,' he says. 'It is not good

enough to accept that old classical French methods are standard teaching practice.

'It's simply nowhere near the norm today.'

According to Seberry, many chefs are restricted to the methods and recipes of old and lack creativity of the mind. 'They don't love food; they just do the job of cooking.

'They know what local produce is but don't know how to use it.'

In the north-east, the culinary mood has been set by the artisans and chefs, and the locals and tourists have not been slow sensing the wind of change.

When Seberry was approached by the county tourism board to represent food, the idea of a colour book featuring maps and photos, local producers and restaurants using indigenous produce to make traditional recipes grabbed the imagination.

This book proves that artisan food from the north-east of Ireland is now established.

It is available online.

Posted on November 7, 2014
Posted in REVIEWS
Tagged A Culinary Journey in the North-East, Artisan Food, Dermot Seberry, Fricot, Ireland, Louth