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#thisisirishfood - The Flavour of Ireland's West Coast

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Abstract: In the West of Ireland, a new awareness for quality ingredients and indigenous flavours are drawing out the potential of local produce and craftsmanship.

Keywords: *culinaria, Irish food, food history, regional food, food scene, food trends*

The West coast of Ireland is one of the outermost points of Europe. Its craggy fringe reaches into the Atlantic with steep cliffs, rock-strewn beaches, and narrow bays. The winter storms blow themselves out of steam here before moving on as calm, heavy clouds across the island. This region has a long history of human activity.

In Belderrig, County Mayo, the stone walls enclosing neolithic cattle fields span across several hills overlooking the grey waters of the harbour below. The 5,000-year-old [Céide Fields](#), now hidden under three-and-a-half meters of bog, are believed to be one of the oldest known field systems in the world. Ancient government and worship sites string along the western coastline and on the steep rocky islands off the shore.

Irish culture and tradition live on strongly in the West, through music, folkways, and not least, the language. Most of the *Gaeltacht* communities, where the Irish language is still predominantly spoken, are found on the West Coast, from Donegal and Connemara in the North to the Dingle and Iveragh Peninsulas in the South.

As fascinating and rich in tradition as this area might be, it's never been one for easy living. The soil covering is often thin and not very fertile, more suitable for sheep than for cattle, and for potatoes rather than wheat or other field crops. The West of Ireland, particularly the Northwest counties of Mayo, Roscommon, and Sligo, were also hit the hardest by the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1849. At the time, most of the native, Irish-speaking population in the country were tenant farmers, renting land from a landlord to produce their crops and a meagre ration of potatoes, leeks and cabbages for their own families.

Many had already been pushed out of the richer East and Midlands toward the poorer areas in the West. When the potato blight hit, (a parasite that rotted potatoes still in the ground and devastated almost the entire potato harvest in those grim years), millions starved, many were evicted from their houses, and many succumbed to diseases, or chose to emigrate. Within 10 years, the western regions of Ireland had lost 25-30% of their population, and the trend of emigration would continue for more than 150 years, only to be halted in the economic boom years of the last decade of the 20th century. The legacy of not only the famine years but also of the tenant farming system, under English rule, from the 17th to the 20th century, has left its mark on Irish food traditions and cuisine until today.

Besides potatoes, which grew plentifully, even in the meagre soils of the West, dairy products such as milk, buttermilk, and butter and the occasional lamb from the flocks, freely roaming the rugged hills, the coastal residents relied on food from the coast and sea: fish such as herring, pollock, ling, or mackerel; seafood – oysters, clams, periwinkles, or scallops; and various types of seaweed gathered in baskets along the rocky shores.

Cheaper meat cuts such as bacon were widespread, and offal was also a common feature on the table, particularly in Cork, where a large number of abattoirs slaughtered and prepared beef for export, leaving bones, heart, blood and stomach for the local population. Many of these ingredients, such as offal, herring, or the freely foraged seaweed and periwinkles, carried memories of poverty and deprivation for a long time. The fasting rules of the Catholic church, whose influence has been waning rapidly in Ireland over the past three decades but who firmly held sway over the country until then, contributed to giving fish and seafood the flavour of obligation rather than choice.

Stuffed lamb's heart, liver, and tripe are shunned these days as the now more affluent Irish population opts for steak and roasts. Herring, a popular favourite along the North and Baltic Sea coasts, is virtually impossible to find on Irish tables, even though it is still caught by Irish fishing boats. Foraging along the beaches would have long been regarded as something done out of desperation.

A New Irish Food Scene

But over the last decade, the culinary winds have changed. A new Irish food scene is gathering momentum, and the West of Ireland is a fertile area of activity. For the 2019 season, the Guide Michelin has awarded its coveted stars to 16 restaurants in Ireland. Three of them are new on the list, all in County Cork in the Southwest. The appraisal notes highlight the use of local, seasonal ingredients and menus "inspired by nature" and sourced from small farmers, market gardeners, foragers and local fishermen.

Other starred restaurants in the West include [Aniar](#), whose name means "from the West" and is programmatic for the provenance of their ingredients, and [Loam](#), named after a common local soil type, both in Galway city, and the [Wild Honey Inn](#) in County Clare, a pub-style establishment serving local produce since the 1860s. A further three restaurants in the West of Ireland newly received the Michelin "Bib Gourmand", the award for moderately-priced eateries.

Local, seasonal ingredients, innovative takes on traditional techniques, and simplicity – the new scene in Ireland follows in the footsteps of the New Nordic Cuisine. Similar to the Nordic countries, Ireland's culinary traditions had not, in the past, been formulated into a fine dining cuisine akin to the French or Chinese. Yet a new awareness for quality ingredients and indigenous flavours is drawing out the potential of local produce and craftsmanship.

Dairy farming has been the dominant type of farming for millennia, and the importance of cattle is inscribed in ancient Irish myths such as 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley'. Frequent rain keeps the pastures green all year round, allowing for outdoor grazing for most of the year. Ireland is currently the 10th biggest exporter of dairy products worldwide, mostly in butter, cheese, cream, milk, whey and milk powder for infant formula, of which this small country produces 10% of the global yearly output. While 85% of the island's dairy production today goes into this large-scale industrial economy, Ireland has also re-discovered its artisan cheese production.

The link to the ancient traditions was lost during the colonial period, but in the 1970s, local smallholder farmers and newly arrived Dutch and German families began to produce artisan raw milk cheeses again. Slowly, amateur cheesemakers became established professionals, and nowadays, [Irish farmhouse cheeses](#) can be found in restaurants in Dublin, Cork and Galway as well as farmer's markets and shops across the country. The style of the cheeses is as diverse as the producers themselves. Some recall Cheddar, others Brie, Gruyères, Gouda, Mozzarella or Manchego; there are

hard, semi-hard, soft and blue cheeses. Cow's milk is used as well as that of sheep, goat, and even buffalo; some use carrageen seaweed to curdle the milk instead of rennet.

Tradition and innovation combine also in other areas of artisan food production. Charcuterie does not have a history here, but creative butchers have begun to produce air-dried lamb in Connemara, where sheep and lambs graze on wild herbs, heather and wild flowers in the hills, or chorizo and venison salami in Cork. Traditional 'black pudding' blood sausage is refined with peat smoke. The varied and highly nutritious seaweeds, dulse and kelp from the Western shores are made into a range of pestos, butters, or even used to flavour gin. Honey and berries are made into meads, jams, and chutneys.

Beer and whiskey are a cliché of Irish identity, but as an industry, brewing and distilling had withered. Smaller, independent companies had suffered from the struggles of national independence, from prohibition in the USA, from the loss of the internal British market, and a stagnant domestic market as the young country languished economically for decades after its founding in 1922. The number of distilleries in Ireland decreased steadily until there were only two companies left in the 1970s, producing a handful of brands. But this industry, too, has seen a revival in the last two decades, as independent producers are springing up around the country.

[Dingle Distillery](#) on the Irish-speaking Dingle peninsula was the first independent whiskey producer to release a single-pot still whiskey in 2017. Also artisan gin production is soaring, with producers creating idiosyncratic styles using local botanicals such as fuchsia, bog myrtle, rowanberry, hawthorn and heather, sometimes seasonally foraged. [Bertha's Revenge gin](#) from County Cork, on the other hand, is distilled from milk whey – and named after a famous local cow who lived to the Methuselaen age of 48.

The [craft beer movement](#) took root in Ireland in the mid-2000s, led by breweries in the West – Galway, Kerry and Cork. A change in the tax law as well as newly available national and EU-funding saw their number mushroom in the early 2010s. These microbreweries employ seven times more people today than the large breweries, and they bring jobs to rural regions – 32 craft beer breweries are located in the Western coastal areas. Along with the breweries come specialized shops and pubs, further strengthening regional economies. Again, innovation and tradition mingle with influences from abroad. Breweries use local ingredients like honey, oats, and peat smoke and offer a wide range, from seasonal beers and international styles such as kettle sours, IPAs and wheat beers, to Irish classics like porters and ales.

The upsurge of interest in and awareness about Irish cuisine can be traced to a number of factors. The economic 'Celtic Tiger' boom of the 1990s and early 2000s allowed more people to frequent restaurants and buy speciality foods regularly. It also permitted more travel to foreign destinations and thereby encounters with local cuisines and foodways – and, not least, with the sense of pride and identification with the local food culture that is almost proverbial in many places, beginning with France, Italy and Spain but spanning right across the globe. Many are also the stories of Irish 'expats' who return from years of traveling and working abroad with a portfolio of food-related business ideas and skills, from brewing or sustainable farming to high-end cooking.

Yet, while the individual entrepreneurial and epicurean spirit is important, a vital element to the momentum seems to be a growing awareness of the interdependencies within the community. This renaissance of Ireland's West is certainly encouraged by the creation of the [Wild Atlantic Way](#) in 2014, a highly successful tourism initiative along Ireland's West Coast highlighting not only natural sights but also the rich cultural heritage and activities common to the coastal regions. The leading

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local chefs are practicing a community spirit with their suppliers and customers. Moreover, they are actively promoting this spirit beyond their own menus and opening hours.

Every October, for the past four years, the [*Food on the Edge*](#) symposium has been bringing chefs and food leaders from Ireland and around the world together in Galway to speak about their vision for the future of food in the industry and on the planet. The symposium is the brainchild of chef JP McMahon, owner of Aniar as well as two other restaurants in the city. In 2018, the symposium touched on topics as varied as food waste, the importance of service, food education, and mentorship, as well as showcasing around 90 Irish artisan food producers in a central marketplace.

The quality of Irish artisan produce, restaurants, and craftsmanship has not gone unnoticed abroad, either. In fact, the Galway region has been declared the [European Region of Gastronomy 2018](#). It is an accolade that may stand symbolically for the whole West of Ireland, a region that, at long last, has blossomed into a vibrant place bringing together the past and the future through local food.