The Pig in Irish Cuisine and Culture

In Ireland today, we eat more pigmeat per capita, approximately 32.4 kilograms, than any other meat, yet you very seldom if ever see a pig (C.S.O.). Fat and flavour are two words that are synonymous with pig meat, yet scientists have spent the last thirty years cross breeding to produce leaner, low-fat pigs. Today’s pig professionals prefer to use the term “pig finishing” as opposed to the more traditional “pig fattening” (Tuite). The pig evokes many myths and themes in relation to cuisine. Charles Lamb (1775-1834), in his essay Dissertation upon Roast Pig, cites Conculitus in attributing the accidental discovery of the art of roasting to the humble pig. The pig has been singled out by many cultures as a food to be avoided or even abominated, and Harris (1997) illustrates the environmental effect this can have by contrasting the landscape of Christian Albania with that of Muslim Albania.

This paper will focus on the pig in Irish cuisine and culture from ancient times to the present day. The inspiration for this paper came from a folklore talk about how Saint Martin created the pig from a piece of fat. The story is one of a number recorded by Seán Ó Conaill, the famous Kerry storyteller and goes as follows:

From St Martin’s fat they were made. He was travelling around, and one night he came to a house and yard. At that time there were only cattle; there were no pigs or piglets. He asked the man of the house if there was anything to eat the chaff and the grain. The man replied there were only the cattle. St Martin said it was a great pity to have that much chaff going to waste. At night when they were going to bed, he handed a piece of fat to the servant girl and told her to put it under a tub, and not to look at it at all until he would give her the word next day. The girl did so, but she kept a bit of the fat and put it under a keeler to find out what it would be.

When St Martin rose next day he asked her to go and lift up the tub. She lifted it up, and there under it were a sow and twelve piglets. It was a great wonder to them, as they had never before seen pig or piglet.

The girl then went to the keeler and lifted it, and it was full of mice and rats! As soon as the keeler was lifted, they went running about and under the hole that they could got into. When St Martin saw them, he put pig fat off the mill pots and threw it at them and made a cat with that throw. And that is why the cat ever since goes after mice and rats (Ó Conaill).

The place of the pig has long been established in Irish literature, and longer still in Irish topography. The word muc, a boar, like the word muc, a pig, is a common element of placenames, from Kanturk (boar’s head) in West Cork to Ros Muc (headland of pigs) in West Galway. The Irish pig had its place in literature well established long before George Orwell’s English pig, Major, headed the dictatorship in Animal Farm. It was a wild boar that killed the hero Diarmait in the Fenian tale The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne, on top of Ben Bulben in County Sligo (Mac Con Iomaire). In Ancient and Medieval Ireland, wild boars were hunted with great fervour, and the prime cuts were reserved for the warrior classes, and certain other individuals. At a feast, a leg of pork was traditionally reserved for a king, a haunch for a queen, and a boar’s head for a character. The champion warrior was given the best portion of cured (Cúart Mhurh or Champions’ Share), and fights often took place to decide who should receive it. Gantz (1981) describes how in the ninth century tale The story of Mac Daltha’s Pig, Cet mac Matala, got surprised over the year of Ireland: “Moreover he flauted his valu on high above him, and took a knife in his hand and sat beside the pig. ’Let someone be found among the men of Ireland’, said he, ’to endure battle with me, or leave the pig for me to divide!’”

It did not take long before the wild pigs were domesticated. Whereas cattle might be kept for milk and sheep for wool, the only reason for pig rearing was as a source of food. Until the late medieval period, the “domesticated” pigs were fattened on woodcock, hare, mouse, insect and whitethorn, giving their flesh a delicious flavour. So important was this resource that it is acknowledged by an entry in the Annals of Clonmacnoise for the year 1038: “There was such an abundance of acorns this year that it fattened the pigges [runts of pigges]” ( Sexton 45). In another mythological tale, two pig keepers, were called ‘sacach’ after the home of sacach (pig keeper to the king of Munster) and the other called ‘rocht’ after its grunt (pig keeper to the king of Connacht), were such good friends that the one from the north would bring his pigs south when there was a mast of oak and beech nuts in Munster. If the mast fell in Connacht, the pig-keeper from the south would travel to the local slaughterer (mucadh mac an tuisceart) in West Galway. The Irish pig had its place in literature well established long before George Orwell’s English pig, Major, headed the dictatorship in Animal Farm. It was a wild boar that killed the hero Diarmait in the Fenian tale The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne, on top of Ben Bulben in County Sligo (Mac Con Iomaire). In Ancient and Medieval Ireland, wild boars were hunted with great fervour, and the prime cuts were reserved for the warrior classes, and certain other individuals. At a feast, a leg of pork was traditionally reserved for a king, a haunch for a queen, and a boar’s head for a character. The champion warrior was given the best portion of cured (Cúart Mhurh or Champions’ Share), and fights often took place to decide who should receive it. Gantz (1981) describes how in the ninth century tale The story of Mac Daltha’s Pig, Cet mac Matala, got surprised over the year of Ireland: “Moreover he flauted his valu on high above him, and took a knife in his hand and sat beside the pig. ’Let someone be found among the men of Ireland’, said he, ’to endure battle with me, or leave the pig for me to divide!’”

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The potato transformed Ireland from an under populated island of one million in the 1590s to 8.2 million in 1840, making it the most densely populated country in Europe. Two centuries of genetic evolution resulted in potato yields growing from two tons per acre in 1670 to ten tons per acre in 1800. A constant supply of potato, which was not seen as a commercial crop, ensured that even the smallest family could keep a few pigs on a potato-rich diet. Pat Tuite, an expert on pigs with Teagasc, the Irish Agricultural and Food Development Authority, reminded me that the potatoes were cooked for the pigs and that they also enjoyed whey, the by product of both butter and cheese making (Tuite). The agronomist, Arthur Young, while travelling through Ireland, commented in 1770 that in the town of Mitchelstown in County Cork “there seemed to be more pigs than human beings”. So plentiful were pigs at this time that on the eve of the Great Famine in 1841 the pig population was calculated to be 1,412,813 (Sexton 46). 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.

Pork was popular and was the main meat eaten at all feasts in the main houses; indeed a feast was considered incomplete without a whole roasted pig. In the poorer holdings, fresh pork was highly prized, as it was only available when a pig’s own was killed. Most of the pig was salted, placed in the brine barrel for a period or placed up the chimney for smoking.

Certain superstitions were observed concerning the time of killing. Pigs were traditionally killed only in months that contained the letter “r”, since the heat of the summer months caused the meat to turn foul. In some counties it was believed that pigs should not be killed under the full moon (Mahon 58). The main breed of pig from the medieval period was the Blar Azor Back or Greyhound Pig, which was very efficient in converting organic waste into meat (Fitzgerald). The killing of the pig was an important ritual and a social occasion in rural Ireland, for it meant full and plenty for all. Neighbours, who came to help, brought a handful of salt for the curing, and when the work was done each got a share of the puddings and the fresh pork. There were a number of days where it was traditional to kill a pig, the Michaelmas feast (29 September), Saint Martins Day (11 November) and St Patrick’s Day (17 March). Olive Sharkey gives a vivid description of the killing of the barrow pig in rural Ireland during the 1950s. A barrow pig is a male pig castrated before puberty.

The local slaugtherer (buisitair) a man experienced in the rustic art of pig killing, was approached to do the job, though some farmers killed their own pigs. When the buisitair arrived the whole family gathered round to watch the killing. His first job was to plunge the knife in the pig’s heart via the throat, using a
special knife. The screeching during this performance was something awful, but the animal died instantly once the heart had been reached, usually to a roar of applause from the onlookers. The animal was then draped across a pig-gib, a sort of bench, and had the fine hairs on its body scraped off. To make this a simple job the animal was immersed in hot water a number of times until the bristles were softened and easy to remove. If a few bristles were accidentally missed the bacon was known as 'hairy bacon!'

During the killing of the pig it was imperative to draw a good flow of blood to ensure good quality meat. This blood was collected in a bucket for the making of puddings. The carcass would then be hung from a hook in the shed with a basin under its head to collect the dripping blood. A potato was often placed in the pig’s mouth to aid the dripping process. If the carcass was dismembered. Sharkey recalls that her father maintained that each pound weight in the pig’s head corresponded to a stone weight in the body. The blood was washed and then each piece that was to be preserved was carefully salted and packed in a ham case for further curing. It was customary in parts of the midlands to season the hams in a straw bed for a few days at this stage, while in other areas juniper berries were placed in the fire when hanging the hams and slices (sides of bacon), wrapped in brown paper, in the chimney for smoking (Sharkey 166). While the killing was predominately men’s work, it was the women who took most responsibility for the curing and smoking. Puddings have always been popular in Irish cuisine. The pig’s intestines were washed well in a stream, and a mixture of onions, lamb, and soaked in spices, tomato and flour were mixed with the blood and the mixture was stuffed into the casing and boiled for about an hour, cooled and the puddings were divided amongst the neighbours.

The pig was so palatable that the famous gastronomic writer Grimod de la Reyniere once claimed that the only piece you couldn’t eat was the “oink”. Sharkey recalls that her father remarked this was a sad experience. When farmers have made tin whistles out of it! No part went to waste; the blood and offal were used, the trotters were known as crubeens (from crub, hoof), and were boiled and eaten with cabbage. In Galway the knee joint was popular and known as the giuninns (from gin, knee). The head was roasted whole or often boiled and pressed and prepared as Brawn. The chitterlings (small intestines) were meticulously prepared washing in cool water and the poler, a mixture of undigested food and faeces, chitterlings were once a popular bar food in Dublin. Pig hair was used for paintbrushes and the bladder was occasionally inflated, using a goose quill, to be used as a football by the children. Meinertzla (2007) provides a pictorial review of the vast array of products derived from a single pig. These range from ammunitions to chewing gum.

Among the popular dishes in the repertoires of the seemingly ever growing number of talented Irish chefs. Michael Clifford popularised Clonakilty Baking as a starter in his Cork restaurant Clifford’s in the late 1980s, and its use has become widespread since, as a starter. An original mac and cheese dish was paired with a dish which has become modernised, "a la Pierre Kautman" by a number of Irish chefs, who bone them out and stuff them with sweetbreads. Keith virgin, the first Irish chef to be awarded two Michelin stars, has roasted suckling pig as one of his signature dishes. Richard Corrigan is keeping the Irish flag flying in London in his Michelin starred Soho restaurant, Lindsay House, where traditional pork and bacon dishes from his childhood are creatively re-interpreted with simplicity and taste.

Sausages and rashers have long been popular in Dublin and are the main ingredients in the city’s most famous dish “Dublin Coddle.” Coddle is similar to an Irish stew except that it uses pork rashers and sausage instead of lamb. It was, traditionally, a Saturday night dish when the men came home from the public houses. Terry Flynn has a book on Dublin Folklore called Monto, Munster, Madams and Black Coddle. The black coddle resulted from snot falling down the chimney into the cauldron. James Joyce describes Denny’s sausages with relish in Ulysses, and like many other Irish emigrants, he would welcome visitors from home only if they brought Irish sausages and Irish whiskey with them. Even today, every family has its favourite brand of sausages; Byrne’s, Olhausens, Granby’s, Hafner’s, Denny’s Gold Medal, Kearns and Superquinn are among the most popular. Ironically the same James Joyce, who put Dublin pork kidneys on the world table in Ulysses, was later to call his native Ireland “the old sow that eats her own farrow” (184-5).
in leaner low-fat pigs, many argue, to the detriment of flavour. Alas, all is not lost. There is a growth in consumer demand for quality local food, and some producers like J. Hick & Sons, and Prue & David Rudd and Family are leading the way. The Rudd process and distribute branded antibiotic-free pig related products with the mission of “re-inventing the tastes of bygone days with the quality of modern day standards”. Few could argue with the late Irish writer John B. Keane (72): “When this kind of bacon is boiling with its old colleague, white cabbage, there is a gurgle from the pot that would tear the heart out of any hungry man”.

References


Tuite, Pat. Personal Communication with Pat Tuite, Chief Pig Advisor, Teagasc. 3 May 2002.


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Irish cuisine is the style of cooking that originated from Ireland, an island in the North Atlantic; or was developed by the Irish people. It has evolved from centuries of social and political change, and the mixing of the different cultures in Ireland, predominantly the English and Irish (and, in Ulster, the Scottish). The cuisine is founded upon the crops and animals farmed in its temperate climate. Irish cuisine is a style of cooking originating from Ireland or developed by Irish people. It evolved from centuries of social and political change and mixing between the different cultures on the island, predominantly English and Irish. The cuisine takes its influence from the crops grown and animals远农场 in its temperate climate. Mac Con Iomaire, M. (2010) “The Pig in Irish Cuisine and Culture” in MC Journal – the Journal of Media and Culture, Vol. 13, No. 5. (http://arrow.dit.ie/tfschafart/2/). Mac Con Iomaire, M. (2010) “Irish Corned Beef: A Culinary History” in Journal of Culinary Science and Technology, Vol. 9, No. 2. (http://arrow.dit.ie/tfschafart/23/).