

“Traditional Irish dishes are always simple, yet hearty and full of flavor”

Taste of Ireland

By Michael Donahue

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Patrick Reilly, chef and co-owner of the Majestic Grille, prepares grilled salmon with colcannon, a traditional Irish meal.

Photos by Mike Maple

Irish food is "simply cooked foods," Reilly said.

Saucier agrees.

"There's not too much to it, ever," Saucier said. "It's a very simple process that comes out very tasty at the end. It's never an overdone process."

Like in Memphis, pork is popular -- because historically it's inexpensive, a secondary cut in Ireland.

Drinking green beer, eating corned beef and cabbage and wearing green clothing are common St. Patrick's Day traditions -- in the United States.

None of those are traditional March 17 customs in Ireland.

When Patrick Reilly was growing up in Leixlip outside Dublin, St. Patrick's Day was a religious holiday and the schools were closed. It was a "family day," with everyone picking a shamrock and sticking it in their lapel and going to Mass. The pubs closed at 10 p.m.

"A typical Irish St. Patrick's dinner would be a roast leg of lamb, some spring peas, some baby new potatoes and some fresh mint," Reilly said. "You'd take the mint and make a mint sauce with vinegar and sugar."

Reilly keeps traditional Irish food alive at the Majestic Grille at 145 South Main. He's the chef and co-owns the restaurant with his wife, Deni.

At Celtic Crossing, owner D.J.Naylor, also from Ireland, and chef Bobby Saucier feature traditional Irish dishes.





D.J. Naylor (left), owner of Celtic Crossing in Cooper-Young, says his chef, Bobby Saucier, serves corned beef and cabbage although the dish didn't originate in Ireland and isn't eaten there.

"Pigs would eat anything. If they let the pigs run in the woods where the oak trees were, pigs would eat a lot of acorns. They'd fatten up for free. If you had a cow or a lamb, you had to have grass. You got a lot more mileage out of a pig than a cow," Reilly said.

Reilly, who has six sisters and three brothers, grew up around food. His uncle was a chef and his aunt was a jam and jelly maker.

"My dad was a great gardener. They had a huge two-acre garden. He used to grow peas, potatoes, rhubarb and blueberries."

Reilly was hooked at age 8 after he successfully baked a batch of oat-meal cookies.

In culinary school, he apprenticed in the executive dining room at the Guinness Brewery, where employees were given 10 free bottles of the stout at the end of each work week.

"We used to cook Dover sole, lots of salmon, lots of local lamb."

They generously used their product in some of their dishes.

The Irish version of English steak and kidney pie was steak and mushroom pie made with Guinness.

"We made a great Guinness beer batter, which was fabulous for frying fish."

Growing up one of 12 children in Ballina in County Mayo, Naylor said his family dinners were on a strict schedule devised by his mom

"On Tuesday it was bacon and cabbage, on Wednesday, shepherd's pie; Thursday, Irish stew; and Fridays, the fish day -- cod, salmon as a bonus, trout," he said. "Every dish was served with potatoes maybe two or three different ways. On Sunday we'd have chicken and ham. Dinner was at 1:00 regardless of work or school. Tea at 6 p.m."

Naylor, who cooks on occasion at the bar/restaurant at 903 S. Cooper, said family members supplied recipes to Celtic Crossing.

Saucier was having trouble making "boxty" -- a savory pancake made of potatoes, onions and parsley.

"I couldn't get it right," he said.

He called Naylor's sister in Ireland.



PHOTOS BY MIKE MAPLE/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Deni and Patrick Reilly, owners of Majestic Grille, prepare many traditional Irish meals at their Downtown restaurant. He says Irish recipes are generally simple.

"She gave me a recipe in five minutes. It's not hard at all. She straightened me out in just a couple of minutes.

"The thing about Irish cooks, they're always willing to share. I can call a restaurant in another city and they're always more than willing to help you out," Saucier said.

Reilly's sister taught his wife how to make Irish soda bread, a bread made of unrefined flour, baking soda and water. The recipe originally was his mother's.

The bread, along with leek-potato soup and colcannon, an Irish specialty of mashed potatoes, onions and cabbage, are popular items at the Majestic Grille.

Shepherd's pie is a popular item at Celtic Crossing.

"It's beef with gravy, carrot, onions and topped with mashed potatoes and baked in individual serving dishes with Irish cheddar cheese on top," Saucier said. "It's a very homey thing. It's very hearty and the taste is just outstanding. Anytime you mix beef and potatoes together you get a good thing."

And while corned beef with cabbage is served at Celtic Crossing, it's actually an American dish.

"The Irish don't eat corned beef and cabbage," Reilly said. "That's a myth."

But they give it a special touch at Celtic Crossing, serving it with a parsley sauce, which Naylor says "is very, very Irish."

And potatoes, by the way, "are not indigenous to Ireland," Reilly said.

He's right. According to "The Food Encyclopedia" by Jacques L. Rolland and Carol Sherman, (Robert Rose, \$49.95), potatoes were taken from South America to Spain in the early 1500s. In 1585, Sir Francis Drake brought a batch from Chile that would eventually lead to the tubers's widespread popularity across the continent.

As for green beer, Naylor originally wasn't going to serve it at Celtic Crossing on St. Patrick's Day.

"The first year we did Paddy's, I refused to have green beer 'cause it's not really an Irish thing," he said.

Because of the demand for it, Naylor changed his mind and served it the next year. Last St. Patrick's Day, they served "probably 1,500 pints" of the emerald-colored beer.

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Recipes to follow...

Roast Leg of Lamb

2 tbsp. whole grain Dijon-style mustard
2 tbsp. chopped fresh rosemary
2 tbsp. chopped fresh thyme
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
3 cloves garlic, minced
5 lb. whole leg of lamb
1 tsp. coarse sea salt

In a small bowl, combine the mustard, rosemary, thyme, ground black pepper, and garlic. Mix well and apply to the lamb. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator overnight.

Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Place lamb on a rack in a roasting pan and sprinkle with salt to taste.

Bake at 450 degrees for 20 minutes, then reduce heat to 400 degrees and roast for 55 to 60 more minutes for medium rare. The internal temperature should be at least 145 degrees when taken with a meat thermometer. Remove from the oven. Cover loosely with foil and let rest for about 15 minutes before carving.

Note. You can buy a boneless leg of lamb at your butcher, but I prefer to roast it with the bone in as it makes for a juicier piece of meat.

Serves 8 to 10.

Source: Patrick Reilly, Majestic Grille

Colcannon

6 medium potatoes, peeled and cut into pieces
2 cups chopped cabbage
1 large onion, chopped
1 stick plus 1 tsp. butter
1/4 cup heavy cream
Salt
Pepper

Place potatoes in a large saucepan or Dutch oven. Cover with water. Add a pinch of salt. Bring to a boil. Cover and cook over medium heat until potatoes are almost tender. Drain well and mash with a potato masher.

Meanwhile, bring another pot of water to a boil. Add a pinch of salt and cabbage. Simmer for 5-6 minutes or until cabbage is tender. Drain well.

Melt 1 tsp. butter in a skillet. Sauté onion until clear, about 2 minutes. Add cabbage, then potatoes. Stir in remaining butter and cream. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Note: Kerrygold Irish butter now is available in local supermarkets and is highly recommended for this dish, which goes well with the roasted lamb.

Serves 6.

Source: Patrick Reilly, Majestic Grille

Shepherd's Pie

1 lb. lean ground beef
1 medium onion, rough chopped
2 large carrots, rough chopped
1 tbsp. fresh chopped garlic
1/2 tbsp. thyme
1 cup frozen green peas
1/2 cup Guinness (or any dark beer)
3 cups mashed potatoes
1/2 cup grated cheddar cheese

Brown meat in a skillet. Remove half of excess fat. Add onions, carrots, and cook until carrots are tender. Add thyme, green peas and Guinness. Cook for 15 minutes. Put in individual bowls or into one pie dish. Cover with mashed potatoes. Bake in preheated 350 degree oven for 15 min. Remove. Add cheddar cheese. Cook until cheese is melted. Serve immediately.

Serves 4.

Source: Bobby Saucier, Celtic Crossing

Apple Mint Jelly

12 medium cooking apples
3 cups. sugar
Small bunch fresh mint (about 2 oz.)

Quarter apples. Place in large Dutch oven with mint and add just enough water to cover. Cook on low heat, covered, 2 hours or until apples have disintegrated. Put apples, including juice, into jelly bag or four thicknesses of cheesecloth. Allow juice to drip from bag. (For clear jelly, do not squeeze bag.)

Combine four cups of the juice with sugar and boil rapidly to jelling point, 220 degrees to 222 degrees or until two drops of jelly will run together off side of spoon. Remove from heat. Pour into hot, sterilized jelly glasses or canning jars. Seal.

Makes about 4 half-pints.

Source: Patrick Reilly, Majestic Grille