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A History of Seafood in Irish Cuisine and Culture

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> '*One of the many paradoxes which bloom as freely as the shamrock in its native land is this; that the coasts of the emerald isle are rich in seafood, but that the Irish people have on the whole been shy of consuming it. One has only to imagine what would happen on these coasts, if the people of, say, Singapore were suddenly transplanted thither, to realise the extent of this shyness.*'[1]

Introduction

Fish is one of the most abundant wild foods available to a small island nation. Certain species of seafood have moved from being 'poor man's food' to 'luxury food' over time. It may be said that the Irish do not behave as island people since we have little or no history of exploiting the sea compared to our European partners. Ireland was late developing its fishing industry and now suffers reduced EU fish quotas, the unfortunate but necessary result of decades of over-fishing on European waters. This paper investigates the historical role seafood has played in Irish cuisine and culture – past and present. The paper aims to dispel the myth that the Irish have no maritime food tradition and highlights that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Comparisons will be made between the consumption of seafood in Ireland and in other European countries. The paper identifies the factors (political, economic, cultural and religious) that have influenced Irish consumers in their purchase and consumption of fish, and discovers what food the Irish prefer to fish.

Mythology

The wild Irish salmon features strongly in Irish mythology and until the introduction of the Euro graced some of the nation's coinage. The salmon also appears in topography particularly in the County Kildare town of Leixlip (Léim an Bhradáin) meaning literally 'Salmon's Leap'. 'Leixlip' derives from the Norse for salmon 'lax'. A tale from the Fenian cycle of Irish mythology states that the River Boyne was home to a magical salmon that ate nuts from a hazel tree and was known as the Salmon of Knowledge. A druid had foretold that whoever first ate of the flesh of that magical

[1] Alan Davidson, *North Atlantic Seafood* (Totnes, 2003), p. 468

salmon would have knowledge of all things. Demne's father was Cumhail Mac Art, a warrior killed before his child was born. Fearing for her son's safety at the hands of her husband's killers, Demne's mother sent him away to be raised by a woman warrior and druidess. Unable to avoid pursuit by his father's enemies, Demne decided to become a poet. A poet's high status in Celtic society would shield him from harm. He studied with a poet named Finnéagas who lived near the River Boyne. Having watched the salmon for many years, Finnéagas finally caught it and told his apprentice Demne to cook the fish. While the salmon was cooking, Demne burnt his thumb. To ease the pain, he licked the burn thereby tasting the magic fish. Demne told Finnéagas what had happened and his mentor decreed that the young Demne was the one intended to eat the salmon and changed his name to "Fionn". Henceforth known as Fionn Mac Cumhail, he received three gifts that would make him a great poet: magic, great insight, and the power of words.

History

Ireland's long and indented coastline extends to an impressive 7,000 kilometres, yet no place in the whole country is more that 100km from the coast. About 7,000 years ago the first inhabitants, who arrived by sea, set up home in the northeast of the island. From here they travelled the coastline from the northeast to the very southwest. Coastal areas supported many early settlers, as the interior parts of the country were heavily forested and inaccessible. The archaeological record shows that middens, huge heaps of shells and discarded bones, the remains of their fishing and hunting, mark the sites of their foraging.[2] It is believed that many of these sites were used seasonally.[3] The Mount Sandel site in County Derry was probably used during the summer to catch salmon, and eels during the autumn.[4] At Dunloughan Bay, near Ballyconneely in County Galway, shell middens, dating from the early Bronze Age to the tenth century A.D., are being exposed by erosion and over-grazing. These sites give a wonderful snapshot of history and contain rich deposits of oysters, cockles, limpets, winkles, dog whelks and razorfish interspersed with burnt stones and

[2] Nöel P. Wilkens, *Alive Alive O: The Shellfish and Shellfisheries of Ireland*, (Kinvara, 2004), p.8
[3] M. O Kelly, *Early Ireland – A Introduction to Irish Prehistory*, (Cambridge, 1995), p.27
[4] P. Harbison, *Pre-Christian Ireland*, (London, 1994), p.22

wickerwork reduced to charcoal. Oysters seem to dominate the earlier Bronze Age sites, winkles and limpets the later ones.[5]

Christianity arrived in Ireland in the fifth century with Saint Patrick and established a foothold quickly, embracing many of the old customs and rituals of druidism. Monasteries became centres of learning and many of the larger archaeological remains of fish traps and complex wattle fences and woven baskets used for catching salmon and eels have been found at monastic sites, particularly in the Shannon Estuary.[6] It is suggested that Ireland saved western civilisation after the Visigoths sacked Rome and Europe was plunged into the 'Dark Ages'.[7] Irish monks preserved and copied many of the Greek and Roman texts and Ireland's Monasteries became safe havens and intellectual centres for Europe's learned classes. Along with Christianity came the custom of abstaining from meat on Fridays, on fast days and during Lent. Although abstinence from meat did not automatically mean the consumption of fish, as eggs were also a common source of protein, there was a clear correlation between the increased consumption of fish and days of fast and abstinence. For many inland areas these were the only times when fish was available. 'Cadgers' or salesmen travelled through the district in horse drawn carts, selling fish to locals, travelling many miles until their load was sold.[8]

The salmon was regarded as the 'king of fish'. Gaelic chiefs saved the prized position at their feasts for the salmon, which they roasted whole over an open spit and basted with wine, honey and herbs. There is evidence of an export trade in salmon. Indeed, between 1400-1416 almost thirty licences were issued to Bristol merchants who were permitted to import old wine, salt and cloth and afterwards return home with salmon and Irish goods. By 1540 Irish ship-owners were credited with having very up-to-date ships and Irish seamen were quick to take advantage of the great North Atlantic fisheries that were then opened. The Tudor conquest from the sixteenth century severely restricted the further development of native-owned shipping. Hugh O' Neill saw the importance of Irish commercial and fishing fleets and considered the

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[5] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O, p.8*
[6] A. O' Sullivan, *Foragers, Farmers and Fishers – An Intertidal Archaeological Survey of the Shannon Estuary*, (Dublin, 2001), p.143
[7] Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilisation*, (London, 1995)
[8] J. Mc Gowan, *Echoes of a Savage Land*, (Dublin, 2001), p.94

possibility of an Irish navy, but his military failure after the Battle of Kinsale (1601) led to centuries where the Irish plied their seafaring skills in foreign navies.[9] During the eighteenth century large quantities of salted salmon were exported to Italy and France. Foreign trawlers fishing in Irish waters are not a new phenomenon either. French fishing fleets, particularly off the south-western coast, fished Irish mackerel shoals intensively. In 1757, a Cork City newspaper reported the presence of fifty French mackerel fishing vessels fishing near Bantry Bay in County Cork '*without interruption from revenue cutters'*.[10]

Fish was one of the principal elements of the modest diet of eighteen-century Dublin, and was consumed in large quantities.[11] This was both because of its relative cheapness and on account of the religious observances of the majority of the population. The variety of seafood and fresh water fish available was remarkable and included, as well as staples such as herring and oysters, hake, haddock, whiting, turbot, trout, eel and salmon. It is interesting to note that city folk seemed to favour bi-valve molluscs like oysters and mussels while country folk favoured gastropods like winkles. The more prosperous members of society, who ate seafood from choice rather than necessity, consumed other shellfish such as crab, shrimp, lobster and scallops. The strand at Irishtown was renowned for the large quantities of shrimps caught there until the great frost of 1740 destroyed them and the shrimp fishery there never recovered.[12] Isolated food items do not make an ethnic diet; the Irish have a long history of dairy products or 'white meats' as they were called, not to mention both the humble pig and the potato. The painter, Hugh Douglas Hamilton captured itinerant hawkers and sellers during the late 18th century in his 'Cries of Dublin'[13]. These illustrations include, along with many food peddlers, vendors in the fish and shellfish trade, particularly oyster and herring sellers. Oysters were transported to Dublin from Carlingford Lough, some 70km away, and were sold throughout the city, mostly for immediate consumption. There was such a large demand for oysters that

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[9] John de Courcy Ireland, (Maritime History) *The Encyclopaedia of Ireland*, (Dublin, 2003) p.694-695
[10] Cathal Cowan and Regina Sexton, *Ireland's Traditional Foods: An Exploration of Irish Local and Typical Foods and Drinks*, (Dublin, 1997), p.54
[11] L.A. Clarkson and E.M. Crawford, *Feast and Famine, Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1900*, (Oxford, 2001), p.45
[12] Jim Cooke, (The Rise and Fall of Ringsend Oyster Beds) *A Maritime History of Ringsend*, (Dublin, 2000), p.61
[13] William Laffan (Editor), The Cries of Dublin, (Dublin, 2003)

artificial oyster beds were located north of the city near Clontarf, Howth and Malahide to ensure a steady supply.[14]

Herrings were an important part of the Irish diet as they could be eaten fresh or preserved for the winter months. They featured strongly on fast days, so much so that following Lent, butchers led 'Herring Funerals' to celebrate their customers' return to meat, where a herring was beaten through the town on Easter Sunday, thrown into the water and a quarter of lamb dressed with ribbons was hung up in its place.[15] During great runs of herring the fish was sold cheaply, and many housewives preserved their own in barrels. Jonathan Swift, ever opinionated, maintained that the finest herrings came from Malahide. His fictional cry reads;

'Be not caring, Leave of swearing.
Buy my herrings, Fresh from Malahide,
Better never was tried.
Come, eat them with pure fresh butter and mustard,
Their bellies are soft, and as white as custard.
Come, sixpence a dozen, to get me some bread,
Or, like my own herrings, I shall soon be dead.'[16]

The Dublin Fishery Company was established in 1818 to supply the Dublin Fish market with a better supply of fresh fish. Trawling was unknown or practically non-existent before this time and when the company purchased eight trawlers, English captains and seamen were brought over to operate them out of Ringsend.[17] Severe competition drove the price of fish down to one penny a pound in 1820. The company was wound up in 1830 but achieved a lot in its time including the discovery of new fishing grounds in the Irish Sea. One of the skippers stepped in and purchased the fleet and to quote Brabazon Walloh '*Thus the speculation that failed when ill managed under the amateur fishermen made this man's fortune*'. The introduction of

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[14] Cooke, *A Maritime History of Ringsend*, p.60
Laffan (Editor), *The Cries of Dublin*, p.62
J. Rutty, *An Essay Towards a Natural History of the County of Dublin*, (Dublin, 1772), Vol.1, pp.376-7
[15] Cathal Cowan and Regina Sexton, *Ireland's Traditional Foods: An Exploration of Irish Local and Typical Foods and Drinks,*p. 47
[16] William Laffan (Editor), The Cries of Dublin, p.94
[17] D. Bennett, (Dublin Fishery Company) *Encyclopaedia of Dublin* (Dublin, 1991) p.61

the technique of 'trawling' from Brixham, Devon to Ringsend led to the introduction of Sole and Turbot from the deep waters to the Dublin Market in large numbers.[18]

Bia Bocht (Poor Man's Food)

Whereas finfish need to be caught by hook, net or trap, certain shellfish can literally be picked up at low tide. Up until the nineteenth century it was mainly the poor who gathered shellfish. Such fare, called '*cnuasach mara'* (sea pickings) was known as '*bia bocht'* or poor man's food. For this reason shellfish failed to appear in the written accounts of commerce (and Taxation!) leading some commentators to conclude that they were not eaten here at all.[19] Thereby arose the myth that the Irish have no maritime food tradition. Things that are common or ordinary tend to be overlooked by 'History' and the gathering of simple seafood seems to leave no foothold on 'History's' pages. But we know that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence and what information we do have from archaeological digs, ancient writings and travellers' accounts, confirms that good use was made of shellfish in Ireland particularly in times of hardship.[20] The common or blue mussel (*an diúilicín* in Irish) is one of the most abundant and versatile of the Irish shellfish. Often called the poor man's oyster, it was used as bait in long line fishing, used for food, and it was also spread on fields as fertiliser. Certain seafood were considered 'poor man's food' which is reflected in the 17th century poet Aogán Ó Rathaille's lament for the days of his youth before the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, after which his Jacobite patron's lands were confiscated and the poet and his family found themselves dispossessed.

Is Fada Liom Oíche Fhírfhliuch

Is fada liom oíche fhírfhliuch gan suan, gan srann,
gan ceathra, gan maoin caoire ná buaibh na mbeann;
anfa ar toinn taoibh liom do bhuair mo cheann,
's nár chleachtas im naíon fíogaigh ná ruacain abhann

[18] extracts from Brabazon Walloh, The Deep Sea and Coast Fisheries of Ireland (1848) quoted in A Maritime History of Ringsend, p.83
[19] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O,* p.16
[20] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O,* p.16

The drenching night drags on: no sleep or snore,
no stock, no wealth of sheep, no horned cows.
This storm on the waves nearby has harrowed my head
-- I who ate no winkles or dogfish in my youth! [21]

This notion of equating shellfish with poor man's food may have been further enhanced by the evidence of the movement of starving people during the potato famine of the 1840s to the coast in search of food.

Salted ling, often known as 'battleboard', was in widespread use for centuries, either as Friday food in inland areas and as a winter staple in southern and western coastal areas. Indeed Florence Irwin[22] includes a one-pot recipe for salted ling and potatoes in her publication. Stockfish (dried fish) kept up to ten years if properly dried, but was understandably often unpleasant to eat.

Ireland since 1922

There were 4,321 craft of all sizes involved in sea fishing in Ireland in 1916 with 15, 789 men and boys employed as crew.[23] However, many of these were vessels of smaller tonnage, principally involved in small-scale fishing within a few miles offshore. The Congested District Board (1890-1923) established by Arthur Balfour to alleviate poverty in the western seaboard counties, many of which also happened to be the areas in which the Irish language was still widely spoken, did much to encourage fishing by building boat slips and fishing piers. In 1922, when independence was achieved, Arthur Griffith was the only one of the Irish Free State's founders to declare that for real prosperity, Ireland must have a strong maritime economy. His successors during the twentieth century ignored this important observation; they and the great majority of the Irish intelligentsia have turned their backs on the sea and its huge possibilities.[24] Based on reports from 1910 – 1928,

'*the number of steam trawlers on which reliance can be placed for the maintenance of regular supplies of white fish – engaged in landings in the*

[21] S. Ó Tuama and T. Kinsella (Editors), *An Duanaire: An Irish Anthology: 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Philadelphia, 1981)
[22] Florence Irwin, *Irish Country Recipes*, (Belfast, 1937)
[23] Alex Thom, *Thom's Official Directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland 1919*, (Dublin, 1919), p.696
[24] de Courcy Ireland, (Maritime History) p.694-695

Saorstát (Irish Free State) is seven only, an insignificant number having regard to the existing demand for this type of fish'.[25]

The report also highlights the dichotomy of an island nation, whose surrounding seas are full of a varied stock of fish, being dependent for its supplies of fish largely on external sources. The Department of Lands and Fisheries was re-constituted in 1928, following the Report of a Commission appointed to advise on the measures necessary for the preservation of and for the economic betterment of the Gaeltacht (Irish-language speaking regions) along the western seaboard. Many of factors that led to the improvement of marine resource were tied up with the Irish language, and were the result of inspired individuals rather than to government policy. By 1932 fish consumption per capita was estimated at approx 4.5 lbs per capita, compared with 32 lbs per capita in Great Britain at the same time.[26] Independence was followed by a bitter civil war, an economic war with England and the second world war. It was not until 1952, with the establishment of Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), the Irish state agency responsible for developing the Irish Sea fishing and Aquaculture industries, that progress began. Alan Davidson [27]describes Bord Iascaigh Mhara as a fertile and inventive organisation, whose work in the field of fish cookery is unsurpassed by that of any sister organisations in larger countries. Other organisations involved in developing marine resources were Gael Linn (a charitable trust dedicated to promoting the Irish language), The National Science Council (NSC) and University College Galway. Key individuals in each organisation's love for the Irish language led to a rare cooperation between agencies.[28] Such cooperation was uncommon as J.J. Lee[29] illustrates: '*In the promising field of fish farming, for instance, the industry must liaise with no fewer than fifteen official bodies presumably reflecting the massive duplication of effort…between the many state agencies in agriculture and food'*.

In the 1950s and 1960s a Breton family, based in west Cork, dominated the shellfish trade. Knowledge of the biology, population structure and composition of the Irish shellfish stocks was poor at the time. Fishermen were glad to have any buyers at all for their catch and there was no really strong indigenous seafood company in the west

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[25] A. Ó Brolacháin, (Fisheries) *Saorstát Éireann: Irish Free State Official Handbook*, (Dublin, 1932), p.129
[26] Ó Brolacháin, (Fisheries) ,p.128
[27] Davidson, *North Atlantic Seafood*, p. 468
[28] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O,* p.139
[29] J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, (Cambridge,1989), p.635

of Ireland with good connections to the continental markets.[30] The real catalyst for the rapid modern development was the entry of Ireland into the EU - then the Common Market - in 1972. That event was also to trigger the explosive exploitation of the wild shellfish stocks that occurred in the ensuing decade.

Commercialisation and exploitation

Transportation and refrigeration were key factors in the commercialisation of seafood. The Railways opened up inland markets for fresh fish, and it is argued that live shellfish exports only became economically viable with the advent of the roll on / roll off ferries. Until then live periwinkles were transported on open decks with instructions for the ship's captain to have them doused with seawater at regular intervals. Before refrigeration the most common method of preservation was salting and smoking.

The exploitation of all marine resources can be categorised as moving through stages: The first is the gathering / harvesting stage where the animals are gathered for personal use within a family or among neighbours. This method usually makes little demand on existing stocks. Once any species becomes a traded commodity it moves into the exploitation stage. Professional fishermen enter the fishery and control effectively passes to market forces. Without the vital stage of resource management, the inevitable outcome of exploitation is over-fishing, resulting in the eventual depletion of natural wild stocks. The logical commercial stage that follows over-exploitation is (artificial) cultivation or fish farming, a practice used for oysters by the Romans over two thousand years ago.

Oysters

A staggering amount of oysters were consumed once oysters became fashionable among city dwellers. They were the first real 'fast food' for the masses of the industrial revolution. An estimated one and half thousand million oysters were consumed each year in England in the 1860s.[31] Rule's Oysteria founded in 1798 by Thomas Rule, has a strong claim to be London's first restaurant[32]. Two of Dublin's

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[30] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O,* p.138
[31] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O,* p.100
[32] G.H. Bowden, *British Gastronomy: The Rise of Great Restaurants*, (London, 1975), p.19

most famous restaurants 'Jammet's' and 'The Red Bank' shared the oyster theme. In 1901 they were named 'Burlington Restaurant and Oyster Saloons' and the 'Red Bank Oyster Hotel' respectively.[33] The shell middens offer archaeological evidence of extensive oyster consumption from later Mesolithic period and written reports from the late 17th century illustrates their abundance and particularly the size of the native Irish oyster (Ostrea edulis). Throughout the nineteenth century the Irish oyster beds were continuously over-fished. The Government Oyster Commission reporting in 1870 recommended the utmost caution with respect to all attempts at artificial cultivation, but in 1903 the short-lived Ardfry Experimental Oyster Cultivation Station was opened in County Galway.[34] To remedy the decline in oyster production the Pacific oyster *Crassostrea gigas* was introduced into Europe on a large scale in the late 1960s and into Ireland in the early 70s; the reason being that it was easier and faster to cultivate than the native oyster and it was not prone to the disease *Bonamia ostrea*.[35] The native Oyster (Ostrea edulis) is seasonal, as it spawns during the summer months hence only available when there's an 'R' in the month. The Pacific (gigas) oyster doesn't spawn in the cold waters around Ireland so is available all year round.

One possible reason suggested for the lack of seafood consumption in Ireland is that Catholics associated fish with penance.[36] This argument seems to ignore fish consumption patterns in other European Catholic countries. It is fair to suggest that in inland counties, where the supply of fish was poor in both quality and quantity, a more negative opinion of fish prevailed than in the coastal counties where fresh seafood was more readily available. Smoked salmon is mentioned in the diary of Amhlaoibh Ó Súilleabháin from Callan in the inland County of Kilkenny. On St Patrick's Day (17th March) 1829 he records: '*we had for dinner… salt ling softened by steeping, smoke dried salmon and fresh trout*', he also expresses the following sentiment in his diary entry on 2nd April 1832 '*I do not like salt fish and fresh fish was*

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[33] Alex Thom, *Thom's Official Directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland 1901*, (Dublin, 1901), p.1958
M. Mac Con Iomaire, Dublin Restaurants 1922-2002: An Oral History (Unpublished Progress Report for Doctoral Thesis), (Dublin, 2004), p.39
[34] Wilkens, *Alive Alive O,* p.102
[35] M. Uí Chomáin, *Oyster Cuisine*, (Dublin, 2004), p.
[36] Davidson, *North Atlantic Seafood*, p. 468

not to be had, except too dear and seldom'.[37] When railways became operational in Ireland in the mid 19th century, they were used to transport large quantities of fish each year, from coastal ports to inland areas. In 1911 alone 25,590 tonnes of fish were conveyed inland from Irish ports.[38] Steam train drivers had a novel way of cooking herrings, by placing them on the coal shovel and held in the firebox for two minutes - Irish railwayman's breakfast.

After Vatican II in the late 1960s, Catholics were no longer forbidden to eat meat on a Friday. Oral evidence from Johnny Opperman[39], a retired chef / entrepreneur now in his eighties evokes an earlier era:

> *'Fish!, God when you come to think of it!, Jesus! you would commit bloody murder rather that eat a piece of meat on Friday,… when you come to think of it, the changes…'*

He goes on to describe his memories of Fridays whilst serving his apprenticeship in the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin during the mid 1930s:

> *'Only one thing I remember about Fridays, if you were on garde on Friday there was a certain priest used to come in, always in the afternoon, and he'd have a bloody big steak, and the steak was to be made so it looked like a piece of grilled turbot…(laughter)'*

Seafood Festivals and Restaurants

In the 1950s, with the foundation of Bord Fáilte, the Irish Tourist Board, there was a concerted growth in tourism. Hospitality has been synonymous with Irish culture and was enshrined in ancient times in the Brehon Laws. Festivals were seen as excellent ways to increase tourism and generate much needed revenue for local communities. The most famous of the seafood festivals is the Clarinbridge Oyster Festival that has been part of Galway's social calendar since 1954. Other festivals include the Bundoran Lobster Festival, the Foyle Oyster Festival in Inishowen, the Waterford estuary Mussel Festival at Cheekpoint and the more recent Bantry Mussel Fair that was inaugurated in the late 1980s. Wexford also has a famous Mussel Festival and hosts a local Cockle Festival at Duncannon. One of Dublin's famous seafood

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[37] M. Mc Grath (Editor), *Cinnlae Amhlaoibh Uí Shúilleabháin: The Diary of Humphrey O' Sullivan Parts 1-4*, (London, 1989)
[38] Thom, *Thom's Official Directory 1919*, p.696
[39] Interviewed by the author at his home in Wicklow on 28 April 2004

restaurants 'Restaurant na Mara' originated from a seafood festival in Dun Laoghaire in 1971. The King Sitric restaurant was also opened in 1971 in Howth and has specialised in seafood ever since. Two other Dublin seafood restaurants, the Lord Edward and the Lobster Pot have not only preserved the classical fish dishes like Sole Bonne Femme, but are also the last bastions of the classical table arts in Dublin.

Much of today's consumption of fish is linked with Fish and Chip shops. Leo Burdock's opened in 1911, Eduardo Di Mascio, a carpenter from Valveri, Italy, arrived at the height of the Civil War in 1922 and opened his first Fish and Chip shop in Dublin's Marlborough Street. Also in 1922, Ivan Beshoff, a mutineer from the famous Russian battleship Potemkin, opened his first fish and chip shop in Usher's Island.[40] There are regional differences in the culinary terminology associated with fish. Lennox's is the name synonymous with chip shops in Cork City, where fish and chips are sometimes known as '*a bag of blocks and a swimmer'*. In Dublin the vernacular describes fish and chips as a '*One and One'*, '*Blossom*' is the term for black Pollock, and '*Rock Salmon'* is dogfish fried in batter. Dogfish has recently been re-branded as '*cape shark'*. Ray and particularly long ray is very popular in Dublin, so much so that Ringsend, a south city suburb, is commonly known as 'Raytown'. The term '*pissy ray'* refers to the strong ammonia smell that can emanate from these cartilaginous fish if they are not absolutely fresh. One of Dublin's most famous chippers is Leo Burdock's and as a sign of the times we live in, they now have '*Hoki*' fish from New Zealand on the menu as an alternative to the endangered cod.

Changing Consumption Patterns

Alan Davidson[41] attributes the preservation of Ireland from the invasion of foreign dishes and restaurants to a streak of conservatism running through the Irish character. Today's Ireland is the destination of not only New Zealand's Hoki fish but many of her young population. Ireland has recently become a truly multi-cultural country and the new ethnic mix is creating demands for food provision to reflect the increased pluralist cultural values. The consumption of fish has become fashionable particularly

[40] R. Doyle, (Fresh fish and chips and no bones about it) *The Irish Times*, (Dublin 10 September 2003), p.9-10

[41] Davidson, *North Atlantic Seafood*, p. 468

due to the associated nutritional benefits. Fish was once a cheap source of food, but many species now are equally or more expensive than prime cuts of meat.

Particular species of fish have gone through cycles of being in vogue at specific times in history. The eel is amongst the oldest of Ireland's traditional foodstuffs yet the consumption of eels declined steadily in the post famine (1850s onwards) period. Today eels are mostly exported, and those that are consumed are mostly in smoked form as part of seafood platters. Monkfish, although popular today, was once used to bait lobster pots. I remember P.J. Dunne, a lecturer of mine at Catering College, recalling how he, as larder chef in 'Jammet's' restaurant coped with shortages during the 'Emergency' (WW2), and how he became an alchemist, transforming monkfish, not a popular fish at the time, into collops of lobster, scallops and scampi. One satisfied customer summed up the fabulous fare in Jammet's during the years of the Second World War as '*the finest French cooking between the fall of France and the Liberation of Paris*'.[42] Scallops were clearly common enough in the 1930s according to the story of a County Limerick housewife who was apologising profusely to a German engineer working on the Ard na Crusha power station that all she had for his dinner were scallops! Whelks are fished mainly in Counties Wicklow and Wexford and are seldom sold in Ireland but exported mostly to the lucrative Asian market. A speciality of Connemara and the Aran Islands is 'Ballach Buí', a salted 'Ballan Wrasse' but its popularity has been waning over the last two decades. Tuna fish, once only known in its tinned variety, is now on restaurant menus as 'Carpaccio', 'Ceviche' or 'Char-Grilled'. Irish fishermen are now hunting deep-water species, which are not affected by quotas. They include grenadier, orange roughey, rabbit fish, mora-mora (deepwater cod) and red fish. This raises ethical issues since some of these fish take up to 70 years to mature and replenish. Wild Irish salmon to this day is highly prized although stocks are rapidly being depleted. Farmed salmon is now so widely available that it has become one of the cheapest fish on sale today.

The Portuguese are Europe's highest consumers of fish averaging 58.5 kg per capita in 1999 compared with Ireland's 20.1 kg. Ireland was incidentally slightly ahead of

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[42] John Ryan, (There'll never be another Jammet's*) The Irish Times*, (Dublin, 11 April 1987), p.3 weekend section

England at 20 kg, Germany 15.6 kg and the Netherlands at 14.5kg.[43] On the other hand the Irish consumed a total of 96.8 kg of meat per capita in the year 2000, most of which was pig meat (38 kg) and poultry (32.4 kg) respectively. Over half of all seafood eaten in Ireland is consumed in food service outlets rather than in domestic settings. This contrasts with European countries like France, Italy, Spain and Greece where 75% of all seafood is consumed in the home.[44]

Analysis

Ireland's geographical location, on the edge of the continental shelf, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean and Irish Sea, favours us with a vast array of seafood. The island's numerous lakes, rivers and streams and canals are an angler's paradise. Yet in spite of this Ireland lags behind most of Europe in terms of seafood consumption. Irish coastal waters appear to be sufficiently favoured by fish to make it worthwhile for foreign fishermen to come here. J.J. Lee[45] argues that if Irish fishermen cannot compete with them, it is not because the fish have chosen to boycott them. This belies the real politic; there is no such thing today as Irish fish, only EU fish in Irish waters. Countries like the UK, France, Belgium and Holland had established a tradition of fishing near our coasts for years before the Irish fishing industry became properly organised, and on this basis received quotas for certain species which are multiples of those allocated to Irish fishermen.[46] Tim Pat Coogan[47] recalls an interview he conducted in 1965 with Brian Lenihan, who was at the time the junior minister responsible for fisheries, about the governments plans to develop the fishing industry (Ireland having probably the richest fishing grounds in western Europe at the time). The answer took the form of two questions relating to the number of both farmers and fishermen in the country. The number of fishermen at that time (approx 8,000) according to Lenihan '*wouldn't elect one Fianna Fáil TD on the first count in a five-seat constituency*'. In the political calculations of the day, the farmers' numbers, not the long-term potential of the fertile sea, was the prime concern. . Fishing rights were

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[43] Bord Iascaigh Mhara, *Realising the Market potential for Irish Seafood, BIM's Marketing Strategy 2001-2006*, (Dublin, 2000) p.24

[44] Ian Mannix, Seafood in Irish Cuisine and Culture, Past, Present and Future (Unpublished undergraduate Thesis), (DIT, 2004), p.63

[45] Lee, Ireland 1912-1985, p.523

[46] Frank Corr, (Conservation and Politics Spur Seafood Prices*) Hotel & Catering Review*, (Dublin, February 2004), pp. 31-33

[47] Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, (London, 2003), pp.455-456

bartered away to other EEC members in return for concessions to the powerful farm lobby.[48]

The total value of the Irish seafood industry in 2003 was €665 million, with nearly 60% of that coming from exports. Within the EU, France (€91 million) remains the premier market for Irish seafood followed by Spain (€58 million) and Great Britain (€54 million) and the most important markets outside the EU were Japan (€19 million) and South Korea (€14 million).[49] From a culinarians point of view the biggest disappointment concerning fish in Ireland is that the best of the Irish catch never sees the Irish table.

The lack of exploitation of the sea by the Irish, compared to their European neighbours, may be understood if one studies the geographic location and the nature of the coastline. In Ireland such was the abundance of the shore and inland waters that the early Irish had no reason or need to seek sustenance or resource from the deep ocean. To sail out into the Atlantic was not something that would be undertaken lightly. The Atlantic was so dangerous that the great maritime expansion to the West did not take place until the 15th century. There are always exceptions. Ireland's Saint Brendan the navigator is purported to have reached America in the sixth century, and according to Mark Kurlansky[50], the Basques were supplying a vast international market in cod by the year 1000, based on their fishing fleet's surreptitious voyages across the Atlantic to North America's fishing banks.

The abundance of other foodstuffs clearly had a bearing on Ireland's historically low level of seafood consumption when compared to some of her European neighbours. The key as to what was not consumed may lie in what was. Masons employed on Christ Church Cathedral in 1565 were fed 2lbs of salted meat, 2lbs of wheaten bread and eight pints of largely oaten ale daily. In 1577 the diet of an English soldier in Dublin on fish days was 8 oz butter or 1 lb of cheese, or eight herrings. The Franciscan community of Cork city in the 1760s and 1770s, whose per capita income would have been half the wages of an artisan in regular employment, consumed an

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[48] Coogan, Ireland, p.456
[49] B.I.M., Fall off in Seafood Exports but Investment at Record Levels (BIM Press Release), (Dublin, 2004), www.bim.ie
[50] Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*, (New York, 1997),p.22

average of 38 lbs meat, 10-20 lbs butter and an estimated 24 lbs fish per annum, in addition to bread and potatoes.[51] Although pigs were always popular in Ireland, the emergence of the potato resulted in increasing both human and pig populations. The Irish were the first Europeans to seriously consider the potato as a staple food. By 1663 it was widely accepted in Ireland as an important food plant and by 1770 it was known as the Irish Potato.[52] The Potato transformed Ireland from an under populated island of 1 million in the 1590s to 8.2 million in 1840, making it the most densely populated country in Europe.[53]

Conclusions

Modern Ireland has a vibrant fishing industry, although fishing rights conceded during early membership of the European Union leave our fishermen with restricted quotas. More than half of the landed catch is exported and much of the fish consumed today is farmed. Over half the fish consumed today is in foodservice outlets, as the Irish seem less confident than their European neighbours in handling fish in a domestic setting. BIM are actively campaigning to promote seafood consumption both domestically, by marketing fish as a convenience product for the cash rich / time poor generation, and also in the food service sector through schemes such as the 'seafood circle' and féile bia' programmes promoting the use of indigenous foods. We have seen how Irish dietary patterns have changed over time and today, fish and fasting on Fridays is a distant memory among the Celtic Tiger's young cubs. Most inland counties would have rarely seen fresh fish and interestingly, smoked fish sales are greater even today in the midlands than in the coastal parts of Ireland[54]. Once considered 'bia bocht' or poor man's food, fresh wild seafood is now a luxury food whose market share within Irish food consumption is challenged by numerous cheaper alternatives. Irish society has been radically transformed over the last twenty years from a land of emigrants to one of rising immigration. The growing Asian community now keeps in business Dublin's famous Moore Street fishmongers, whose best customers used to be the denizens of 'Raytown'. Perhaps Alan Davidson's reflections were indeed prophetic.

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[51] L.M. Cullen, (Comparative aspects of Irish diet, 1550-1850) *European Food History: A Research Review*, (Leicester, 1992), p.50

[52] Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, (The Pig in Irish Cuisine and Culture, past and present) *The Fat of the Land: Proceedings from the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2002*, (Bristol, 2003), p.209

[53] R. Phillips and M. Rix, The Potato in Irish History, (Dublin, 1995)

[54] Mannix, Seafood in Irish Cuisine, p.10