



Cuitlacoche Sauce with Seared Beef



Main Course Salsas



Last weekend was quite busy again. We had barely recovered from the [Ballymaloe Lit Fest adventure](#) and by Saturday morning, we were embarking in another trip to a food festival: The [Sheridans Irish Food Festival](#) which is one of my favourite food festivals in Ireland.



Organised by [Sheridans Cheesemongers](#) and held in Sheridans' HQ in Virginia Road Station in Co. Meath, this festival has it all: food, music, workshops, demos and talks. I love the fact that every year, I come home stuffed and with one or two new food findings.

This year, wasn't the exception! I came across this amazing organic vinegars called Wildwood Vinegars. I was blown away by the stunning flavours and the passion of its producer. Their heather vinegar or the elderflower one are my favourites. Watch out for them in Bloom!



We arrived a day earlier as we were attending a pre-festival dinner organised by the Sheridans at chef Richard Corrigan's new place in Cavan, The Virginia Park Lodge. The place is still in the refurbishing stage, but one can see a promise of greatness in it. I can't wait to stay there again once it has officially opened.



The gardens are beautiful, full of old trees and hidden gems. The golf course and a view of the lake frame the place perfectly. Dinner, although a bit late, it was worth waiting for as we were presented with seven great courses. The atmosphere was relaxed and the service impeccable. After a good night sleep and a very tasty full-Irish breakfast, we headed to Virginia Road Station for the day.



The Sheridans Irish Food Festival was great. I arrived early enough so was able to browse the stalls and chat to producers before the masses descended on the grounds. There was music and plenty of activities for the kids. Great food to have there and food to go. Over 60 stalls with everything from fruit, vegetables and artisan bread, to icecream, nettle pesto, craft beer and smoked fish!



The National Irish Brown Bread competition was held there too. The weather was not great, but this is one of those festivals that you can enjoy regardless of the rain. There were tons of different cheeses, goat's milk, raw milk, preserves, jams, crisps, pastry, chocolates, teas, baked goods, coffee and even a celebrity turkey (and I'm not talking of Dustin the Eurovision turkey)!!



In the afternoon I booked a demo on Seaweed by Sally McKenna, author of Extreme Greens, where we learned a lot about seaweed and its uses and I also attended a talk/rant on the issues facing food producers and restaurants in Ireland.



The festival was mostly free this year, even the parking, which made it a great day for families and since the place is

dog friendly, dog owners can enjoy it too! It is one of my favourite festivals of the year. Thank you to Sheridance [Cheese Mongers](#) for the hospitality and for making this a great weekend.

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Meeting Diana Kennedy...

Monday, 19 May 2014



I must confess that one aspect of Irish life that I truly love is the fact that Irish people, in general, have a complete disregard for celebrities. Many world-famous celebrities choose to spend their holiday time in Ireland because nobody bothers them. They can go out, like a regular person and enjoy themselves. It is like if Irish people go out of their way to ignore celebrity status... such a cool thing. Some of that 'coolness' has rubbed off and I also do the cool thing... I have never understood how people can go into hysterics at the sight of another human being. Don't take me wrong, I'd happily and discreetly stare at George Clooney on the street, but I would never dream of interrupting a dinner or anything to ask for an autograph. I am, after all these years, a little Irish too, so I must remain cool. Over the past weekend, all that 'coolness' went to hell and I was transformed into a weak-kneed, teary eye, (inner) screamer, starstruck fan, for the most unlikely of characters. I completely lost my coolness when I finally met my ultimate food hero, the most extraordinary woman that is Diana Kennedy at the [Ballymaloe Literary Festival 2014](#).

I have been an admirer of Doña Diana for over a decade. I have all her books, I've read every magazine, every internet article and, most importantly, I have used her books many, many times. They are an incredible source of knowledge, they can be used as inspiration, as reference and as a learning tool. A British citizen by birth, Diana Kennedy was born with far too much spirit for a woman of her time. She left Britain in 1953 for Canada because, in her own words, *"somebody said to me - why don't you go to Canada?- and as you know, when somebody says -why don't you- I do!"*.

From Canada she traveled through the Caribbean Islands, landing in Haiti as a revolution was just breaking: *'The first man I saw was the man who became my husband'*- she refers to Paul Kennedy, the New York Times correspondent who was leaving Haiti for the safer shores of Mexico; Diana followed him. She arrived in 1957 in Mexico and her love affair with the country and food continues until today. She lived in Mexico until her husband Paul was diagnosed with cancer. They returned to the US and lived in New York so Paul could get treatment; sadly, he passed away a year later and Diana was left alone and with little or no money.

She was encouraged by an editor friend of hers to give Mexican cooking classes in her apartment and thus she found a source of funding for her many travels back to Mexico. Eventually, she moved back to Mexico, to the state of Michoacan, where she bought land (to the amusement of the local men) and settled in what she called 'Quinta Diana'. She has spent nearly 60 years researching and documenting Mexican recipes. She has travelled extensively through the countryside in Mexico gathering recipes and knowledge that she then meticulously catalogued and preserved.

She also managed to turn Quinta Diana into a sustainable ranch, living off the grid, growing her own food and tending to her own animals for over 35 years, way before sustainability and green issues were trendy. Her eleven books are a testament to her enormous contribution to the preservation of some of the most ancient and sacred kitchen traditions in the country and the Mexican people, like it or not, are forever indebted to her researching talents and her determination to preserve recipes and ingredients that would have been otherwise long forgotten and/or lost.



This thinly-framed, 91 year old woman, with a surprisingly youthful spring to her step, walked into the venue on Friday evening wearing leather pants, a black turtleneck top with a khaki jacket and the most stunning Mexican necklace. She went straight to the champagne and mingled with people before the opening speeches. When I saw her I felt so overwhelmed. Here she was, a woman I greatly admire, not only for the enormous contribution to Mexican Food, but also because of her stubborn determination to be treated as an equal. A woman who survived the Mexican macho culture and paved the way for women like me to follow.

A woman who fought and continues fighting for the rights of small farmers and for the necessity to preserve and protect the incredibly rich food heritage my country has. I was jittery! I approached her and spoke to her in Spanish, which she speaks fluently. We spoke for about 10 minutes about Mexico, my life in Ireland, ingredients and sustainability. Sometimes she seemed to forget which language she was using and mixed the two, I totally relate to that. She seemed to like me as she agreed to a photo with me.



To say that I was beyond myself is not an exaggeration. I was like a 15 year old girl at a One Direction concert (minus the screaming of course, she probably would have slapped me!). Saturday morning couldn't come quick enough. I was so excited, I couldn't sleep. When we got to [Ballymaloe Cookery School](#), we were told Diana had requested no photography or recording of any kind was to be allowed during the demo. I was disappointed, but didn't really care. The room was packed, but I managed to secure front seats as I was there so early! Nobody could wipe the smile off my face.

She walked into the demo kitchen looking fabulous again. The demo was the funniest and most interesting thing I have seen! I knew off her no-nonsense reputation and her tendency to lash out at the minor provocation. I was at the receiving end for whispering an answer to a women sitting next to me, but she forgave me quickly. She was not so forgiving with a guy at the back who asked a question and then ignored her answer: *'You only have me for another half hour you know? You have your neighbour for the rest of your life!'*- she pointed out with her wonderfully scornful British accent.



Image courtesy of Carol-Anne O'Shea

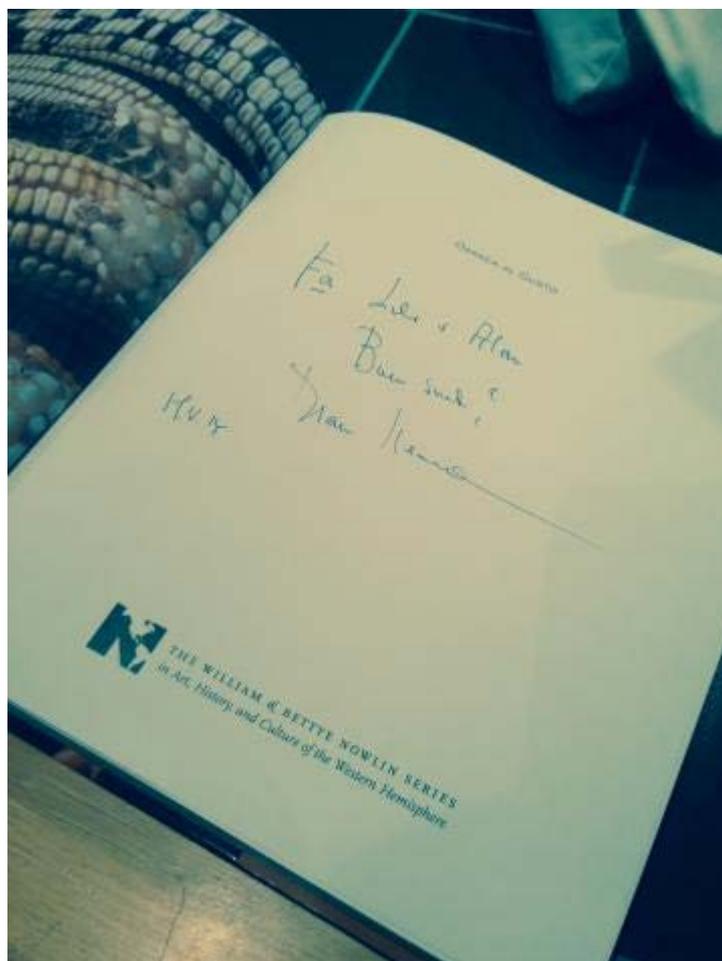
Under her strict supervision and with the soothing commentary of Darina Allen every now and then, Doña Diana cooked seven dishes. All stunning, flavoursome and uncommon: *'If I see another book about Tamales, I'll scream'* - she told us. When talking about chillis, she said - *'If a book tells you to deseed a chilli, through the book away'* - I nearly jumped off my chair and erupted in sudden applause (only managed a low 'yes!!' as I was afraid for my life she'd scold me again!) Anybody who has seen me knows how I feel about the same subject! She also said salt should be added during the cooking process not at the end and insisted that ALL dishes were to be served in real plates with real cutlery as she hates disposable stuff - *it is ruining the planet!*- she remarked - (don't ever mention tinfoil in her presence, she hates the stuff!!). She took questions with a mixture of disdain and contempt (she doesn't like stupid questions) but answered them all nevertheless. She signed books and chatted with me a little longer.



Image courtesy of Aoife Cox from The Daily Spud

On Sunday she gave a free talk. 9:30 am at the cookery school. The room was packed to the rim as word had gotten out about her witty lashing tongue. She stood up at the top of the room proud and surprised that so many people had gotten out of bed on a rainy morning to hear her talking. She spent the next hour and a half talking about how she ended up in Mexico, the food of Mexico, her beautiful book *Oaxaca al Gusto: and Infinite Gastronomy*, her photography skills and how much, again, she hates the fact that Mexicans are not fighting to preserve their food heritage.

I asked her loads of questions and she was very engaging and funny. She apologised to me for saying that the food of the North of Mexico was not as good as the rest of the country's (with the exception of our tamales nortenos, which she said were delicious and '*muy elegantes*') and proceeded to tell us about the different types of ingredients found in the regions of Mexico. It felt to me like there was nobody else in the room, I swear to God, if George Clooney had walked in the room, had sat down and started talking to me I would have shush him quickly!!! I was a little teary eyed when it was time to say goodbye and everybody in the room would have gladly sat there for another hour listening to her adventurous stories.



After spending the weekend around her, I ended up so in love with this intolerant woman! She made us laugh so much. I was in awe of her energy, her passion and her dedication for what must feel like a lost cause. I felt inspired, vindicated and challenged to be better. She was passionate, witty, irreverent, funny, challenging, defiant and tough as old boots. She was a touch rude at times - 'I'm 91 I've earned it' - but she did it all with a twinkle in her surprisingly young-looking eyes. I deeply admire the power of her convictions. After 11 groundbreaking books, at 91 years of age, she is planning the launch of her latest book and her Quinta Diana is in the process of being transformed into the [Diana Kennedy Centre, Quinta Diana foundation](#) with the aim of providing a way to protect and preserve the culinary traditions of Mexico.

At a different talk, Tom Parker Bowles said that we should all have an opinion when writing about food - For God's sake have an opinion - he said - it doesn't matter if it's right or wrong, you just have to have one!- that resonated with me. Diana Kennedy has an opinion and she is not afraid of stating it, in fact, she shouted it from the rooftops of Ballymaloe. What an honour and what a legend, for as long as I live, I will treasure my little encounter with this incredible woman.

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Upcoming Food Festivals...

Friday, 9 May 2014

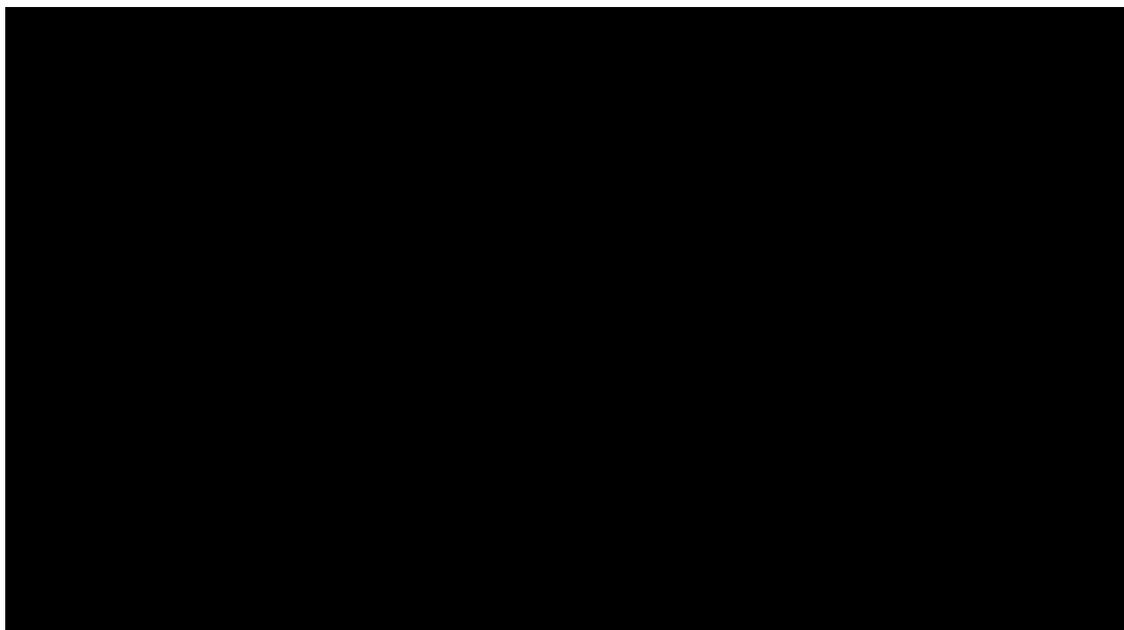


The last few weeks have been manic. New thing in work and tons of work for the shop, which is in the process of getting a revamping, loads of social engagements and a few family things. May, June and July are full of great foodie festivals and my calendar is jam packed with stuff. While having coffee with friends today, I found myself telling them about all these fabulous festivals in Ireland and was really surprised they hadn't heard about them, so it occurred to me that only because I know they're happening, doesn't mean everybody else does, so got the idea for this quick post on what's coming up in the next few weeks. Hope you find the information helpful! If you live in Ireland, you can choose which ones you want to go to and plan ahead... if you live abroad, hope this wets your appetite for a trip to this beautiful, evergreen-island soon.

The Kerrygold Ballymaloe Lit Fest: now you need to be living under a rock in Ireland not to have heard about this one! It's all over twitter, facebook, the papers and magazines. The Ballymaloe Literary Festival of Food and Wine is in its second year and it's a celebration of all things food and wine in the beautiful and inspiring setting of the renown Ballymaloe Cookery School, the Ballymaloe House Hotel and Restaurant and The Big Shed; all in close proximity to each other in the tiny village of Shanagarry in County Cork. While many of the ticketed events will happen at the cookery school and the house, the Big Shed will host the Fringe Festival, which is just as cool and fun as the rest. The festival takes place from the 16th to the 18th of May and a full programme can be downloaded here. There is still some tickets available and most of the activities at the Fringe Fest, including demos and a market are free of charge. The highlight of the festival, at least for me, is the cooking demo and the talk with the legendary Diana Kennedy, who is responsible for the writing of most of my favourite Mexican Cooking Books, but there is also a ton of my lovely foodie friends, bloggers and chefs that will make this a fantastic festival. This is a weekend I am so looking forward to!!

The Sheridan's Irish Food Festival: this is one of my favourite food festivals of the year. It's in its fifth year and it gets better every time! Super relaxed, mostly free and a fantastic day out for families. When the weather is good, like last year, there is no place on earth I'd rather be! Set in Sheridan's Virginia Road Station (a restored train station which also happens to be Sheridan's HQ) in Virginia, Co. Meath. This festival has it all: cooking demos, talks, foraging walks, kids' activities, plants for those with green fingers, Irish crafts, tons and tons of lovely Irish food and a great atmosphere. Some of the talks and demos need to be booked online, but it's only a 5 each. There is no entry fee and you only pay for parking (I think it was a fiver last year). You park your car in the middle of a huge field and make your

way to the festival by foot. I highly recommend this for families. It's truly a lovely way to spend a day. The Festival takes place on Sunday, 25th of May. Get [tickets for the talks here](#). Here's a video from last year's festival when the super talented [Donal Skehan](#) did one of his Kitchen Hero episodes there! A little extra note: check the maps and directions provided by the festival, signage is very good once you get near, but we get lost every year!!! :)



[The Burren Slow Food Festival](#): This fantastic festival takes place from the 23rd to the 25th of May in the beautiful Lisdoonvarna in County Clare. This festival is in its 8th year and this year's theme is seaweed. Tickets are 5 euro per person and children go free. There will be tastings, foraging walks, talks by [John & Sally McKenna](#), Sally wrote the book *Extreme Greens* where she shares her deep love and knowledge of seaweed. There are several cooking demos, a Burren Lamb barbeque banquet, bike tours, a farmers' market, walks and even a chocolate demo which is bound to keep the kids happy! Slow Food extraordinaire, Darina Allen, will be giving a talk too and the list of people involved in this festival is both impressive and very eclectic. Very passionate folk in incredibly beautiful surroundings. Worth a weekend trip.

[Culture and Chips](#): Now, any festival with the World Chip Championship in it deserves a mention. A lovely reader sent it to me and I absolutely love it! The city of Limerick will host this festival from the 29th of May until the 2nd of June and if you take a look at what's happening during it, you'll love it too; it's totally insane: a Wine Goose Chase, Culinary Carnival Chip Banquet, Cabaret des Frites and the very first World Chip Championship EVER, amongst other events, I say, what's not to like??? Prices vary from 15 quid to up to 70 euro for tickets, but there are a few free events. [Check details here](#).

That's May pretty much gone guys! There are quite a lot of other festivals coming up in June and July, including the Taste of Dublin, Bloom 2014, and the Westmeath Hay Literary Festival, just to name a few, but I'll leave that for another post during the week! Till then...

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Pico de Gallo...

Tuesday, 22 April 2014



A couple of weekends ago, we commemorated what would have been my dear friend John's 50th birthday, with a charity weekend, which included an amazing nature trail in Clonbur, in the beautiful Connemara region in Ireland, in and out of the border between County Galway and County Mayo. We left Dublin later than expected and then got lost on the way out from Dublin... (yes, you heard right, we got lost leaving Dublin!) by the time we were on the (right) way, it was late afternoon and we knew arriving to a small village after 10 pm at night, meant limited food options.

We had purchased the recently launched app from Mckennas Guides the Best 100 Restaurants in Ireland 2014 and we decided to put it to good use. We couldn't afford another long detour from the main road, so we found ourselves in a little pub in Glasson Village (near Atlone in Westmeath) that had a gleaming recommendation from the list, The Fatted Calf. The food was incredibly good with a menu full of seasonal and local ingredients. If you are anywhere near this place, don't miss the opportunity to eat in it.

I ordered a buttermilk fried chicken that came with a side of pico de gallo for my main course. I always stay away from any take on Mexican Food if I can. I eat plenty of Mexican food at home and I cook it right, so I prefer to eat Irish food or any other food when I'm dining out. Also, far too many establishments have jumped to the Mexican Food banwagon lately and menus have been littered with bad takings on Mexican food, which annoys me greatly! But since all the food so far had been outstanding, I took a risk and ordered the chicken expecting a southwestern take on the pico de gallo. It was the closest to the real thing I've ever had in Ireland and the little twist the chef added was very nice and it reminded me of how much I like this simple Mexican dish.

In Mexico, pico de gallo is eaten with empanadas and quesadillas, on hotdogs in the cinema and with deep fried fish or shrimp cocktail. It's super fast to make and very healthy! I've posted this recipe a few years back but when the blog got redesigned I took it down as I didn't like the pictures. So back from the archive, here it is. Mexican Pico de Gallo. Enjoy!

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Bean & Goats Cheese Tamales...

Monday, 7 April 2014



I spend a lot of time reading about food. It's what I like doing the most; yet, when I sat down to write this particular post, I realised most of what I know about Tamales was from either the stories my mother and grandma had or from general common knowledge. I decided to research a little bit more about it, what I found out really surprised me! For example, did you know that the oldest records place tamales as far back as 1200 BC in Mayan paintings?! or that the Franciscan Friar, Bernardino de Sahagun (a most remarkable historian and ethnographer who dedicated over 50 years of his life to the study and documenting of the Aztec people's culture and traditions) has a whole section dedicated to *Tamales* with detailed descriptions of what they were, how they were cooked and eaten and when in his 16th century manuscripts entitled 'General History of the Things of the New Spain'?! I certainly didn't! So I'm sharing some of what I knew and some of the new bits I learned here with you.

A *Tamal* (not Tamale) is a parcel made of maize dough, which has been stuffed with either a savoury or a sweet filling, wrapped in a corn husk or banana leaf and then steamed until cooked. The husks or leaves are discarded before eating as they are only a vessel for the dish inside. It is only in very few cases that edible leaves of avocado and local plants are used as wrapping so they are eaten as part of the tamal, in general, however, the leaves are unedible, so to be on the safe side, if you're given a *Tamal*, don't eat the husk!

The word *Tamal* came from the term '*Tamalli*', a Nahuatl (Aztec) word meaning 'wrapped'. I found out that there are close to 500 original, regional recipes catalogued in Mexico alone, out of which as many as 5000 variation recipes have been recorded (5001 if you count this one!). They were eaten widely by both nobles & common people in prehispanic Mexico during religious festivals and special days. Some historians speak about the tamales being used as food to go or to take into a journey as the dough and husk or leaf would help preserve and protect the meat inside. The tamal would be heated in a wood fire, husk and everything on, and unwrapped when heated through to eat the contents. The husks served as both protection and a sort of container to eat the tamal from. In a funny sort of way, we still do that, unwrap a tamal and eat it off the husk on a plate.

Tamales are a dish that is eaten in the whole of the country. Every region has different fillings based on local

ingredients and perhaps a slightly different way to make them, but the ancient tradition, cooking method and basic recipe remain the same since 1200 BC! They are a celebratory meal and a sort of right of passage for many women in Mexico. I dare find a Mexican family who hasn't, at some point, gathered the women and children of the family in the kitchen to help make a bunch of these for a party or for Christmas! Nowadays, there are many commercial companies supplying them to supermarkets, but in rural Mexico, many women still make them by hand and enterprisingly sell them at their village market to earn a living. A tamal made by hand is so much more satisfying than one bought in a shop. It also preserves a tradition that is as old as Mexican time.

While traditionally in the North of Mexico we use cheddar or another hard cheese to make these tamales, here I used my home made [spiced beans](#) and my favourite Irish Goats Cheese, [St. Tola's Original](#), as a filling; I loved the way the cheese softens and runs into the beans without completely melting into them; it complements the flavour of the beans so well and it adds an airy texture to the filling. It works fantastically well with the dish as a whole. I hope you like them as much as we did!

Note: making tamales is hard work, but it can be great fun if you have the family helping or invite a few friends with the promise of a nice meal after! Trust me, they are worth all the effort.

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