

REAL IRISH DON'T EAT SO DA BREAD?!

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In my childhood, March meant my mother's rendition of the golden, raisin-studded round loaves that were simultaneously making an annual appearance in bakeries citywide. Known by Chicagoans-at-large as **Irish soda bread**, they're perhaps most famously seen — on the South Side, at least — in sliced form, in the non-plastic-cup-wielding hands of St. Paddy's Day partygoers. It was our link to the auld sod, the bread of our ancestors.

Wasn't it?

It was only after I moved to Ireland in my mid-twenties that I discovered the stuff I'd understood to be the nation's quintessential carb was in fact something of a superfluity, available in shops but by no means a staple. Such a minor player is it in Ireland's national roster of baked goods, that when I ask my Irish fiancé what its correct name is, he shrugs and finally offers, soda bread with raisins?

Far more ubiquitous on the Irish table, I quickly learned, is brown bread, a crumbly, hearty loaf that's perfect for sopping up soups and stews, and perhaps even better enjoyed with just a smear of butter. In its looks, taste and preparation, brown bread is beautifully simple, yet its centrality to Irish cuisine should not be underestimated; indeed, according to Jimmy Griffin, award-winning baker and proprietor of Griffin's Bakery, a 135-year-old Galway City institution, this humble loaf is nothing less than "our national bread, rooted in our traditions, our very soul and fabric."

For Darina Allen, the highly-influential Irish cook and owner of the world-renowned Ballymaloe Cookery School in County Cork, brown bread has a powerful connection to the idea of home. She recalls that her mother prepared it "virtually every day of her life." Of herself and her eight siblings, Allen notes, "Wherever we were, her bread was one of the things we looked forward to when we came home."

If brown bread is such an elemental part of Irish cooking, then, how did a pale, fruit-speckled loaf come to be thought of by Chicagoans as Ireland's definitive bread? I suspect that a lack of access to Irish whole wheat flour at the time that many of those Chicagoans' Irish ancestors came to the city may be responsible. (Even today's American whole wheat flour is far finer than its Irish counterpart; the recipe here uses wheat germ to replicate the slightly gritty texture of authentic brown bread.) These Irish emigres improvised with American flour; the results would produce, over time, not an Irish tradition exactly, but an Irish-American one.

Five years in Ireland taught me well that Irish and Irish-American are not the same things — indeed, they are sometimes wildly different things. That is not to say, however, that the traditions we create in the places we come to be are less important than those of the places we've come from.

On the contrary, as these new traditions pass from one generation to the next, they develop the power to transport us, just like Chef Allen, home. For my part, I believe I'll take my dinner with a side of brown bread this St. Patrick's Day — but I'll save room for a slice of Mom's soda bread for dessert.

Free lance writer Cate Huguelet grew up in Evergreen Park. She traveled to Ireland in 2004 to complete a three-month editorial internship, and wound up staying in the country for almost six years. She now is based in Tennessee.

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