

St. Patrick's Day: Not Just for the Irish



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St. Patrick's Day: Not Just for the Irish

What do these things have in common: shamrocks, leprechauns, parades of people wearing green and orange, and green beer? They are all a part of St. Patrick's Day, of course! But why should St. Patrick's Day be celebrated and what types of activities would one find?

History of St. Patrick's Day

History cannot say for one hundred percent certainty who the real Saint Patrick was, but he is believed to have been Maewyn Succat, born around 385 AD. Succat, baptized Patricius (or Patrick), was the son of a Roman nobleman, and was born in Scotland. He was kidnapped from his hometown and taken as a slave into Ireland around the age of 16. He escaped to Gaul, at the age of 22, and returned to Scotland. There he followed his father and grandfather into the Celtic Church and later he became a missionary who returned to Ireland.

To learn about the man behind the holiday, one can read *Confessio* and *Epistola*, letters he wrote. The first is described as Saint Patrick's spiritual autobiography. The second is his attempt to right the mistreatment of Irish Christians at the hands of the British. These two works, however, do not teach us enough about the man to know what is true and what is fancy.

Because so little is written about Saint Patrick, there is much that remains unknown about the man. The folklore surrounding him, however, abounds. He is believed to have raised people from the dead. The fact that there are no snakes in Ireland is also attributed to the man, although snakes have never been indigenous to the country. Whatever the folklore, Patrick is said to have lived in Ireland as a missionary for thirty years establishing monasteries and schools wherever he went. He also converted people to Christianity throughout the country.

One of the stories surrounding Saint Patrick is that he won pagan Ireland to Christ by his explanation of the Trinity using a shamrock. His taught, as the story goes, that God is one being, with three separate personalities – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a teaching tool, he plucked a shamrock from the ground and showed the pagans how the shamrock is one plant with three separate leaves.

Historical accounts say that Saint Patrick died on March 17, 460 AD. Bishop Patrick has been liturgically celebrated as a saint soon after his death, despite the fact he has never been formally canonized. It was also around his death that St. Patrick's Day was first celebrated. Although there is no proof that Saint Patrick was associated with the Catholic Church, they have embraced him as their own.

March 17 has been celebrated as Saint Patrick's Day, many believe, since his death. As Irish people have moved out of their homeland, they have taken their holidays and celebrations with them. Of course, Ireland has the most elaborate St. Patrick's Day celebrations, but they can be found around the world wherever there are large populations of Irish people.

In the United States, Boston, Massachusetts hosted the first St. Patrick's Day celebration in 1737. Since that time, large cities throughout America have been adding yearly parades, often coloring their food and beer green. Not to be outdone, in 1965 Chicago, Illinois began coloring the Chicago River green each year to celebrate this Irish-born holiday.

Other Components Associated with Ireland and St. Patrick's Day

Green - Most likely, as a child, you made sure that you wore green to school on St. Patrick's Day. Why? It is believed that children began the tradition of pinching anyone who wasn't wearing this springtime color. Green is also the color of the fields of Ireland and the venerated shamrock. It is also associated with nature, which may pay homage to the Druids of old.



The Shamrock – This three-leafed clover covers Ireland and, according to Irish legend, was part of their ancient mythology because they naturally formed a triad. Three was a sacred number to ancient Celts. Shamrocks, which are different from the four-leaf clover, are more widely available in the United States than in Ireland and are said to bring good luck.

The Blarney Stone – If you ever take a vacation in Ireland, most people will recommend that you visit Blarney Castle. While you're there, make sure you take the opportunity to kiss the Blarney Stone. Those who do kiss the Blarney Stone, which is not an easy task, are said to be given the gift of gab, or the ability to speak eloquently.

Leprechauns – Another traditionally Irish invention, the leprechaun is an Irish fairy that looks like an old man. He is said to have a pot of gold, which can only be found by following the sound of his hammer. If you can catch the leprechaun, legend says he'll give you his pot of gold.

Irish Cooking and Its History

If you want to learn about Irish cuisine, you just have to learn about the people of Ireland because the two are inseparable. Anthropologists have determined that people began living on the Emerald Isle about 8,000 years ago and they lived mainly on what the sea and forests could provide. They also gathered the wild edibles that were available – watercress, berries, nuts, and wild lettuces. They evolved into an agricultural society around 4500 B.C. and began to cultivate oats, barley, and wheat after the British had introduced them to the inhabitants. Soon after, they began to domesticate animals and use them for food. They added milk, butter and cheese to their diets along with the meat from goats, sheep, and cattle.

As today, a good quantity of food would have been cooked during the early gastronomic history of Ireland. Usually food was cooked in a large pot, like a cauldron, that had three legs and that could be placed directly over the fire, left simmering continuously. (This method of cleaning is the basis for the song “Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot, nine days old.”)

Where you lived determined what you would have cooking in your pot. If you lived on the coast, your pot would be full of seafood, seaweed, herbs, and possibly some wild vegetables. If you lived inland, your pot would have contained wild game, vegetables, and herbs.

Another method of cooking, particularly for wild fowl, was to cover the entire bird in a casing of a couple of inches of blue clay. The clay was then put into the hot fire and allowed to bake. When the clay was baked as hard as stone, it was taken out of the fire and broken open. The feathers and skin were easily removed with the clay. You could also find people cooking meat, usually whole animals, on spits over open flames.

Breads, made from eight different grains grown in Ireland, were cooked by placing the cauldron, turned upside down, on top of hot coals or stones. This acted as a basic oven. Because cauldrons were so valuable, and many people didn't have them, it is likely that bread was placed on hot flagstones and then placed in front of the hearth to cook.

As the Irish began to cultivate crops, one crop that could easily be found was corn. A large part of the corn grown was not used as a food source, but was used for creating ale. The corn ale was mixed with herbs, honey, and spices and was consumed by everyone in the Irish family.

Mead was another alcoholic beverage consumed by the Irish, but it was generally reserved for feasts. Fermenting honey and water then adding herbs and spices made the mead. Additional honey was added to sweeten the mead.

Wines made from grapes were not common in Ireland until they were used as a means of trade with the Gauls.

Dairy products – cheese, butter, and milk – were very important in the Irish diet. It would not have been uncommon to find butter and cheese made from sheep's milk as opposed to cow's milk.

According to historical accounts, it is unlikely that vegetables played a very large part in the Irish diet prior to the 8th century. If they were used in cooking, the most likely vegetables to be used would have been leeks, onions, nettles, and watercress. They would have used any fruits they could find – sloe berry, raspberry, blackberry, strawberry, and elderberry – would have been gathered from the area. Apples seem to have been the only type of fruit that was cultivated.

Perhaps the most well known of all Irish foods is the potato, which was introduced to Ireland in the 17th century. The potato is believed to be a native of the Americas and has only become a staple in Ireland within the last 300 years. The potato was first introduced to Europe in 1570 by the Spanish who brought it back from their conquests in the New World.

By 1663 the potato was entrenched as a staple of the Irish diet; by 1770 it had become so popular that it had become known as the "Irish Potato." Families in Ireland depended upon the potato to supplement their meager winter diets. Dependence upon one crop, however, had a detrimental effect on the country and its population.

Although there had been lesser famines in Ireland due to extreme cold weather, blight on the crop caused the "Great Potato Famine" of 1845-1848, causing the deaths of over 1 million people. Approximately 3 million people also emigrated from Ireland during this time period. Following the great famine, however, the potato has remained one of the staple foods on the Irish diet.

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Traditional Corned Beef

Ingredients:

3-4 lbs. corned beef brisket
2 onions, sliced
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 bay leaves

6 whole cloves
6 medium potatoes, pared
5 small carrots, pared
1 medium head cabbage, cut into 6 wedges

Preparation:

Heat a Dutch oven over medium heat.

Place the corned beef, onion, garlic, cloves, and bay leaves in the Dutch oven and add water so it is barely covered. Cover and let simmer for one hour per pound of meat, or until the meat is fork tender. Do not let it come to a boil. Remove the meat from the pot and then add the potatoes and carrots. Replace the cover and bring to a boil. Allow to cook for 10 minutes and then add the cabbage wedges. Allow the mixture to cook for an additional 20 minutes or until all of the vegetables are tender.



You may glaze the corned beef while the vegetables are cooking by spreading the fat side of the meat with a light coating of prepared mustard. Sprinkle $\frac{1}{4}$ cup brown sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of cloves over the mustard. Place the meat into a shallow pan and place it in the oven, which has been set to 350 degrees. Allow the meat to cook for 15 to 20 minutes.

Irish Soda Bread

Ingredients:

2 cups flour	¼ cup butter
½ teaspoon salt	¼ cup raisins
½ cup sugar, additional for sprinkling	1 teaspoon caraway seeds
½ teaspoon baking soda	1 egg
½ teaspoon baking powder	about ½ cup buttermilk

Preparation:

Begin by preheating your oven to 375 degrees.

In a small bowl, mix together the dry ingredients (flour, salt, sugar, baking soda, baking powder). Cut the butter into the dry ingredients until it looks like coarse meal. Add the raisins and caraway seeds. In a ¾ measuring cup, break the egg into the cup and then add enough buttermilk to fill the cup. Add this mixture to the flour and mix until it is thoroughly blended. Take the dough out of the bowl and knead it. Split the dough into several small rounds of the same size. Make a cross on the top of the dough with a knife and then drizzle melted butter on top. Sprinkle sugar on top of the scones. Place them on a greased cookie sheet and bake until they are golden brown (approximately 30 minutes.) You can use a greased iron skillet in place of the cookie sheet.

Irish Cream Cheesecake

Ingredients:

1 cup graham cracker crumbs	3 eggs, separated
¼ cup sugar	2 (8 ounce) packages cream cheese, softened
¼ cup margarine, melted	2 tablespoons cocoa
1 envelope unflavored gelatin	2 tablespoons cold coffee (can use bourbon)
½ cold water	1 cup whipping cream, whipped
1 cup sugar	

Preparation:

Combine the graham cracker crumbs, sugar, and margarine in a bowl. After thoroughly mixed, press them into the bottom of a 9 inch spring form pan. Soften the gelatin in water. Mix together ¾ cup sugar and beaten egg yolks, stirring constantly, cook this mixture over low heat for about 3 minutes. Mix the cream cheese and cocoa together with an electric mixer on medium speed until it is well blended. Gradually add the gelatin to the coffee and then add that to the cheese mixture. Chill until thickened, but not until it is completely set.

As the cheese mixture chills, beat the egg whites until they are foamy. Gradually add the remaining mixture and mix until they form stiff peaks. Take the cheese mixture out of the refrigerator and fold the egg whites and whipped cream into it. When the eggs and cream are thoroughly incorporated, pour this over the crust. Put back into the refrigerator and chill until firmly set. Enjoy!

So, how about you, do you have Irish blood flowing through your veins?

In the past, at most times of the year, being Irish wasn't always a good thing. As Saint Patrick's Day draws near, however, everyone wants to be Irish. They want to be associated with the people of the Emerald Isles, to maybe enjoy a little bit of the "luck of the Irish," even if it is just for one day each year.

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