

# IRELAND

## History

- Early 1800's- large population growth in Ireland caused many Irish to become impoverished; religious prejudice against Catholic Irish by the British and political clashes with the British caused many Irish to emigrate to the United States for relief.
- In 1845, the potato crop failed and because 90% of the population relied on it as their main source of food, a devastating famine spread over the island leading to a mass migration of Irish to the US; starving Irish families had no alternative but to leave Ireland in hopes of a better future.
- Irish constituted about 1/3 of all immigrants in 1820; by 1840, about 1/2 of all entering immigrants were Irish.
- New England became the center of Irish immigration, and by 1950, the Irish comprised one fifth of all foreign-born people in New England.
- Altogether, almost 3.5 million Irish entered the United States between 1820 and 1880.
- Current Irish immigrants include young people looking for employment opportunities; many Irish immigrants are returning home as the economy in Ireland has improved.



## Health concerns

- Health problems facing Irish-Americans include circulatory system diseases such as heart disease and stroke; associated with the American diet, which is high in saturated fat and sodium. In contrast Irish people living in Ireland have one of the best diets in the world, according to the WHO.
- Smoking rates are about the same in Ireland and the USA, but in 2005 Ireland became the first country in the world to ban smoking in the workplace (thus bars, restaurants, hotels, even vehicles if the vehicle is ones workplace)
- Although it is declining, alcoholism has traditionally been a problem in Irish society as unlike other cultures, the Irish tended not to mix food and drink. This has caused a high incidence of cirrhosis and liver damage, and has contributed to higher levels of death due to heart disease

- Celiac disease is disproportionately common in Irish people and people of Irish descent. Those afflicted have an inability to process wheat glutes.
- Irish (and Northern Europeans generally) have high rates of skin cancer from overexposure to sunlight.

### **Food Management**

- Traditionally, wives and mothers did not work, so they took care of the home and the children, and were the gatekeepers for the food coming into the house.
  - Although many Irish-American women work, some are still solely responsible for purchasing, preparing and serving meals to their families. The family typically eats together in a formal setting.
- Core foods include potatoes, meat (beef, pork, lamb), fish, black tea with milk and sugar.
- Sub-core foods include root vegetables (carrots, turnips, onions), salad dishes, poultry, and cabbage. White bread is the staple sandwich bread.

### **Food and Meaning**

- “Bangers and mash” is a typical modern Irish meal that consists of pork sausages and mashed potatoes. Sausages are also served at a traditional Irish breakfast called a “fry” or a “fry-up.” It was high in calories because most Irish (men) worked in a labor-intense agricultural setting.
- “Fish and chips”, which is fried fish and French fries, is a very popular dish with the Irish and was traditionally served only on meatless days for Irish Catholics.
- Steak and kidney pie is often made with Guinness, a stout (Dark beer) that is native to Ireland, and of which the Irish are very proud.
- Shepherd’s pie is a popular dish that was traditionally made to use up leftover “minced” meat (ground beef or lamb), and then topped with mashed potatoes
- Tea is more popular than coffee and is served at breakfast and often after meals. Ireland has the highest per capita consumption of tea in the world, and Irish Americans keep with this tradition that began as a result of Ireland’s history as a part of the British Empire.

### **Specific food practices**

- In the past, many devout Catholics did not eat meat on Fridays. This is less so today.
- No food or drink is taken one hour before taking Communion for Irish Catholics
- Many Irish families and people from all age groups dine out and socialize at the pub, which is a restaurant that serves beer, wine, liquor, and light meals. The pub often functioned as a kind of community center. This continues in America.
- All members of the Irish family are encouraged to partake of foods provided at the family meal.
- Although Irish people today eat a varied diet very similar to that of Americans, they are still very fond of potatoes; mashed potato is the most common and includes milk and butter.
- Breastfeeding rates in Ireland are among the lowest in Europe. As in other cultures, Irish rates tend to be higher among those who are better educated.
- The fruitcake (and at Christmas the plum pudding) is a traditional dessert. Because fruitcakes symbolize fertility, Irish wedding cakes were traditionally a frosted fruitcake.

### **Major Celebrations**

- St. Patrick's Day is celebrated by first attending church with the entire family, and then having a large traditional meal together.
  - Interestingly, St. Patrick's Day is celebrated more in the US than in Ireland; corned beef and cabbage is an American dish. The original Irish dish is bacon and cabbage.
- After attending Mass on Easter Sunday, everyone comes home together for an Irish Easter feast that consists of roast potatoes, vegetables, roast lamb, and a sweet dessert. Chocolate Easter eggs are a special treat for young people, seen as a reward for abstinence during the preceding 40 days of Lent.
- Christmas dinner, served after Mass, is traditionally the biggest feast of the whole year, and includes turkey, roast ham, stuffing, potatoes, Brussels sprouts and other vegetables, and the most important time for family reunions. .
- St. Stephen's Day is the day after Christmas, and is another traditional holiday celebrated by an old tradition called the "wren boys," similar to the "trick or treat" at Halloween.
- 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays are celebrated with food and drink

### **Communication Style**

- Irish people tend to be reserved in public although, they can be boisterous among friends.
- Family is very important and siblings and cousins are usually very close.
- The use of sarcasm and humor in conversation is very common
- Traditionally, Irish people tend to be very private and modest.
- While they have great respect for health care workers, they are less likely than Americans to schedule regular check-ups.

Written by Sara Faman Colleary, graduate student at Framingham State College and reviewed by Mary Lynch, Assistant to the Registrar, Framingham State College.