

Elaine interviewing Joan Cundy

Joan: I was born on the island of Ireland, in the North so I'm technically British but my heart is Irish and the recipe that sits well in my family; that's come down through the centuries, actually; is Beef, Oyster and Guinness pie.

Ingredients, basically, beef; oysters; onion; garlic; carrots; thyme; bayleaf; pepper and, of course, the Guinness.

So, historically, to a West Coast family in the 18th century, oysters were a free food, collected from the rocks on the Atlantic shoreline. The oysters supplemented what little meat they had. Wild venison, another free food, often replaced the beef and the meagre meat and oyster pudding they ate then devolved into a meatier pie. So the more meat, less oyster, (less oyster meant less moisture in the pie) and what better way to add moisture than the newly-acclaimed stout called Guinness. So that was in 1759 that Guinness moved from London - the stout moved from London to Dublin. The problem with the oysters over the centuries became simply pollution - people were becoming ill with the oysters. So, today you will find on the West coast and South coast of Ireland native oysters are farmed in just the same way as they are here in Brittany.

I chose this recipe to connect Brittany and Ireland with the oyster.

Elaine: Do you like oysters?

Joan: I do. But not too many.

Elaine: They're sort of a bit of a Marmite thing aren't they? Love or hate. I'm in the other camp.

Joan: It must be obvious that cooking beef in a pie you can't cook oysters at the same time because it's simply the time difference required. So the technique, and that's what interests me most about the Irish recipe, is the technique. The pie would be cooked without the oysters. The crust would then be slit and the oysters tipped in to the beef - into the sauce and the beef and the vegetables - and they'd, just on the steam alone, they would be cooked just perfectly.

Elaine: Amazing! And that recipe has come down in your family from ...

Joan: This is a family favourite, yes - that's on my father's side of the family. On my mother's side of the family, who were poorer, were three basic recipes.

The most important one in the family being Champ, which is potatoes; scallions; milk, butter, salt and pepper and, optionally, beaten raw egg. The potatoes are boiled and mashed; the scallions - especially the green part, as much as possible, for the extra

colour which is important, they're heated gently then beaten into the potatoes, beaten with a wooden spoon. The wooden spoon is very important in an Irish household.

Elaine: So, not just to wack the kids with!

Joan: Yes. It is indeed, you only have to threaten an Irish child with a spoon and they'll behave. So, the mixture is piled onto each plate and a well made in the centre in which a large knob of butter was placed. You eat your Champ from the outside - each forkful put into the melted butter, or, in my grandfather's case, (my grandfather Davy) he would beat a raw egg - beat up an egg - and just drop the raw egg into the well and it sort of semi-scrambled in the heat from the potatoes. Others - Boxy would be offered almost everywhere in Southern Ireland. It's basically equal amounts of mashed potato and raw potato and plain flour - equal amounts depending on the family size; a pinch of Bicarbonate of Soda and Buttermilk, which again connects Ireland with Brittany because, as you know, buttermilk is drunk here every day. Add some salt and pepper to that and, again, a large knob of butter. The technique is that the raw potato is grated as much as possible and the starch in it is removed. Today, you'd use kitchen paper (it was a tea towel in the past). The raw mixed with the cooked, the flour added and enough buttermilk to form a soft batter and the batter is melted onto a griddle or frying pan using a large spoonful at a time. So, it comes out like a sort of sconie thing..

Elaine: Almost like a thick crepe.

Joan: Yes

Elaine: So again you're getting this connection.

Joan: Here is would be called a galette pomme de terre.

Elaine: Absolutely. Isn't that interesting - the very strong cuisinery connection with the food when you just ...???

Joan: It's the availability isn't it? What's around - particularly at Roscoff way. And the second one we eat a great deal of is Colcannon. Potato, green cabbage - mixed together with your milk, your butter, your salt and pepper and formed into a sort of scone-like (a thick, scone-like shape). Or not at all - just left in one big dish and you spoon out what you want to eat. The interesting thing about both of the recipes that I've talked about is that they are very easy to cook in advance which was important to an ancient Irish farming family as it is to a modern housewife today.

Elaine: That's true, actually. It's something you don't realise how busy people are these days, well people largely in farming background particularly or fishing or whatever have always been busy -

Joan: Exactly

Elaine: involving the whole family.

Joan: Often the whole family were needed so things could be prepared in advance. They'd be left in the range; in the coolest part of the range, which was pretty cool I imagine. Of course, potatoes are very important to the Irish nation. But it needs to be pointed out, I believe, that the potato blight, which caused the three major famines in Ireland, was actually widespread throughout Europe. It wasn't just Ireland's problem. It existed all over Europe and, indeed, in North America. Because the blight, which is the same disease that tomatoes get here in Brittany if you don't grow them under cover.

Elaine: It's the same base?

Joan: Yes. It was all over Europe and people were starving in other countries as well. But in Ireland it was so particularly bad with wet winter after wet winter. They were actually planted into wet ground. To the poor families there was no alternative because they were growing potatoes as the landlords required and there was no alternative for them. If you found something other than oysters (the venison was a sort of substitute for beef which the poorer, poorer families couldn't possibly afford) the law was that you had to share as you did the potato. You farmed potatoes but most of them went to the landlord and then subsequently to England so as much we like to you cannot separate the potato, the famine and the landlords.

Elaine: Thank you very much Joan. Just before we go - back to the wooden spoon. Was I right?

Joan: Yes. It was always a threat, to me, and my cousins, but it was withdrawn when my younger brothers came along it was decided that we shouldn't be hitting our children at all - let alone with a wooden spoon!

Elaine: Thank you very much Joan

Joan: Thank you Elaine. It's been a pleasure.