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Rachel's

IRISH FAMILY FOOD

A collection of Rachel's best-loved family recipes

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Introduction



This is a cookbook I have always wanted to write. It's a collection of my very best family recipes, seriously comforting and nourishing food, all inspired by both traditional and modern Irish cooking. In Ireland we have fabulous ingredient-led dishes that make the most of the incredible produce from our farms and fish and seafood from our coast. These are my favourite recipes to cook for my family, the ones I turn to again and again. Whether or not you're familiar with Irish food, I'm sure you'll love this celebration of our country's culinary culture.

Irish food has a rich history and tradition. Of course, our love for the potato is well known and very real, but with recipes such as colcannon, Irish stew and our wonderful soda bread there are so many distinctively Irish dishes that make our food ideal for home-cooked meals – wherever in the world you might live. I grew up in Dublin and my mum was a very good cook. She would often have casseroles gently bubbling in the oven, filling the kitchen with their alluring aromas to make my sister and me ever more impatiently hungry.

My own relationship with cooking started with baking. My sister, mother and I would often bake together, making biscuits or cakes. I loved the whole process, from the messy mixing to the mysterious rise behind the oven door. It was at the age of eighteen that my interest in cooking became a passion and eventually an obsession. I travelled down to East Cork to study at the famous Ballymaloe Cookery School, which at the time had been going for six years, and at which I still teach to this day. It was at the cooking school that I met its founder, Darina Allen, who would eventually become my mother-in-law! I also met her mother-in-law, Myrtle Allen, the matriarch of Irish food who had founded the Ballymaloe House Restaurant and guest house all the way back in 1964.

On my first day at the cooking school I learned many of the principles that we still teach students today: that the best food comes from the best ingredients and that means carefully grown crops and lovingly raised animals. The school sits in the middle of an organic farm from which we get the students' cooking ingredients. It opened my eyes to how much more important proper produce is than complicated or long-winded recipes.

This is echoed by our impressive and still rapidly expanding modern Irish food culture. Ours is not a history of elaborate multilayered dishes. Irish food is about local produce. The greenest grass in the world feeds the happiest cows, which in turn produce the most beautiful butter and cheeses. We have teams of small dedicated farmers who put their efforts into growing delectable crops and our cold water creates the sweetest seafood. With ingredients like this, I think it's important not to dress up the food too much, to let their flavours take centre stage. This book is filled with simple and easily achievable dishes that I love to cook and, perhaps most importantly, that I love to eat!

The recipes range from light suppers for a summer's evening to big hearty casseroles for when the wind is blowing and the rain is lashing down. There are everyday dinners for school nights when you've been at work all day, as well as slightly more involved recipes when you want to make something a little more special. All the recipes are easy to follow and not at all difficult to execute.

I've also included four passages about each of the different provinces in Ireland, with information about the food as well as the people, their history and folklore. Irish culture is ancient but alive and vibrant, with food a fundamental piece of it. I hope that through our food you can connect both to the history of Ireland and to the wonderful country that it still is today.

Rachael



Soups and light meals



These are the sorts of dishes I like to serve as a casual supper or a light lunch. They are versatile recipes and not too filling. A soup, for example, can easily feed a family if accompanied by lots of delicious crusty bread. Probably due in no small part to our blustery and bracing weather, there is a real tradition of warming soups in Ireland. It might be a nourishing broth such as the West Cork Broth with Gubbeen Bacon or a rich and creamy comforting soup like the two different chowder recipes in this chapter.

Lots of the recipes in this chapter would also work really well as an starter for a larger meal. Asparagus with Hollandaise Sauce is one of my absolute favourites when made with perfect Irish butter from our greenest pastures. It makes the most divine supper on its own, but if you're having guests over, then a few asparagus spears cooked this way is a lovely way to begin a meal. The same is true of the wonderful combination of fresh oysters with a glass of Guinness.



Asparagus on toast with hollandaise sauce

Asparagus has to be my favourite vegetable. The exquisitely flavoured bright green spears have a season that is always sadly short. Ireland has perfect growing conditions to produce some of the best asparagus I've ever tasted. There are lots of different ways of cooking and serving asparagus, but for me this is the very best: simply boiled in salted water and served on Brown Soda Bread with butter and lashings of hollandaise sauce.

Vegetarian

Serves 4

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 20 minutes

16–20 asparagus spears

Good pinch of salt

A few slices of Brown Soda Bread

Butter

Hollandaise sauce

Snap off the tough woody end of each asparagus stalk and discard. Fill a large saucepan to a depth of 4–6cm (1½–2½in) with water, add the salt and bring to a boil. Tip in the asparagus and cook in the boiling water for 4–8 minutes, until tender when pierced with a sharp knife. Drain immediately.

While the asparagus is cooking, toast the bread, then spread with the butter and remove the crusts, if you wish. For each person, place a piece of toast on a warmed plate, put 4–5 asparagus spears on top and spoon over a little hollandaise sauce.

Hollandaise sauce

Vegetarian

Makes 75ml (3fl oz)

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 5 minutes

1 egg yolk

1 tbsp cold water

50g (2oz) butter, diced

Freshly squeezed lemon juice

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Place a heatproof bowl over a saucepan of simmering water over medium heat. (The water must not boil to avoid heating the sauce so much it scrambles or curdles; take the pan off the heat every so often.) Add the egg yolk and cold water. Whisking all the time, gradually add the butter, a few pieces at a time, until each addition has melted and emulsified before adding the next.

Once all the butter has been incorporated, season to taste with lemon juice and salt and pepper, if necessary. Remove from the heat and serve immediately or leave to sit over the warm water until you're ready to serve.



Artichokes with melted butter

Globe artichokes have been grown in the gardens of Irish country houses such as Ballymaloe for years. They make a beautiful plant, tall and proud, but it is their bright purple thistle-like flower heads that cooks prize. This is my favourite way of serving them. No olive oil here, only simply boiled artichokes and perfect Irish butter. I love the quiet methodical way one eats artichokes. To eat them, pull away each leaf from the artichoke, dip in the butter, then put the leaf in your mouth and scrape off the flesh from the base with your teeth. Discard that leaf and pick another. Eventually you'll get down to the yellow choke: Scrape this off and discard to reveal the tender and juicy heart.

Vegetarian

Serves 6

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 30 minutes

6 globe artichokes

Salt

White wine vinegar

175g (6oz) butter

Juice of ½ lemon, freshly squeezed, plus extra for dipping

Just before cooking, trim the base of the artichokes so they will sit steadily on the plate. Dip the cut end in lemon juice to prevent it from discolouring.

Fill a saucepan large enough to hold all of the artichokes three-quarters full with water. Add 2 teaspoons salt and 2 teaspoons white wine vinegar for every litre (1¾ pints) of water. Bring to a boil over high heat.

Carefully add the artichokes (they should be completely covered with water). Bring back to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium and simmer for about 25 minutes, until the larger leaves at the base of the plant come away easily if you pull on them. If they don't, then continue to cook for another 5–10 minutes. When cooked, remove the artichokes from the water and drain upside down on a plate.

While the artichokes cook, heat the butter in a saucepan over medium-low heat just until melted, then stir in the lemon juice, transfer to a few serving bowls and set aside.

To serve, remove the tough outer leaves and discard. Place each artichoke, while still warm, onto a serving plate. Either give each person their own serving bowl of butter or have the bowls within easy reach.



Dublin bay prawns with mayonnaise

The divine sweetness of Dublin bay prawns (also known as langoustines) is a result of our coastal waters, and I love to eat them simply, with just a little mayonnaise, either plain or with a few herbs stirred through.

Serves 4–6

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 5 minutes

4.8 litres (8½ pints) water

4 tbsp salt

1kg (2lb 2oz) Dublin bay prawns with heads on, or any large prawns

Mayonnaise, to serve

Fill a large saucepan with the water, add the salt and bring to a boil over high heat. When the water is at a good rolling boil, add the prawns. Return the water to a boil and cook for 2–3 minutes, depending on their size. The best way to tell when prawns are cooked is to take one from the pan once they rise to the top of the water, after a minute or so of boiling. If it is opaque and firm all the way through, then they are ready to drain.

As soon as the prawns are cooked, drain and lay them out to cool on flat trays to keep them from cooking any further.

Serve at room temperature with a bowl of mayonnaise on the side.

Mayonnaise

Vegetarian

Makes 300ml (11fl oz)

Preparation time: 5 minutes

2 egg yolks

Pinch of salt

1 tsp Dijon mustard

2 tsp white wine vinegar

200ml (7fl oz) sunflower oil

25ml (1fl oz) extra virgin olive oil

Freshly ground black pepper

2 tbsp chopped fresh herbs (chives, dill, fennel) (optional)

Put the egg yolks in a bowl and mix in the salt, mustard and vinegar.

Mix the sunflower oil and the extra virgin olive oil in a jug.

Very gradually, whisking all the time (either by hand or using a hand-held electric beater), slowly pour the oil into the bowl in a very thin stream. You should see the mixture start to thicken. Keep whisking and adding the oil slowly until it has all been incorporated. Season with pepper and more salt to taste. Stir in the chopped herbs (if using).



Ivan Allen's dressed crab

Ivan Allen was Isaac's grandfather, and this is his recipe. I remember him coming into the kitchen at Ballymaloe and checking the dressed crab whenever it was on the menu to ensure it was just right. If you are using brown crabs, try to find whole crabs so that you can use both the white and the flavourful brown meat. I've given instructions for cooking a crab from scratch, but if you can't get hold of a whole crab, you can use ready-cooked fresh or frozen crabmeat instead. For serving you will need two or three crab shells or six 250ml (9fl oz) ramekins or small dishes.

Serves 6

Preparation time: 15 minutes (plus 45 minutes to prep crabs)

Cooking time: 20 minutes (plus 40 minutes to cook crabs)

425g (15oz) meat from 3–4 cooked fresh large crabs, reserving the crab shells

200g (7oz) soft white breadcrumbs

150ml (5fl oz) Basic White Sauce

2 tbsp Tomato Relish

2 tsp white wine vinegar

1 tsp Dijon mustard, or a generous pinch of dry mustard powder

75g (3oz) butter, melted

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE TOMATO AND BASIL SALAD

8 vine-ripened tomatoes (using one variety or a mixture)

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Pinch of sugar

Juice from a good squeeze of lemon

2–3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

Small handful of basil leaves, larger leaves torn

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas Mark 4. If you plan to serve from the crab shells, scrub them clean, dry well and arrange upside down on a baking tray. Alternatively, place six 250ml (9fl oz) ramekins or small dishes on the baking tray.

In a large bowl, mix together the crabmeat, just over three-quarters of the breadcrumbs, the white sauce, relish, vinegar, mustard and 2 tablespoons of the melted butter; season to taste with salt and pepper. Spoon the mixture into the crab shells or ramekins. In a separate bowl, toss together the remaining breadcrumbs with the remaining butter and sprinkle over the crab mixture.

Bake for 15–20 minutes, until heated through and browned on top. Briefly place under a preheated grill, if necessary, to crisp up the crumbs.

In the meantime, prepare the salad. Cut the tomatoes into quarters or 1cm (½in) slices. Spread out in

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