

Imbolc, 1 February, ST BRIGID'S DAY

In Ireland, Spring begins officially on St Brigid's Day, the first day of February, which is also the feast of *Imbolc*, the ancient pagan spring festival and the first day of the Celtic agricultural year. In Irish mythology the father of all the Irish gods was Dagda. He had a daughter, Brigit, designated the mother goddess, the exalted one and goddess of fertility. Her symbol was fire. The fiery dart of Brigit is represented by a sun symbol which, in later times, developed into what we now call St Brigid's cross.

In early Christian times *Imbolc* was taken over and pagan Brigit was transformed into a saint (with a Christian mythology to equal her pagan one). Saint Brigid became Ireland's second patron saint, the patroness of sheep, cattle, dairy work, poets (and much more). Since there are few facts known about the Christian Brigit, there remained a tension between Brigit and the miraculous deeds of St Brigid because so many pagan elements influenced the 'traditional' lore of St Brigid.

The main significance of the feast of St Brigid was that it Christianised one of the pagan focal points of the agricultural year – when preparations for spring sowing were begun and spring lambing started – so St Brigid was given special responsibility for the protection of farm animals and crops. In rural Ireland this feast was a day of stocktaking in household and farmyard: the housewife counted how much meal, bacon, potatoes and other foods she had in store; the farmer considered how long his stock of hay and other winter fodder would last until the grass began to grow again.

The rituals began on St Brigid's Eve. Brigit was supposed to travel about the countryside, accompanied by her favourite white cow, to bestow her blessing on the people and their animals, so a token of welcome was placed on a window sill – a cake or bread and butter for Brigit and a sheaf of corn for her cow.

No matter how poor the household, a festive meal or at least a special dish would be prepared for supper. This varied in different

regions but butter always formed part of the meal and was always churned on that day. Some of it might be sent to poor neighbours. 'Strong' farmers killed a sheep and sent meat to the needy, others might send fowl or bacon. Other festive foods included colcannon, dumplings, sowans, apple or ginger cake, curd cake, and fruit cake, or barm brack.

Brigid was a renowned brewer, dispensing copious amounts of ale to all without distinction of rank. Ale was therefore drunk in her memory before the making of the ritual cross from straw or rushes began. A cross was hung in both house and cattle byre as a form of protection and to encourage good luck.

Younger people doing the rounds of local houses to collect food and money for 'a hooley' was a common feature of the festival. A *brideog*, an effigy made from a churn-dash dressed up as a human figure, was carried around the houses by 'biddies' collecting food and money for 'the Biddy'. They usually sang a verse to encourage donations:

*Here comes Brigid dressed in white
Give her something for the night.
She is deaf, she is dumb,
She cannot talk without a tongue.*

Alas, almost all of these colourful customs have now died out. While a Brigid's cross may still hang near the door of some rural homes, St Brigid gets scant attention. The day is no longer a church holiday and has never been a public holiday. It's now quite rare for a young girl to be named Brigid and the term 'an auld Biddy' is more than a little derogatory and means an interfering, reactionary, gossiping busybody of mature years.

Yet the Brigid of Christian legend is an attractive person, giving clues to the type of woman likely to gain respect in early Christian Ireland: a clever, liberated lady who outwitted chieftains and bishops, wielded a great deal of authority, but was imbued with a Celtic sense of hospitality. She is reputed to have been the best baker of bread and brewer of ale and mead in Ireland and enjoyed a drink as much as the next person.

SPRING TONIC NETTLE SOUP

Nettles are a traditional spring tonic – an ancient Irish way of flushing toxins from the system that actually has some scientific basis. Nettles are rich in iron and also valuable in the treatment of arthritis. Pick only the tender tops (never use tops which have flowered) and use gloves when picking them. It is possible, by harvesting frequently, to keep young nettle tops going right through until the early summer.

SERVES 6

Ingredients:

350 g/12 oz/2 US cups
floury potatoes, peeled and
cubed

150 g/5 oz/1 US cup mild
onion, peeled and finely
chopped

3 cups (closely packed)
nettle tops, washed and
roughly chopped

2 tablesp butter (or bacon,
duck, or goose fat)

1.5 ltrs/2 $\frac{1}{3}$ pts/6 US cups
chicken or turkey stock

Garnish:

2 tablesp chopped fresh
parsley or chives

a little cream, lightly
whipped

Method:

Melt the butter in a large pot and sweat the onion and potato for about 10 minutes over a gentle heat. Add the stock and bring to the boil. Wash the nettle tops, drain them and add them to the pot to simmer for 5 minutes only (any longer and the bright green colour fades and a rather strong taste develops). Test for tenderness – don't worry, they don't sting after cooking! Purée the soup until smooth in a foodmill or food processor. Return to the pan and reheat.

Serve garnished with a swirl of cream and the chopped herb of your choice.

Variation:

Before cultivated cabbage was introduced, watercress was the traditional accompaniment to boiled bacon and it still grows wild all over Ireland. It can be used in place of nettles but nowadays you should only buy watercress that has been commercially farmed. Use double the amount of watercress to replace the nettles.

KERRY APPLE CAKE

Kerry men (and women and children) are well-known inside and outside Ireland for having jokes told against them. Actually, I've always regarded this as the best Kerry joke of all because, in reality, Kerry people are famous for being 'cute' – clever, on the ball, always keeping the best things secret. In a Kerry apple cake the apples are 'invisible', their presence revealed only when you taste it.

SERVES 4–8

Ingredients:

3 large cooking apples,
peeled, cored and diced
225 g/8 oz/2 US cups
unsifted white flour
90 g/3 oz butter
90 g/3 oz/(scant) ½ US cup
caster sugar
1 teasp baking powder
¼ teasp salt
1 extra-large egg, beaten
¼ teasp nutmeg, grated (or
ground cinnamon or ground
cloves)
3 tablesp Demerara sugar

Method:

Grease a 20 cm/8 inch cake tin with butter, then line it with greaseproof paper. Sift the flour into a bowl and rub in the butter until you have a mixture like fine breadcrumbs. Mix the salt, sugar, and baking powder together in a small bowl, then stir into the flour mixture. Add the chopped apples and the egg and mix to a soft dough. Turn the dough into the cake tin. Mix the Demerara sugar and spice and sprinkle over the top of the cake. Bake at once at 180°C/350°F/Gas 4 for about 45 minutes, or until a skewer inserted into the middle of the cake comes out clean. Traditionally this cake is eaten hot from the oven. It can be served warm (even cold) as long as it is freshly made – just warm it gently if it is to be eaten the following day.



CIDER CAKE

Apples are a native fruit and cider has been made in Ireland since earliest times. There is still a thriving cider industry and the sight of apple orchards in blossom is uplifting in springtime. Cakes made with apples are traditional on St Brigid's Day.

INGREDIENTS:

110 g/4 oz butter
110 g/4 oz/generous ½ US
cup caster sugar
1 teasp bicarbonate of soda
225 g/8 oz/2 US cups
unsifted self-raising white
flour
½ teasp freshly grated
nutmeg
2 medium eggs, beaten
200 ml/7 fl oz/generous ¾
US cup medium sweet cider
2 juicy eating apples,
peeled, cored and sliced
into wedges (optional)
1–2 tablesp caster sugar for
the topping

Method:

Grease a 23 cm/9 inch square, non-stick baking tin with butter. Cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Sift the flour, nutmeg and bicarbonate of soda together. Beat a tablespoon of the flour mix into the butter and sugar mixture followed by all the eggs. Mix in half the remaining flour. Add the cider and beat in fully. Mix in the rest of the flour. Pour the mixture into the tin. If using the apples insert the slices into the mixture (wide side facing upwards) in an even pattern. Bake immediately at 180°C/350°F/Gas 4 for 35–45 minutes or until the top is golden, the cake begins to shrink from the sides of the tin, and the top feels springy to the touch. Allow to cool slightly in the tin before turning out carefully. Place right side up and sprinkle the top with caster sugar. This cake is also lovely eaten as a dessert while still warm served with whipped cream.

VARIATION:

Replace the apple with peeled, sliced wedges of dessert pear.

