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The New Green Cuisine

Forget corned beef and cabbage: The Irish culinary boom has unearthed a bounty of fresh alternatives

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WITH SPRING IN the air, a young man's fancy turns to love, or so Tennyson would have us believe. Likewise, as St. Patrick's Day approaches, thoughts inevitably turn to corned beef and cabbage. Why not try something different this year, a dish that better captures the elemental beauty of Irish cooking? I have in mind the Cork specialty of spiced beef, a home-cured brisket fragrant with black pepper and allspice. Served hot in its own gravy, or sandwiched cold between slices of soft brown Irish soda bread, this aromatic beef with deep, earthy flavors offers welcome respite from corned beef's salty predictability.

“ Ireland stands out for the variety, freshness and flavor of its native ingredients. ”

I first visited Ireland 32 years ago, on my honeymoon. I had married into an Irish-Catholic family. Having grown up in a liberal Jewish one, in which my choice of husband was embraced as good for "mixing the blood," I looked forward to embracing his heritage with equal enthusiasm. That is, until we arrived in Ireland. Where was the fabled Emerald Isle? All I could see was a century of coal grime coating the buildings. At our bed-and-breakfast in Cork, we started each day with the traditional offering: "parched" eggs, grilled tomatoes and sausages, toast so dry even butter couldn't appease it. The only redemptive touch was the marmalade.

I didn't set foot in Ireland for another three decades. Of course, I had heard of the culinary renaissance taking place and had tasted beautiful Irish farmhouse cheeses. But it took our daughter to open my eyes. After a summer in Galway, she was hooked on things Irish: the beer, the literature, the shellfish, the beer. She begged me to visit, I succumbed and, simply put, I was blown away. The "Celtic Tiger" had worked its wonders. It seemed half the population was engaged in either banking or artisanal food production. Markets offered a fabulous array of jams, preserves and syrups, along with smoked fish, hearth breads and more of that beautiful cheese.

Last summer I visited Ireland again. I foraged for seaweed by kayak along the Atlantic Coast. At Barron's Bakery in Cappoquin I tasted "blaas," plump rolls now on their way to gaining PGI status, a European Union certification that a product is local, authentic and skillfully made. I enjoyed seasonal beers from Dungarvan Brewing Company, a craft brewery that carefully bottle-conditions each batch. In Cork, no less, in the 18th-century English Market, I sampled smoked mussels in vinaigrette, rock lobster from Kinsale, tender soda bread flavored with fennel seed, elderflower cordial, floury Golden Wonder potatoes and Yellowman toffee. Best of all was the Farmgate Café's salad of spiced beef on mixed greens, the meat's complex undertones of juniper and allspice providing a perfect counterpoint to the mild lettuce.

A small country, Ireland nevertheless stands out for the variety, freshness and exceptional flavor of its native ingredients: the rich milk that is turned into supple cheeses, the salmon eaten achingly fresh or smoked over beech wood, the brambles and bushes that give rise to delectable jams, the well-marbled beef from Dexter cattle. Add to that the extraordinary in-the-kitchens of Dublin's Michelin-starred restaurants as well as in hole-in-the-wall cafes in the countryside, and you have nothing less than a culinary rebirth, a phoenix rising from the coal ash, deliciously.

Irish Spiced Beef

Although spiced beef is traditional at Christmastime, the Irish enjoy it year round. Don't be daunted by the week of advance preparation—once you have seasoned the meat, this dish virtually prepares itself, requiring little labor in the kitchen. You can thicken the broth into a rich gravy and serve the beef hot, thinly sliced, with boiled potatoes on the side. Or try the meat on a cold-cut platter, with pickled beets or coleslaw for garnish. Easiest of all, if you're going to a St. Patrick's Day parade, is to enjoy the thinly sliced beef in a sandwich, between slices of soft brown bread, with either a spoonful of fruit chutney to moisten it or some sliced pickles and a little mayonnaise.

Active Time: 30 minutes Total Time: 7 days Serves: 12

Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon juniper berries
- 1 tablespoon whole allspice, or 1½ teaspoons ground
- ¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon cloves
- ½ cup kosher salt
- 1/3 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 4-pound beef brisket, tied into a compact form
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 onions, chopped
- 2 carrots, chopped
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- 10 cups cold water (approximately)
- 1 12-ounce bottle stout beer

What To Do

1. In a coffee or spice grinder, grind all spices together. Transfer to a small bowl and stir in salt and brown sugar. Rub mixture into meat, making sure it is well incorporated. Place meat in a glass or stainless-steel dish, cover and refrigerate 1 week, turning once a day. For the first day or so, rub any spice mixture on bottom of dish back into brisket. Once moisture extracted from meat begins to collect in dish, use it to baste meat after turning.
2. When meat has finished curing, remove from refrigerator. Heat oil in a Dutch oven or other pot large enough to hold brisket. Add onions, carrots and thyme and cook over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until vegetables just begin to brown, about 8 minutes. Place brisket on top of vegetables and add enough cold water just to cover. Cover pot and bring to a boil, skimming any foam that rises to surface. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, 3 hours. Stir in stout and cook until brisket is tender, 1 hour more.
3. Allow meat to cool in cooking liquid. When meat is at room temperature, wrap tightly in plastic wrap. (Reserve rich broth for another use.) Put wrapped meat in a shallow dish and place a heavy plate or skillet on top. Place a few heavy cans on the plate to compress meat, and refrigerate overnight. To serve, slice meat thinly against the grain.