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## Eat, drink and be Irish

By DAN MACDONALD, Times-Union food editor

Tonight, hooligans will be passing out in their green beer.



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The next morning, they will be praying to St. Patrick, promising never to drink so much ever again, if they can just make their hangovers go away.

Those less inclined to overindulge can celebrate the Irish holiday by partaking of the food of Ireland. The cuisine is not garish or over the top. Rather, it reflects the nation's peasant past.

While the foods are simple, they are full of natural flavor, said Margaret M. Johnson, author of *The New Irish Table* (Chronicle Books, \$24.95) and *Irish Puddings, Tarts, Crumbles, and Fools: 80 Glorious Desserts* (Chronicle Books, \$24.95).

"Ireland has always been such a poor country they didn't have access to spices. They didn't eat seafood unless they lived right next to the water," she said. "When I visited my cousin [in Ireland] in 1984, they didn't have indoor plumbing."

But that is changing. Technology companies discovered Ireland, and the economy is flourishing like never before. Now chefs are looking at Irish food and presenting it in an upscale manner, she said, noting that the traditional Colcannon is still on the menu, but it may be given a stylized presentation.

Viki Pidgeon, author of the self-published *Deliciously Irish* (Pidgeon's Press, \$19.95), is so enamored by the country that she and her husband have dual American and Irish citizenships.

"I like their way of life. It is so much slower than ours. I feel that they are more appreciative of the everyday things," she said.

Pidgeon collected recipes from people she met in her travels as well as from various country inns and restaurants. One of her favorite dishes is Irish Farmhouse Bake, which combines smoked back bacon, potatoes, mushrooms and cheese.

"It has heavy cream. I'll have it for dinner and can't wait for the next morning to have [the leftovers] for breakfast. It's a good meat-and-potatoes type dish."

Stews are another popular Irish dish, said Robert Meyers-Lussier, author of *This is Delicious! What is It? An Eclectic Collection of International Comfort Foods* (Universe, \$24.95). They include lamb or beef, potatoes and other root vegetables.

He suggests a tip to make the flavors pop: "One of the big tricks is the concept of finishing the stew."

Five minutes before serving, stir in one tablespoon of red wine vinegar. The acid will brighten the flavors that may have grown tired after cooking for several hours.

"It gives the stew a complexity. It gels it," he said.

While we can recreate Irish recipes, Johnson said that Americans can't duplicate the tastes exactly. Vegetables grown and animals raised there taste different than the American products. Sheep raised on grass and those that eat healthier have subtle flavor differences. The same goes for potatoes.

"There is something earthier about it [Irish potatoes]. The taste is affected by the peat," she said.

Products that do taste similar are the Irish whiskeys and Guinness beer. Johnson said sweet American-style cocktails are rarely served in Ireland. Instead, whiskey is served "neat" (no mixer, no ice). A woman drinking in public would most likely have a Guinness that is sweetened with a dash of blackberry liqueur.

However, as wages have grown, so has an appreciation of wine from France, Italy, California and South Africa.

"In restaurants, wine consumption is up. It's huge now," Johnson said.



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