

LIFE BEFORE THE POTATO

Ask someone who isn't Irish what the Irish people eat and the answer is likely to be either "corned beef and cabbage" or "potatoes." Well, beef, in any form, was a luxury for most of Ireland's history and the potato did not arrive on the island until the late 16th century. Not only that, it took a while for the potato to catch on and work its way into the typical Irish diet. So, what did the Irish eat before they learned about the potato?

The answer - oats. As far back as the Celtic age, when kings and their warriors fought over control of land and raided each other's herds of cattle, the vast majority of the people were simple farmers. They had access to common grounds to graze any animals they owned and raised grains and vegetables to feed their families.

Why oats? Well, first, they grow well in Ireland's moist climate and fertile soil. Second, steel cut oats are among the most nutritious of grains. Loaded with protein, more fat than other grains, and a host of vitamins, when combined with dairy, this meant that the Irish enjoyed a diet that was nutritionally sound.

Celtic warriors even found that the oats were convenient to take into battle. They could bring the sheaths of oats along and, at the end of the day, chop the grains with a steel blade, add water and cook into oat cakes on a flat metal surface over a fire.

So, if oats were so great, why did so many Irish end up surviving on the potato? That's a complicated question without an easy answer but as usual in Irish history, an interplay of politics and economics can shed some light on the issue.

The potato was only accepted gradually after its introduction in Ireland. But, at some point, Irish farmers realized that they could grow enough potatoes on a small piece of their land to feed their families and use the rest of their land to grow oats, which they could sell to pay their rent. The days of common ownership of land were long gone and cash rents were a fact of life.

As cities grew and as landlords began to export food from Ireland, a cash-crop economy evolved. Before too long, the poor were unable to afford oats at all and they relied solely on the potato. The potato was easier to grow and more tolerant of poor soil conditions in western Ireland where many of the Irish relocated as they were forced from their lands by the English. Sadly, by the 1840's, fully one-third of the population subsisted on the potato alone. The disaster of the Potato Famine was almost an accident waiting to happen.

Now, with the 21st century well underway, the oats are returning to popularity. They are no longer the simple fare of poor farmers. In fact, there is some irony that they have become quite "chic." The *New York Times* reported that in some New York restaurants, oats with fruit can cost \$14 a bowl!

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See: <http://www.allaboutirish.com/library/foodbev/oats.shtm> By: Pat Friend