

## Food and Food Culture in Northern Ireland

Harry Owens



Northern Ireland has been developing an unmistakable alimentary dialect for centuries—one that is rich in diversity, fiercely independent, and supportive of local produce. Although much of the cuisine is heavily inspired by English and, to some extent, European fare, a flair for culinary innovation and exceptional resourcefulness have allowed the province to develop an entirely unique food culture.

This culture is well established in one of Ulster's most ubiquitous exports—the Ulster Fry. The Ulster Fry is similar in many ways to the Full English Breakfast but with an important addition—namely, potato bread, which embodies the enterprising nature of Irish cooking. Potato bread was invented in Ireland during the nineteenth century, when it was discovered that by substituting much of the wheat flour in unleavened

Each summer, the pretty County Down village of Hillsborough attracts thousands of visitors to its famous International Oyster Festival. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

bread dough with mashed potato (the staple of the Irish diet), leftovers from an evening meal formed a delicious breakfast food.

This resourcefulness continues today. A large proportion of the Ulster diet is based on locally grown vegetables (including *champ*, a stalwart that consists of mashed local potatoes mixed with chopped spring onions) and locally-reared meat, such as the renowned Finnebrogue venison. For the true connoisseur of the province's cuisine, however, it is Ireland's status as an "island nation" that is truly important.



Northern Irish fishermen, based in the province's three main fishing ports, are in close proximity to some of the world's richest fishing waters, and it is this proximity that makes Portavogie prawns, Glenarm salmon, and, particularly, Dundrum Oysters famous. The fame of Northern Ireland's oysters is celebrated at the Hillsborough International Oyster Festival, the home of the World Oyster Eating Championship, an annual event that attracts over twelve thousand visitors from around the world.

With the number of food savvy visitors increasing, thanks to events such as the Oyster Festival, and great immigration to Ulster in recent years, the province has hit a rich, European-inspired, epicurean vein. Although restaurants still make use primarily of local produce, influences from the expanded European Union allow

Fishermen unload crabs fresh from the Irish Sea in Donaghadee, County Down. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

greater creative freedom and help chefs recognize new ways to use the delicacies around them.

Despite external influences, Northern Irish cuisine remains distinctive. Whether you prefer the comfort of a home-cooked Irish stew or the elegance of some of the world's best seafood, Northern Ireland has a dish to suit you.

*Harry Owens is a resident of the seaside town of Bangor and is a lifelong lover of Northern Irish produce, particularly seafood. As a special correspondent to Bridgestone's 100 Best Restaurants in Ireland and other publications, he shares his love of Ulster cuisine with readers.*