

Food

Siobhan O' Hanlon speaks to Regina Sexton, Food Historian

SOH: Regina, I didn't even know there were food historians!

RS: Not many people do Siobhan so you're not alone. It's something that's quite rare, in an Irish context. Outside in a European context the whole subject of food history would be recognised as a discipline in its own right but here yes. I suppose that's what drew my interest that it was an area with no light thrown into it.

SOH: Could you give us a brief description of Irish cuisine?

RS: Like you said in your introduction, from a contemporary perspective Irish food and Irish cuisine if you want to call it that is a mish-mash of different things, drawing influence from a home base which is what we would be familiar with, maybe until the 1970s. The diet taking influence primarily, first of all, from a European context and especially from the Mediterranean cuisine. From Italy first and France to some extent and more recently places like Spain and Greece then also taking in some influence from Asia, like you said India and so on, and a large influence coming from the fast food line and convenience food. There is a huge influence coming in from North America. You have all of these influences then grafted on to a home tradition that would have been strong until the 1970s when we started to be outward looking possibly for the first time in terms of diet.

SOH: Have the Irish taken on any of the traditional European dishes and adapted those to suit their own tastes?

RS: If you think about Ireland. Ireland is an island so it always through time looked out for influences to bring it in. In terms of diet the biggest influence that Ireland would be taking is from England. It would have taken a lot of its influence from England in terms of ingredients and trends. Ireland would first have looked to England and taken those on. The other influences from abroad as well we have taken things from 1970s on the influences are coming mainly from the Mediterranean and taking it in a gentle way first of all. Bringing in foods like macaroni and pasta but there would always be Irish accents to those dishes. They would be made to taste like what people were familiar within an Irish context so the influence would be weaker. More recently those influences would be becoming more authentic. In the last few years the biggest influence coming in would be looking towards Spain. Spanish cuisine has become very popular. We all know about the tapas bars. They are the type of things that happen in the first wave of influence. You would choose gently and as you become more familiar with pasta and rice or the ingredients like olive oil, tomatoes and different cheeses. As you become familiar gently then people want to become more diverse and authentic in what they want to do with those borrowings. The other thing for us to remember in Ireland is that because we are an island not only do we take influences in but we also historically gave influences out. We were an island, traditionally and historically, that produced food. A lot of that food was produced for export. Ireland was exporting a lot of its goods, first to Britain, but also into Europe and in particular, two big items we are talking about, the exportation of butter, especially from Cork, where I am from and also, the other big thing that was

coming into Europe from Ireland, was fish. Irish fish caught in Ireland and exported into Europe, particularly the Catholic countries like Spain, Portugal, France and Italy. Influence goes both ways, we take in but we also give out.

SOH: Obviously, Europe's influence has been very important to the Irish diet.

RS: Of course it has and it's been important in terms of not just taking ingredients in, like we would take ingredients from the European mainland, but we also follow trends and styles. Especially, I always come back to the 1970s, because we started to do things, like television was introduced, a bit before that in the 1950s. Through the 60s and 70s what Ireland started doing, there was television; we had a population that was accessing second level education so we were more adventurous. Also the big thing for that was the start of air travel so people were going abroad more. Be it on pilgrimage in the earlier days or going on holidays. They were bringing things back so Europe was very important in shaking Ireland out of a traditional diet and introducing it to more influences. Things like Nouvelle Cuisine then on the upper levels of dining.

SOH: The European influence on the diet. What changes has that brought with it?

RS: You have more variety, diversification and you have a Pan-European diet. If you walk through any of the streets in urban settings, the cities and big towns, you will see restaurants that have a European base for the most part. I think we can draw a line between Northern and Southern Europe. A lot of what we think of as being sophisticated or novel comes from the Southern European countries particularly those with good climates, that have good sunshine, so they produce oils and good types of pastas, they can grow wheat well. They have good ingredients like tomatoes and peppers, even though those would have come from the Americas. Those types of ingredients would have been drawn through, since we can't produce them here, so they have a novelty factor. Those trends and styles are from the Southern European base. The other line that's above that is the Northern European one and we would share in that band or space. We would share similar things. Now we might develop our own distinctiveness within them. But there are broad styles like a heavy emphasis on meat particularly pig meat, pork and bacon, and an emphasis on heavier vegetables like the root vegetables, turnips, carrots and parsnips. The brassicas then, the cabbage family and heavy carbohydrates, heavy stodgy things like potatoes. Those are the similarities we all share but then there are the trends that we have decided are novel and that we like the taste of. Something won't stay unless we find it palatable.

SOH: Regina, How do you think the typical Irish dinner has changed?

RS: That's easy because we would have grown up with this I presume. The Irish dinner typically would have been three things, meat, potatoes, they were indispensable you couldn't have a dinner without them, you still can't really, even if you have pasta you still have to have things like chips with them, the potato is paramount it's really important, then the vegetables I was talking about, the brassicas, the cabbages, the root vegetables. That has all changed, there is going to be a pasta dish and some point during the week, one dinner would centre around rice, something spicy, maybe a dinner that would be quick and convenient like putting a pizza in the oven. Something that was very unchanging, and monotonous...

SOH: It really was a Monday to Friday dinner, wasn't it? You knew what you would get every day of the week.

RS: It was and now that's changed. There is more diversity in the choices that people have and what they choose to bring in. They are picking from tastes that are global. If they so want.

SOH: Not to mention the health benefits that has come from that change in diet.

RS: There have been health benefits because in more recent times people are thinking about the link between food, nutrition and well being. It's very important to remember that diet has also increased in terms of processed fats, salt and heavy sugars. That would be particularly associated with convenience food industry, that isn't great for the diet.

SOH: In your opinion Regina does food lay the foundation for a better understanding of other cultures?

RS: I think it has to. We all eat and we all have to eat, but we eat in different ways. Different groups eat in different ways. Food is a letter of introduction and we are curious about why different people eat different things and the curiosity starts and interest. We are interested in different ways, customs and people. Food knows no boundaries in that respect.

SOH: You link food to a certain country. If I prepare pizza, straight away I will think of Italy.

RS: That's right if people eat a potato they think of Ireland, so food is a mark of identity, it is how you identify things with people and places. That helps us understand because food is fundamental; it's a way that all of us find a way in, to understand a different culture.

SOH: How does food assist dialogue?

RS: I think it's instrumental in promoting dialogue. In Ireland at the present day, the opening of different shops selling ingredients from Eastern European countries. It is interesting to see a lot of those have found their way into the supermarkets. They would be promoting dialogue whether it's between ourselves or between the new groups that are settling in the country so food knows no boundaries and it's very welcoming. It can promote so much understanding and be a social understanding about how people operate socially, be it how the economy of food works, the politics of food. Food is an open door, an open door to many things, if we want to push it.

SOH: How important has the provision of foreign cuisine been to the integration process for migrants living here?

RS: I think food is very important because first of all it sustains us but also people are close to their food, they have a certain palate. We as Irish people have a certain palate, other European peoples and others coming to the country have a certain palate. When you are in a strange place and feel uncertain about things you get a sense of comfort

from the palates that you are familiar with. Food brings a sense of comfort and security and it also gives a sense of identity that you want to have and hold on to in a place where everything else is unsure. I think that's very important.

Ciaran Oglesby speaks to Emilio Trurillo of Nico's Restaurant

CO: Emilio, when did you first establish your restaurant?

ET: I have been in Nico's 32 years but Nicos itself was opened in 1963 by Mr Nicos Rogero and then he went back to Italy. I took over in 1977 and I'm still here after 31 years. The Nicos name comes from an Italian gentleman that worked in the Italian embassy in Lucan because in the 60s the Italian ambassadors used to employ Italian waiters and chefs who they brought from Italy and Nicos was one of them. He worked in the Italian embassy to look after the Italian ambassador but after a few years working in the embassy he came out and he opened his own restaurant, Nicos in Dame Street. It has been here since 1963 and at that time there was Bernardo's in Lincoln Place that was working with the embassy in Lucan, there was Quo Vadis and these people were the backbone of Italian cuisine in Ireland in the 60s because there was nothing else. These people we must admire, even myself I worked for 4 or 5 years as a chef in Bernardo's and they taught me Italian cooking at it's best. That was how I started and we have been fortunate that we kept the Nicos name on the premises and I hope to stay here another fifty years.

CO: What attracted you to Ireland in the first instance.

ET: I met my wife in England and she is Irish so I came over here in 1971 and worked as a chef and then took over Nicos ever since.

CO: What was the initial reaction of the public towards the availability of authentic Italian cuisine in Dublin?

ET: Very, very good. It was very positive from the Irish point of view because in the 70s there were very few restaurants anyway. In Dublin people tended to go out, we were very busy in the 70s. Things were not great but people appreciated Italian food and still now after 30 or 40 years they still do it and they still appreciate very much.

CO: Where there any other Italian restaurants in Dublin at the time?

ET: Yes, In the 70s there were about 4 Italian restaurants and they were all well known. They were very, very busy and they all did very well. The other 3 restaurants are all gone and we are the only one left as the oldest Italian restaurant in Dublin since 1963.

CO: Congratulations on that. Compared to foreign countries, any other western countries that wasn't very many was it? In the 70s to have only 4 Italian restaurants?

ET: Yes, I worked in London and to compare Dublin to London, London was a big, big city. In Dublin at the time the economy was not great and people did not go out very often but the few Italian restaurants that were there did business and as a chef myself we worked very hard all day and people appreciated that.

CO: From your point of view being a chef what was your opinion of the Irish diet when you first arrived here?

ET: Italian Cooking and dishes, people know very little about. In Ireland they had the best ingredients and especially in the 70s there was an abundance of fish, so much meat and vegetables. The majority of Irish liked to cook at home with the usual things, stew or chicken and nothing else, but slowly, now in Ireland you can see every type of restaurant and they do very well.

CO: Has there been much change between then and now in the Irish diet?

ET: Yes, indeed. Especially now people tend to look after themselves. They don't want to eat fatty foods. In Nicos now we sell a lot of fish, fish is very light and they say it's good for you so I think people look after themselves a bit better now.

CO: What do you think influenced people's direction in the change of their diet here in Ireland?

ET: What can I say?...

CO: Do you think it may have been popular culture with everyone getting on the environmentally friendly and healthy kick with their diets?

ET: Oh yes, that's the idea. Like myself you tend to watch what you eat. The idea is not to overdo it. Like everything else. Eating and drinking are the same process. You keep an eye on it.

CO: Would you have found, now this is a personal question, in the 80s when you visited friends and you showed off your culinary skills to cook them a real Italian meal, did you find they were receptive to it?

ET: Oh yes. They would be very happy with it. It's like everything else if you go in any house, even now, and do a bit of cooking and do a new dish for someone they appreciate it very much. That is human nature. I think in this day and age they open up so many ethnic restaurants but I think the Italians still do very well. People still appreciate, there is still a big, big demand for it. First of all we have all plain ingredients. We don't try to kill the dish. You can see the freshness of the food and that's what people appreciate.

CO: Did you find that these friends you cooked for then tried out the dishes themselves?

ET: That's the idea. Even my wife at home, she's Irish, and when she cooks she's one of the best. She cooks all the Italian dishes. You have to have love for cooking as well. It's like anything else if you cook you have to keep an eye on it and I think people appreciate that.

CO: Have you personally adapted to the Irish diet?

ET; Yes I did? After so many years you adapt to everything. I find the breakfast is great but you have to watch fatty food. That's the only thing. Everything else is grand. You have the best ingredients in this country why not use them?

CO: Finally, Has the Irish diet influenced your own cooking in any way?

ET: In Italy we have so much cooking and choice. The menu is big and vast but I still like to have a turkey and ham for Christmas or a leg of lamb on a Sunday or roast beef. They are typical Irish dishes which I enjoy very much.