

Episodes 77

St Patrick's Day dinner

I love, as in savor with deliberate delight, an excellent corned beef.

The briny flavor is part of it, but also the beefiness. The brisket is beefier than other cuts and when well and properly brined the shimmer of the meat when cut and the texture of the meat creates great anticipation. Sometimes, when the light hits the meat just right, a rainbow glistens across the surface.

I am alone in my house as a fan of corned beef for dinner. Corned beef hash is better appreciated so not all is lost. But cabbage? Nope. Brussels sprouts for one more of us is fine but cabbage is a firm unyielding no.

St Patrick's day offers this great dish opportunity but it also presents a chance to work on some cooking and food skills. While I do love history and learning more about it, this show is food skills first if there's a choice, and there is, but today, we get to do both.

Where the heck is the corn?

The corn in corned beef refers to the rock salt that was used as a preservative on meats. Here, beef. A deep dive is not the purpose here, but people have been preserving meat with salt for thousands of years.

According to the website Kitchenproject.com, the term Corned has been in the OED, Oxford English Dictionary, since 888.

Salt draws out water and changes the composition of meats. The water retraction helps control pathogens which is good.

Corned beef today, in the parlance of our times, is brined—cooking skill number 1. A brine is, at its most simple salt dissolved into water. Some brines add sugar which doesn't serve to make the meat sweet but helps firm the texture of the meat as well as also helps manage pathogens or bacteria we don't want on our food.

Corned beef has become quite an item and industry for grocery stores, especially these weeks. In most grocery store meat cases you can find pre-brined portions of brisket with a spice

packet for your to poach—cooking skill number 2—for your dinner.

Now, today, the day of publication of this episode, is next week, plenty of time to find a brisket, brine it yourself and be ready for St Patrick's Day dinner.

Some quick kitchen math

Briskets are usually trimmed pretty well from the butcher shop or your grocery meat counter.

Between bits you can't use and such I plan on about a 20% loss in yield—that's probably a bit high, but no one ever complained about getting more to eat.

So, if I'm starting with 16 ounces of beef, I'll lose just over 3 ounces in cooking. What is left, the eating part, is about 13 ounces. That's enough for two people, probably, but overlooks the delightful corned beef hash and sandwiches and other ancillary uses. You know you. Depending on what else you want to eat, buy on the excess side for all those yummy other dishes.

Briskets can be pretty big but most grocery stores don't sell the whole thing. It's too much. One

consideration is the calendar. 4-5 pounds of brisket will need a good 10 days to properly brine. If you find smaller pieces that time can be reduced to be ready for St Patrick's dinner.

I'll put the recipes for today's episode on the show notes page, culinarylibertarian.com/77. That'll link to a blog post with much of this spoken content and the printable recipes.

If you find yourself in a pinch because you found this episode too near your planned dinner date, the pre-brined packages of brisket from the store are fine. They come with a spice packet which, actually, I discard and use my own. But, that's me. Those spice packets are fine, but I prefer more control over what I add.

When the brisket is cooked, fork-tender by the way, remove it from the poaching liquid and let it rest on a roasting pan-something with edges-for 10 minutes or so. A lot of liquid will come out of it but it's better it better in the pan than on the plate.

The sides to this delight are cabbage and potatoes. On one webpage I found two sources cited which directly contradict each other about the

authenticity of corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes as Irish or not. That's not soon going to be settled but I see no reason to exclude the Irish from having made these dishes even if in disparate forms. As cooking goes, poaching meat is hardly anyone's own.

The history of the Irish and the potato is rather well known. All that is to say if it is authenticity you seek, rest well knowing that in Ireland surely someone somewhere eats corned beef and cabbage and potatoes.

I prefer the red-skinned, less starchy potatoes simply for how they hold up when cooked, which is only slightly better than the starchy potatoes. I also enjoy rather large wedges of cabbage. In your house, make it as you like.

Irish soda bread has an interesting history for bakers and the generally curious as well. I'll add some links to the show notes page for you to read for more information.

In addition to a curious provenance, there is a wide diversity in recipe ingredients. Many recipes and posts make the point that Irish soda bread is made from soft wheat flour, not hard wheat flour.

Yeast was difficult to obtain and even at that soft wheat flours are not the first best choice for yeast doughs. Bread soda, or baking soda later, was the preferred leavening for Irish soda breads, also called quick breads. This name seems to suggest something about the baking time but refers to the mix and shape and bake aspect versus the mix and ferment and degas and ferment and shape and proof and bake. In that description, the answer to why it's called quick breads seems plain enough. That term, quick breads, is rather new, perhaps the late 18th century in the US. The key difference was the great increase in yeast-leavened breads so some distinction was likely made. But, first a moment about that provenance.

Many foods have simultaneous origination, that is, more than one culture may have combined specific ingredients in a particular way.

The Sodabread.info website notes the “earliest reference to using soda ash in baking bread seems to be credited to American Indians using it to leaven their bread. Pearl Ash was used prior to 1800 to make flat cakes on hot rocks by combining it with an acidic ingredient in the dough.” The state of poverty in Ireland may well have hurried

along their own creation of soda bread. That same site notes the earliest recipe found in Ireland is from 1836.

The other curious ingredient which appears with inconsistency is fat. Some soda breads are as a big biscuit. Flour, baking soda, salt, solid at room temperature fat and buttermilk. The more conservative are flour, soda, salt, and buttermilk. There are some which add raisins or caraway seeds (one of my favorite versions) and maybe sugar or an egg. Given the condition of near poverty, excluding eggs and sugar and fat seems reasonable leaving just the buttermilk, or, in some cases curdled milk, and flour, salt, and soda. Modern cooks egg wash or milk wash the bread for a golden brown color and may sprinkle sugar on top. I would expect a proper 4 ingredient soda bread would omit these steps.

As to the aesthetics, there is a tradition of cutting or pressing into the top an X or a cross. Of course, that may reference Christ but some have suggested it was also for ease of portioning or to ensure a more even bake. Maybe all three.

As a baked good, soda bread is a delight as soon as it is cool enough to cut. Since the classic version has no butter or added fat or eggs, the quality goes down.

However, it is excellent as toast the next morning with corned beef hash.

Make the bread

Mixing soda bread—skill number 3—is not difficult but does get sticky. Dough fingers make some bakers and cooks anxious. It's part and parcel part of baking but I've got a way around it for at least less stickiness.

Sifting flour for quick breads is a good idea; not required like for some cakes, but it does help make an airy bread.

Sift all the dry ingredients in one mixing bowl: flour, salt, baking soda. Make a well in the center and pour in the buttermilk. I use a wedding cake dowel to stir with, but I don't expect you to have that. The opposite end of a wooden spoon will do well. Stir with that to form the dough ball then with a plastic bowl scraper, scrape the edges toward the middle of the bowl to form a sphere.

Soda bread doesn't need kneading but does benefit from a few moments of hydration.

If you find soda bread recipes on line they nearly all call for all-purpose flour. I don't know if the exchange of cake flour, a soft wheat flour, is the same as for AP since the starch content is higher in cake. Also, those recipes will read to knead the dough a bit on the counter. That's being achieved with the dough scraper in the bowl. We're containing our mess.

Those additions of sugar or spices or raisins are somewhat popular and are not wrong, per se, since many people have grown up with that as their tradition. But, keep in mind the poor Irish would not have had money, most likely, for such things as sugar or spices to be used here in an everyday bread. Such extravagances would be saved for very special holiday meals.

A cast-iron pan would probably have been the baking vessel of choice but a sheet pan will do.

One more note: when the Irish came to America, brisket was most easily found in New York in the Jewish neighborhoods. Given the fondness for

caraway seeds in Jewish rye, it's easy to see how caraway seeds migrated into soda bread. Caraway as an addition requires no more liquid.

Raisins can test the hydration of a dough as they'll also pull on the moisture going to the flour which could lead to an even shaggier bread than intended. The recipe on the blog post will not include butter or eggs.

On to breakfast.

Back on the eggs episode, culinarylibertarian.com/75, I love corned beef hash with poached eggs. Nearly everyone who eats corned beef hash probably eats the commercial canned version.

That's not a terrible thing as such but when you make it at home, there is an unmet expectation between what you see in your head and what you see on the plate.

Frankly, I'm not entirely certain I know how—or want to know how—the commercial version ends up as it is. Off the top of my head, such a version might be possible if all the ingredients were ground together. That's a step I just don't have an interest in trying.

At this house, a sharp knife is what I use to cut the ingredients.

Frankly, I like the goo that is the commercial hash, but prefer homemade as much as is possible. The advantage for corned beef hash after St Patrick's day is the leftover potatoes--you did make sure to have leftover potatoes, right?—help get there.

Most recipes you'll find in books or online instruct to cut the meat into half-inch cubes. That works but it never comes together as I prefer. A smaller cut of meat and potatoes, and why not add some cabbage as well?, helps the hash hold together a bit more and also lets it build that crust I find so wonderful. On our homemade version the eggs on top, poached soft for me, do some of the work of holding everything together. Pan-fried, sunny side up, runny—you can do over easy—is also a great way to let the yolk do some work.

If you've soda bread leftover, some sliced of that toasted and buttered with the hash and eggs on that is a great breakfast.