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Breads of the World: Ireland

Presented 2/21/2017 by Susan Ringer and Terri Fleming

In Ireland, "plain" soda bread comes in two colors, brown and white, and two main types: cake (aka, loaf) and farl (see below). People in the south of Ireland tend to make cake: people in Northern Ireland seem to like farl, though both kinds appear in both North and South, sometimes under wildly differing names.

If the bread contains raisins, currants, caraway seed, egg, sugar or *anything* in addition to flour, buttermilk (or sour milk), salt and baking soda, it's not traditional and authentic soda bread. Breads with added dried fruit are called Spotted Dog.

Soda bread is said to have become so prominent in Ireland because the native wheat, a soft, low-gluten variety, is particularly well-suited to the soda bread technique. And it made use of a common kitchen byproduct in the era before refrigeration: milk that had turned sour.

Traditional White Soda Bread

Makes 1 large loaf

Ingredients:

4 cups flour
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking soda
1½ to 1¾ cups buttermilk (or sour milk)

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
2. Sieve the dry ingredients. Make a well in the center. Pour most of the milk in at once. Using one hand, stir in a full circle to mix in the flour from the sides of the bowl, adding more buttermilk if necessary. The dough should be soft-ish, not too wet and sticky. When it all comes together, turn the dough out on a floured board and knead lightly for a second, just enough to tidy it up.
3. Pat the dough into a round about 2 inches deep and cut a cross on it to let the fairies out! Let the cuts go over the sides of the bread to make sure of this.
4. Bake at 450 degrees for 15 minutes, then turn down the oven to 400 degrees for a further 20 to 30 minutes until cooked. If in doubt, tap the bread bottom; it should sound hollow.
5. Cool on a wire rack or on the windowsill in the time-honored way.
6. If you prefer a softer crust, wrap a clean tea towel around the loaf while it cools.

Source: *Irish Traditional Cooking* by Darina Allen

Spotted Dog (aka Tea Cake, Railway Cake or Sweet Cake)

Makes 1 large loaf

Ingredients:

4 cups unbleached all-purpose white flour
2 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking soda
4 tablespoons (½ stick) cold unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch dice
1¾ cups buttermilk
1 large egg
¾ cup currants (or raisins or golden raisins, or a mix)
1 teaspoon orange zest (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper or silpat.
2. Sift flour, sugar, salt and baking soda into the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment. Add diced butter and mix on low speed just until butter is mixed into the flour.
3. Measure buttermilk in a large measuring cup. Add egg and orange zest, if using, and mix with a fork. With mixer on low speed, slowly add the buttermilk-egg mixture to the flour mixture. Combine currants (or raisins) with 1 tablespoon flour and mix into the dough. The dough will be very soft.
4. Dump the dough on a well-floured board and knead just enough to tidy it up, making a round loaf about 2 inches thick. Place on prepared sheet and cut a ¾-inch-deep X into the top with a serrated knife.
5. Bake 45 to 55 minutes or until cooked through. To test, tap the bottom: if it's cooked, it will sound hollow. Cool on baking rack. Serve warm with butter.

Source: Adapted from *Irish Traditional Cooking* by Darina Allen

Spotted Dog variations/additions:

American: Add 2 teaspoons caraway seeds to the flour after sifting

Golden: Substitute about 1 cup of fine-ground cornmeal for 1 cup of the flour

Candied peel: Add 2 ounces mixed candied peel

Farls: On the stovetop, preheat a heavy skillet on low- to medium-low heat. Prepare dough as above through step 3. On a floured surface, divide dough in half. Working half at a time, with floured hands, knead just enough to shape into a round loaf. Flatten to ½-inch thick with hands or roller. Cut into fourths. Sprinkle flour on dry, hot skillet and cook four pieces at a time, 6-8 minutes each side. They will rise while cooking. Makes 8 farls.

Glossary, trivia, ingredients & substitutions

Bastible: Heavy iron pot with three legs, a flat base and a concave lid. It was used in traditional/old Irish kitchens to bake bread over an open fire. The bastible is held over the fire by a pronged stick called a gaulog. Hot coals were scooped onto the lid to bake from above and below. The word bastible is said to be a bastardization of the name Barnstaple, the town in Devon, England, where the pots were manufactured.



Buttermilk/sour milk: Sour milk can be substituted in equal measure for buttermilk. Two methods of making sour milk: Darina Allen's: Mix 2 cups whole milk with 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice. Let sit at room temperature 15 minutes. Stir and use. Store extras in the fridge for up to two days. Another method: Mix 1 tablespoon + 2 teaspoons vinegar with 1 2/3 cup milk. Let sit 5 minutes before using. Makes enough for one loaf.

Cake bread or cake: A traditional Irish term for soda bread

Cross: Why cut a cross on the top? There are practical reasons. Slashing the dough lets the dough stretch and expand while baking, and it lets heat penetrate the thickest part of the dough. It also makes it easy to cut into four portions when done. Folklore says the cross "lets the fairies out" or "lets the demons out" and protects the household.

Farl or soda farl (pronounced far-el): The Northern way. Dough is rolled out and cooked on a dry griddle. Traditionally, farls were the quickest way to make soda bread for unexpected guests who drop by for a bit of craic (good fun).

Irish butter: Irish butter and many other European-style butters have higher butterfat content than American butters. They're creamier, have a smoother mouthfeel and sometimes even a slightly cheesy taste.

Raisins, currants and golden raisins/sultanas: Raisins and golden raisins (aka sultanas) are very similar and can be interchanged in recipes; both are from vine-grown grapes of different varieties. Most "currants" sold in the US are dried Zante grapes; they're much smaller than raisins. True currants actually are small berries grown on bushes in the Middle East; they're hard to find in standard US supermarkets.

Soda: Baking soda was introduced in Ireland in the first half of the 19th century, freeing cooks with quick (non-yeast) breads, which became a staple of every Irish household.

Ulster fry or fry-up: A full breakfast of eggs, meat, potatoes and soda bread fried in butter or bacon grease, sometimes making use of day-old farls and bread.