**Food History of the Celts**

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The Celts cannot be defined by one culture. They have existed for thousands of years throughout Europe (as the people of Ireland Scotland, Brittany, Cornwall, Isle of Man, and Wales still call themselves Celts). The origin of the Celts is still a question. Current DNA analysis states that the Celtic lineage can be mapped through a single patriarch from Galicia, modern day Turkey around 7000BC. Then along the Mediterranean coast and into Europe in a rapid migration. As the Celts migrated through Europe the culture changed. They kept no written records. The Druids were their spiritual and political leaders and believed that their knowledge was too sacred to write down it was passed down by word of mouth. All the documentation we have are second hand, what Romans and Greeks wrote about them, as well as archaeological evidence. The Celts developed new technologies for metal work, farming, agriculture, animal domestication, cooking techniques, and processing the fruits of their labors. Quern stones, ploughs/ard, messor (harvesting machine) and cauldrons were some of their advancements in technology. The Celts were also the first to invent a harvesting machine, the messor later called the vallus by the Romans. “It was a big box, the edges armed with teeth and supported by two wheels, which moved through corn fields pushed by ox. The ears of corn were uprooted by the teeth and fell into the box”, states Pliny the Elder a Roman author. He also states they had other technical advanced tools for agriculture including scythes, spades, sickles, axes, forks, and billhooks. This helped the Celts’ massive expansion through Europe. The Celts technological advancements with Iron is also how Europeans moved from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

*Domestication:* Throughout Europe food sources and practices dramatically changed with new technological advancements. The first millennium BC few communities lived solely on wild resources. Europe became more reliant on agriculture, and domesticated animals. Although wild game like boar, deer, rabbit, and fowl were still hunted, usually by nobles. Husbandry was practiced by all. The favorite livestock of the Celts were pigs. This is supported by the majority of pig bones found in a Celtic Oppidum in Manching, Germany. Evidence of crossbreeding between domestic and wild pigs were found at Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland of the Le Tene Celtic settlement. This produced larger breeds. The most important product brought to the British Isles by the Celts was cattle, as it provided a variety of products (meat, milk, leather). They were used as draught animals as well. They kept them without slaughtering for years. Their blood was used for breads, and puddings. They would make a small slit in the neck, bleed the animals a bit then cauterizes the wound. They consumed internal organs and bone marrow. This is supported by archaeological sites where cow bones were found with signs of marrow subtraction (The Celts 457). Cows provided dairy which was used to make butter and cheese. Domesticated sheep and goats were a staple in Celtic settlements. About half of the goat population were killed in youth suggesting that goats were used more as meat bearing animals than sheep. Goats were also used as dairy animals and for their hides (the Celts 458). The keeping of sheep although is undeniable. Sheep were kept more through adulthood suggesting that sheep had another more important use, that would be wool. They were also used as dairy animals for milk and cheese (The Celts 458). Manufactured woolen goods were well known by Caesar and became part of the export business from Britain to Rome (Ellis 105).

*Cooking Methods:* Many different ways of cooking and serving meat were practiced. Cooking stones were used since Mesolithic times. Meat was also wrapped in straw, clay or leaves then dropped into a hot pot, hollowed out log, or hide of hot water. To maintain the temperature hot stones were dropped into the pot until the meat was done. This method of hot rocks and wrapped meat were also used to roast meat. A pit was lined with hot stones and then covered with more hot stones, then changed out as they cooled until the meat was cooked. They also used a spit or grilling to roast meats as well as stewing in large cauldrons held by chains on a tripod over the fire. (Prehistoric Cookery 77, Jacqui Woods).

*Poultry and Fowl:* There is some evidence that the Celts kept domestic hens. They were kept for years probably more for egg production. This is supported by bone fragments found in sites (The Celts 448). Wild fowl were another food source. Cooking techniques included hanging the larger fowl bodies out for several days to tenderize. The head and neck of long neck fowl were left outside the cooking water when cooked so the sinews could be removed with one quick pull of the head (Renfrew 16). Domestic geese and ducks were part of the Celtic diet mentioned by Pliny. “Roast goose was a most sumptuous dish know to the Britons.” A variety of wild birds such as shag, puffin, auk (now extinct) as well as guillemot, gannet, diver, and migratory goose have been found at Hebridean Wheel houses of Cnip, and Sollas in North Uist, Scotland (Armit 73, Prehistoric Cookery 48). Also found were pigeons, pelican, cormorant, heron, swan and so on. The Celts used eggs and had a variety to choose from including domestic hens, geese, and ducks. Seagull’s eggs in the springtime are a traditional favourite in Scotland where they are still gathered today (Wood 168).

*Fish and other seafoods*: The sea was plentiful. Fresh and saltwater fish including bass, trout, carp, cod, herring, and salmon as well as many other types were consumed (Wood 122). This was found at the wheelhouses at Cnip, and Sollas in Scotland. Eel, shark, and other ocean fish were probably acquired through deep sea fishing. According to Athenaeus, “Those Celts who live by the sea or along rivers also eat baked fish flavoured with salt, vinegar, and spices like cumin.” (Freeman 24-25). For the Celts that lived along the sea, shellfish were a large part of their diet including oysters, mussels, scallop, cockles, clams… (Wood 122). Shells of these have been found since prehistoric times. Crabs and lobsters were caught using weighted baskets and archaeological evidence of their use has been documents in Scotland. (Prehistoric Cookery 46). Evidence of garum or fish sauce have been found not just at Roman sites, but also at Celtic sites probably through trade. In Garum or anchovy sauce whole fish was spiced, pounded, fermented, salted, strained, and bottled for future use or trade. Marine mammals were eaten also, used for tools, oil, and house building. This was usually beached whales (Armit 73).

Seaweed, and sea bearing plants were harvested and are still eaten throughout Wales, and Ireland. They are highly nutritious and flavorful. Laver was used to make a sauce for mutton and as a basis for laverbread as well as soups. Carragheen more commonly known as Irish Moss is found along the coasts of the British Isles. Because of its ability to gel quickly the Celts could have used it to thicken fish stew (Walkley 82-83). Sea lettuce or Sea kale were blanched in salt water and served. Sea beets whose roots were boiled and eaten had a subtle flavor. Samphire was used as a vegetable and even pickled. Kelp that washed up was used with barley by soaking is fresh water overnight and boiled with the barley to make a soup (Walkley 82-83). Many seaweeds were collected and dried in the sun then kept in containers. They were used by Celtic cooks for seasoning in soups, and porridges.

When the Celts settled in Britain around 700 BC agriculture was a challenge for them due to the climate and rugged terrain. The Celtic societies of Ireland and Scotland had sophisticated techniques like the iron plough/ard with a coulter. They grew a variety of crops, used manure application and practiced crop rotation. They developed seasonality for planting due to the climate challenge. They developed community feasts and festivals around the planting and harvesting of the seasons some of which are still celebrated today. Cultivated crops included carrots, turnips, peas, beets, asparagus, cucumbers, rhubarb, onions, and garlic. (prehistoric cookery 67- 68). They took advantage of the wealth of edible weeds, berries, nuts, fruits and fungi that were available. Wild vegetables such as nettles, thistles, fat hen, wild spinach, wild celery, ramsons, burdock, white water lily, as well as salad vegetables: sheep’s sorrel, shepherd’s purse, dandelion, bedstraw, yarrow, rocket, bittercress, toadflax, sorrel, burnet, and marjoram. They also used flowers such as clover, chives, primrose, violet, heather, and elder (Wood 141-154). Other things foraged for was honey. This was the only means of sweetening foods for centuries. Many fruits were available to the Celts like blackberries, raspberries, cherries, brambles, crabapples, elderberries, cloudberries, and wild strawberries documented in the archaeobotanical computer database (ABCD. Tomlison). These fruits were probably dried to use during the winter as suggested by the mixed remains found all stored in one place. (Dickson 90). Crab apples have been grown since Mesolithic times. Evidence shows Neolithic peoples dried and stored them for later use. They were also probably used to make cider, juices, verjuice, and vinegars. Domestic and wild plum, and pear trees still exist from this time. Remains of grapes and figs have been found at sites probably brought over by the Romans (Dickson 118-123).

Nuts and legumes were used by the Celts. The Celtic beans are akin to today’s broad bean. They were prepared as we do today, left to soak overnight in salted water then boiled for 3 hours. Other legumes such as lentils and peas were cultivated. These can all be dried and stored over the cold winters and used in soups and stews. (Wood 127). Nuts like acorns and hazelnuts are indigenous to Britain and were widely used by the Celts. They were collected during the autumn and stored for use during the winter. Walnuts and chestnut were cultivated by the Romans who also imported almonds and pine nuts (Renfrew 6).

Herbs and spices were being used in the Celtic diet before the first millennium BC. This can be gathered from archaeological evidence as carbonized, and waterlogged seeds embedded in pottery and pollen analysis show. There were some indigenous plants that were used as well. The Celts would have enjoyed a wide variety of domesticated and wild herbs for seasoning foods. Black currant, caraway, chervil, chives, horehound, horseradish, juniper, mint, mustard, parsley, poppy, leek, thyme, and wall pepper were available spices for the Celts (Wood 133-139). Coriander, sorrel, corn mint, and ginger were introduced by the Romans (Prehistoric Cookery 69-70). Athenaeus mentions the Gauls used Cumin as a flavoring in drinks and to season fish. In Colchester, the remains of a Roman herb shop were found preserved, burned during the Boudicca rebellion in 60AD. The preserved herbs included dill, cumin, coriander, aniseed, celery seed, and poppy seed (Renfrew 23). Opium poppy seeds have been found in Scotland and other than medicinal purpose they were used to sprinkle on top of bread as was the Roman custom. (Dickson 118). There were few remains of mushrooms or fungi in prehistoric record. These were eaten fresh or dried and stored for future use. Evidence was found in a Neolithic village of Skara Brae, Scotland (Prehistoric Cookery 70). There are 3000 species of fungi growing around the British Isles, out of these only 20 are poisonous. Some indigenous types include morels, chanterelles, ceps, field, puffballs, beefsteak, and oyster fungus.

Salt was a staple in the Celtic diet. Hallstatt, Austria where the Celtic people had a large settlement was and is still a main salt mine - Hall meaning Salt, and Statt meaning city. It is an ancient means of preserving meat and fish as well of other foods. Many of these foods were exported to Rome by the Celts (The Celts 444). There were no salt mines in Britain, so salt was mined from the sea. There is well documented evidence of this practice (Wood 119-120). To manufacture their salt, large ceramic trays were filled with salt water and suspended over a fire. As the water boiled down more brine was added until the tray was filled with blocks of salt. The salt was then broken up to use.

Grains were cultivated and have been documented back to the Bronze age in Britain 3,500 years ago. The most common crop was barley. It was used to make porridge, bread, and beer. The iron age gave way to new methods and better tools for growing crops. From the grains they developed bread which was the staple of life for the Celts. This is mentioned by many classical writers. Phylarchus states in his sixth book, “among the Celts it is customary to place on the tables many broken loaves along with meat straight from the cauldron.” (Freeman 24). Rock hard loaves have been found at archaeological sites throughout Britain. Like one in Glastonbury, in Somerset, England dating from the first century BC. They found unleavened bread that contained barley and wheat flours. Another rare example of bread was discovered at Lake Bienne in Switzerland and was dated to the Neolithic period. This bread contained yeast and was made of finely ground barley and wheat flours. Fermented beer could be added to flour to produce leavened bread. Another form of leavened bread was sourdough, where a little dough from each batch is taken and added to the next to keep yeasts alive. Pliny commented on this very practice in Celtic France and Spain. “When the corn of Gaul and Spain of the kinds we have stated is steeped to make beer the foam that forms on the surface in the process is for leaven, in consequence of which those races have a lighter kind of bread then others” (Wood). Many carbonized grains have been found in archaeological sites include barley, spelt wheat, emmer wheat, einkorn wheat, oats, rye, and millet. Tight husk grains required heating the grains to remove the husks. For storage purposes grains were often kept still in their husks in pits. The top layer of the grains would sprout in the pits. These sprouted grains were eaten, ground, turned to malt then added to water to produce a malt beverage. Allowed to ferment, this beverage could easily become an alcoholic drink. One of the oldest archeological sites in Ireland, Ceide Fields, is a great glimpse into Celtic agriculture. Ceide Fields also had remnants of grain grinding stones (or Quern stones) to make flour (Snook, Ceide Fields). Grains were originally ground on a saddle quern with a back-and-forth motion for centuries. They used an oblong stone with a flat upper surface which became concave with use as grain was ground between it and a second flat stone. This was used until the invention of a rotary quern during the Iron Age by the Celts of the 4th or 3rd century BC. The rotary quern was a technological advancement. It consisted of two round stones that sat on top of each other, much like miniature mill wheels. The upper stone was turned by hand with a handle. The upper stone could be raised or lowered to adjust the grind. This would have been used to remove the husks from the grain and grind it. On Neolithic pottery grain impressions have been found showing this method (Avery 1982: 48).

Iron age villages of Glastonbury and Meare produced village ovens, though every house did contain a central hearth the ovens were shared. (Prehistoric Cookery 81). Baking may have been done on a flat stone laid on or beside the fire. Another Dutch oven like methods may have been used by placing an inverted pot over the bread and placing hot embers over it.

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*Garum: Apicious wrote, “that in the best garum only fish livers were used by being exposed to the sun, fermented, and preserved.” It was also written about by Pliny in his book Geoponica XX, chapter 46 1-6 gives the best account for the manufacturing of liquament of garum, liquamen, or a culinary liquid of fish. He states as follows: “The entrails of fish are thrown into a vessel and salted. Take small fish either atherinae or red mullet of sprats or anchovy and salt together, and leave out in the sun, shaking it frequently. When it has become dry from heat, extract the garum from it as follows: take a fine mesh basket and place it in the middle of a vessel with the above-mentioned fish, and in this way the so-called liquamen put through the basket can be taken up. If you wish to use the garum at once do not expose it to the sun but boil it, make it in the following manner. Take brine and test its strength by throwing an egg into it to try if it floats: if it sinks the brine does not contain enough salt. Put the fish into the brine in a new earthenware pot, add origan, put it on a good fire till it boils…let it cool and strain it over two or three times until clear, seal and store away. The best garum is made by taking the entrails of tunny fish and its gills, juice, and blood then add sufficient salt. Leave it in a vessel for two months at most, then pierce the side of the vessel and the garum, called haimation, will flow out.”*

*Verjuice is made by placing the apples into a heap to sweat, discarding the stalks and any decay. It is then mashed to extract the juice. The juice is then strained and stored for a month before ready to use. Crab apples were also used for pectin to produce jellies from other fruits. Crab apples were first boiled then simmered until mushy. Strained through a muslin to remove seeds and fibers then add equal parts honey to the strained liquid. Boil rapidly and stir. Jelly can then be poured into containers covered in wax and cooled (prehistoric cookery 73).*

*Barley Kelp Soup: Wash 8oz. barley. Soak ½ c kelp with the barley overnight. Chop as much root vegetables such as turnips, parsnips, onions, garlic, and carrots as you want. Drain water. Cover the barley and kelp with fresh water. Boil the kelp with the barley for 1hour. Add chopped vegetables. Boil for about 1 hour more (Walkley 83).*

*Orkney Pancakes: 1 cup oatmeal flour, 1 tsp salt, 1 egg, 1 Tbsp Honey, 1 cup milk. Beat the egg sift the flour and salt. Add the egg, honey, and milk to the flour mixture. The batter should be thin as cream. On a hot greased griddle, pour batter onto griddle. It will spread. Pour enough to make pancake size. Flip over when browned on one side. Let the other side brown. Serve hot with butter, and honey (Walkley 87-88).*