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## A Taste of Ireland in Food and Pictures

Theodora FitzGibbon

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# A TASTE *of* IRELAND

*in food and pictures*



THEODORA FITZGIBBON

FOREWORD BY MAEVE BINCHY

OVER  
200,000  
COPIES  
SOLD

# A TASTE OF IRELAND

IRISH TRADITIONAL FOOD

BY THEODORA FITZGIBBON

Period photographs specially prepared by George Morrison

WEIDENFELD AND NICOLSON • LONDON

For EDWARD MORRISON with affection

© Estate of Theodora FitzGibbon, 1968

Foreword © Maeve Binchy, 1994

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# FOREWORD

When I became Woman Editor of the *Irish Times* in 1968, I was an unusual choice: I knew nothing at all about cookery or fashion. But this seeming weakness was in fact a strength. I hired the best. Our fashion writer is still there at the top of her field. Theodora alas is no more. But my memories of her will never fade.

I was totally terrified of Theodora. She was a woman completely in control. She always assumed, wrongly, that I knew all about cookery, and we exchanged phrases about marinades and glazes and bain-maries which I never understood.

Her articles arrived every week immaculately typed, painstakingly researched, and often accompanied by tasteful, artistic pictures taken by her husband, George Morrison the film-maker. I can't remember if we even paid George for his contributions – probably not. But Theodora was a perfectionist, and if her article on marmalade looked much better with a glorious basket of Seville oranges to illustrate it, then that's what we got.

George and Theodora lived near me in Dalkey, Co. Dublin, in a house overlooking the sea. Any time I went there, Theo would say something theatrical, like that she had pancakes in the freezer for two years – or that she always froze chicken carcasses, and waited until she had ten of them, then she would boil the life out of them to get a decent stock.

I was so innocent and ignorant about everything that I never knew whether she was joking or perfectly serious, so I would alternate between smiling broadly and nodding wisely. She assumed I was quite odd – never more so than on the occasion she wrote about veal.

As usual, her manuscript was perfect – not a spelling mistake. All I had to do was to put in headings, and find a picture. It was one of the times when nothing came from George Morrison. In my picture file I found a casserole with many knives and forks sticking out of it. I typed: '*Tasty Veal Casserole, excellent for a winter evening*' and happily sent

the page to be printed.

That evening, watching the television news, I saw an item about Dr Christian Barnard, and my blood ran cold. I knew *now* where I had seen that picture before. It was not a casserole. It was a picture of open heart surgery. What I had thought was a knife and fork was in fact a clamp and a forceps.

My father was a lawyer. 'Admit nothing,' he advised. But I had to admit something. I phoned the Editor and asked him to Hold the Cookery Page. The Editor was low-browed with anger when I arrived, breathless, in the newspaper office to help sort it out. 'We'll be the first newspaper to be prosecuted for cannibalism,' he said to me through clenched teeth.

We were down to minutes now. I had to find a picture of the same size and shape and write a caption. I found a picture of a china egg-cup and egg. '*Why be content with a boiled egg on a winter evening?*' I typed, '*when you could have tasty Veal Casserole?*'

Theodora telephoned next morning. 'You didn't kill yourself, darling,' she said. She agreed later that I almost had killed myself – and dined out often on the tale.

She was a wonderful cook, a great raconteur and a professional with high standards but huge generosity. She still kept me as a friend even when she discovered the depths of my ignorance, and through her writing she taught me to cook.

She said she would love to be remembered at meal times when there might be an argument about food. 'Take down FitzGibbon from the shelf to settle it,' people might say. They would be wise to take her down from the shelf to learn many a thing, not only about food and cooking it, but about life and living it to the full.

MAEVE BINCHY, 1994

# I NTRODUCTION

The descendants of many of the people depicted in these pages are now scattered all over the world. Some have achieved renown in many ways: as poets, publicans or presidents. It is on some of these foods that their ancestors were nourished.

Irish stew, Limerick ham, corned beef and cabbage are well-known everywhere, but as there are traditional dishes in many European countries which have been forgotten, so Ireland is no exception.

The best food of a country is the traditional food which has been tried and tested over the centuries. It suits the climate, and uses the best products of that country. This is borne out by the superb classical cuisine of France, which has changed very little with the years.

Fashion alters food habits as much as it alters dress. Two or three hundred years ago in Ireland the food was, in a way, more imaginative than it is today: especially in the use of vegetables. Globe artichoke bottoms (spelt Harty Choake in old manuscripts) were used for stuffings as well as a vegetable. Nowadays they are thought a luxury, and yet they grow freely here. Charlock (*Sinapis arvensis*), not unlike spinach, now regarded as a weed, was eaten a lot in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Caleb Threlkeld, writing in *Synopsis stirpium Hibernicarum*, 1727, says: 'It is called about the streets of Dublin before the Flowers blow, by the name of Corn-cail, and used for boiled sallett.' Sea-kale, that most delicate of winter vegetables, was known as Strand cabbage in Donegal, and served like asparagus, with melted butter (drawn butter). Carrots were made into a pudding with spices,

eggs, breadcrumbs and butter: in literature they have been called 'honey underground'. Leeks, many forms of onion, and particularly garlic are found in the earliest sources as a flavouring as well as a food. An early poem says:

*Is leighas air gach tinn  
Cheamb 'us im a Mhàigh  
Ol 'an flochair sid  
Bainne-ghobhar bán.*

*(Garlic with May butter  
Cureth all disease  
Drink of goat's white milk  
Take along with these.)*

These were eaten before the potato, which was to play such a significant part in the country's history, was introduced by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585, and planted on his estate in County Cork.

The recipes in this book have been drawn from all sections of Irish life, both rural and urban: many are still cooked daily, as all the ingredients are readily available; others are familiar names, and seldom appear outside private homes. The food of a country is part of its history and civilization, and, ideally, the past and the present should be combined, so that traditional food is not lost under a pile of tins or packages.

We, in Ireland, have long memories: the aromas from the kitchens of our childhood remain when many other things are forgotten. I hope that this little book will revive those memories and bring pleasure to all who use it.

THEODORA FITZGIBBON, 1968