

Relish, Condiment, Kitchen: Bastions of Irish Food Practice for Fourteen Hundred Years

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ABSTRACT: In his 2016 book *Early Irish Farming*, Kelly notes that we are blessed with a large amount of information about the food eaten by the early Irish and how it was cooked. He relies on that which resides in the Old Irish texts, especially the law-texts and sagas. Kelly's sources make it clear that our core staple diet was bread and milk, supplemented by "tarsunn" or "annlann" (Irish for relish, condiment), later known as "kitchen". But what constituted a relish not only varied over the centuries but also according to who was doing the eating, so that in a rigorous penitential diet demanded by the monasteries even milk was classed as a relish while during the famine it was dictated by whatever was available. Later on, evidence of "kitchen" demonstrates that no cuisine or foodway is isolated—there are continual influences, some obvious, some very subtle, but they are there, and should be recognized for the richness that they bring. This is an attempt to show how "kitchen" reflects the movement of people but yet is a constant in the Irish culinary psyche over hundreds of years.

Until routes opened up to the new world that would become North America, Ireland was seen as the last outpost of the old world, given its geographic position as an island at the north-western edge of Eurasia. This meant that Early Christian Ireland (from approximately mid-5th century onwards) was self-contained and insular, as evidenced by the absence of urban or town development on the coasts, until the arrival of the Vikings in the 9th century and, later, the Normans in the 12th century (Cullen 1968, 18). There seems to be agreement in the mid-20th century literature on the subject. For example, Evans argued that Ireland, its literature, language, and social organisation, as well as its folklore and folk customs, exhibited the marginal survival of ancient elements of the Indo-European world. He considered that Ireland was "one of the last homes of the oral traditions of prehistoric and medieval Europe", which reflected the routine of Irish rural life and trade, and the "heroic deeds of half legendary leaders" (1957, 3). In terms of food, Lucas goes further: "Irish food presents a remarkable continuity of traditions from the time of the earliest documentary evidence down to the widespread adoption of the potato in the late 17th century" (1960, 8). Evans saw the Great Famine (1845–1847) as a great social watershed which finally extinguished the prehistoric traditions, and remarked that "knowledge of ways of life that have altered little for centuries is passing away" (1957, xiv).

Yet not all knowledge has passed away. In his study of Ireland's law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD, Kelly notes that we are fortunate that a large amount of information about the food eaten by the Early Irish remains extant (2016, 316). Kelly makes it clear that the core staple diet at this time was bread and milk, supplemented by "tarsunn" or "annlann" (Irish language for relish and condiment, respectively), a practice more recently known as "kitchen", and "relish". Arguably, and perhaps uniquely to Ireland, this practice of adding an appetizing supplement to a contemporaneous staple food has remained in the Irish gastronomic psyche for approximately 1,400 years - from the identification of social practices in Early Ireland as recorded in the law-texts, through colonial influences, and on to the emergence of the Irish state in the early 20th century. Furthermore, that practice has acted as a highly sensitive marker for much broader social, political, and economic developments (Mennell 2005, 470). Hence, this paper attempts to show how the practice manifested itself in Early Ireland, in 19th century Ireland when it was a part of the British empire, and in mid-20th century Ireland as a new emerging state, by utilizing multidisciplinary sources, contemporaneous literature, and folklore and newspaper archives.

One of the challenges in charting that manifestation is that the connotations invoked by terms used frequently in the literature relating to Ireland (such as sauce, condiment, and relish), in addition to their literal or primary meaning, are flexible in usage and scope. The terms also appear almost interchangeable and, quite possibly, they might also reflect the contemporary interpretation of the author. Accordingly, it is worth briefly identifying the characteristics of sauce, condiment, and relish as expressed by some authoritative sources.

First, sauce: It can act "as a nutritional complement to a staple, or a taste complement to a nutritional complement" and sometimes, it can do both (Solomon H. Katz and Weaver 2003b, 237). By way of explanation, the first part of that statement applies where a culture relied solely on a staple food (e.g., grain or potatoes in Ireland). A sauce, often cooked separately, added nutrition by introducing vegetables or animal products (e.g., gooseberry sauce with mackerel). The second part of the statement applies where sauces add flavor to meat and vegetables instead of the staple. These sauces range from relishes (usually preserved fruit or vegetables) to more refined and complex recipes based on stocks or egg emulsifications. (Solomon H. Katz and Weaver 2003b, 237–259; Symons 1998, 110–120). An interesting alternative perspective from North America

distinguishes between the sauces found in professional cookery (e.g., béchamel, hollandaise), and commercial sauces (e.g., Catchup, Tabasco, and Chili Sauce) which are “blended extracts of condiments, vegetables, fruits, etc., and (generally) vinegar, for use with fish, meats, soups” (Ward 1923, 461).

Second, condiment: It originally meant seasoned, pickled, or preserved foods in Latin and Thudichum agreed, although he argued that the contemporaneous meaning had “expanded” to being something which was added to food in order to give it an agreeable taste. Therefore he believed that the term should include all the substances and materials used in this way, classified into nine groups¹ (1895, 86–104). While agreeing in principle, Katz and Weaver reclassified the list into five non-exclusive groups², one of which is compound sauces (2003a, 445–447). However, others consider a condiment to be anything of pronounced flavor used to season, to give relish to food, or to stimulate the appetite. Also, in practice, a condiment was, and is, more likely to be utilized in the dining room than in the kitchen. (Davidson and Jaine 2006, 209; Ward 1923, 147). An Irish perspective notes that “In ancient times, as now, the normal ‘condiment’ of bread was butter” (Lucas 1960, 12).

Lastly, relish: Recently regarded as “a condiment or highly flavored item of food taken with plainer food to add flavor and interest to it” (Davidson and Jaine 2006, 660). Davidson and Jaine also note that while a condiment may be a relish (e.g., mustard), condiments are typically used in small amounts whereas relishes often come in larger bite sized portions taken in conjunction with the main food, not necessarily in or on it. An early 20th century view is that relish is “a term flexibly applied to pickles, small fish variously preserved, and a number of other dishes intended to stimulate appetite” (Ward 1923, 432). An Irish example of a fish based relish is from 1730 when Jonathan Swift mentions a specific relish known as botargo, made from the roe of tuna or red mullet (Ayto 2012, 40). Interestingly, a “baked patty containing blood added to other ingredients (mushrooms, cabbage, etc.)” is called a relish cake in Ireland, perhaps suggesting that the ingredients were also relishes (Share 1997, 236).

Arguably, the use, meanings and connotations of sauce, condiment and relish are contextual in addition to being flexible in usage and scope. But what constituted a relish not only varied over the centuries, but also varied according to who was doing the eating, so that in a rigorous penitential diet demanded by the monasteries even milk was classed as a relish while during the famine it was dictated by whatever was available.

Early Ireland

This segment of the discussion is primarily a cursory distillation of references to Sauce, Relish and Condiment in Kelly’s seminal book, *Early Irish Farming* (2016), as a

means of establishing the origins of the practice in Ireland of adding an appetizing supplement to a contemporaneous staple food. Kelly identifies the staple foods as bread and milk, accompanied by the supplement (316). This is important, as a fundamental principle in Early Ireland was that every householder was obliged to provide hospitality according to customary entitlements corresponding to status. As Lucas has emphasized, “hospitality in ancient Ireland was not merely a virtue, it was an over-riding duty” (1960, 19). Failure to comply constituted the offence of “driving away” and was subject to a fine determined by the status of the person offended, which could be substantial.

Relying mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries,³ Kelly provides copious examples of the entitlements to relishes and condiments based on status. Dillisk (a valued seaweed) was specified as being among the relishes which would be expected in a commoner’s diet (313–314). A low ranking person was not entitled to butter as hospitality when visiting (although they were entitled to milk and cheese or cereals), but a high ranking person had to be given butter every day (326). A master-builder received salted meat as a *tarsunn* with his bread along with a large ration of beer or fresh milk, while his assistant received salt or a vegetable with a small ration of the same beverage (321). Frequently mentioned in the texts, mead was regarded as having more status than beer, and is described as the “relish of noble stock” (113). The law texts also specified the entitlements which applied if a person was injured or ill, particularly when caused by someone else. A high lord received three condiments with his meal: honey, onions, and celery, while lower ranks only got one (319), although onions and celery were among the condiments which could be substituted for beer in an invalid’s diet (253). Binchy notes that there are three condiments (he qualifies them as “relishes”) which the rule of nursing excludes: “every salt fare which is prepared with sea produce, the flesh of a whale and of a horse, and honey”. In those circumstances, it appears that “sweet fruit” took the place of honey (1938, 21,41).

Notably, in monastic diets, Kelly points out that “Because cabbage was regarded merely as a relish (*tarsunn*), there is no diminution in the bread-ration”, which suggests that the daily loaf of a monk was reduced if the relish or condiment was considered more lavish in some way (255). Helpfully, Kelly points out that approximately 2 fluid ounces (almost 60 milliliters) was the amount of extra relish provided in a monastic diet on special occasions, measured by four fills of the half shell of a hen’s egg (576–577), obviously quite a small amount.

It is worth pointing out that Kelly notes a distinction in some of his referenced texts between *tarsunn* and *annlann*, where *tarsunn* included vegetables and beer but not butter and milk, and *annlann* applied to a broader range of foods to include butter, other dairy products such as cheese, plus suet, cabbage, onions, salt and seaweed (316). Kelly identifies *tarsunn* as condiment, and *annlann* as relish

(251–252), and later identifies *tarsunn* as being commonly interpreted as “relish, condiment” (316). But in a note to his text, Binchy comments that the distinction between *annlann* and *tarsann* (note his change in spelling from *tarsunn*) was not clear and suggests that in Dineen’s contemporaneous Irish dictionary they appear to be identical. However, he does suggest that *annlann* may mean a relish consumed with bread, such as butter, cheese or fat, while *tarsann* relates to condiments in general (1938, 62, Note #25). As Binchy says, Dineen lists *annlann* as “sauce, condiment, pickles; applied to fish, meat, etc., taken with bread” and as “dainty food” (1927, 47), while he lists *tarsann* (note the change in spelling from *tarsunn*) as “kitchen, condiment, sauce” (1927, 1182).

Despite the debate on what the two terms in Irish might mean, it is clear that the practice in Ireland of adding flavor and taste to a staple food acquired longevity thanks to what is demonstrably a robust social and cultural framework. Lucas confirms this when he points out that the staple food, milk and milk products, retained their significance in the diet from the early times to the beginning of the 18th century when the potato gained momentum as a replacement staple food (1960, 19, 21).

Ireland as Part of the British Empire

Any meaningful analysis of the 19th century is beyond the scope of this paper, but arguably, local overreliance on the potato as a staple food and significant population growth cumulatively brought radical movement in Irish social and economic environments at a time when Ireland was also part of a rapidly expanding British Empire. According to Laudan, by 1914, Britain controlled an empire of nearly 400 million people, and a domestic population of 40 million, up from circa 23 million in 1820. Laudan contends that the latter half of the 19th century marked a significant point in culinary history in that Anglo cuisines⁴ were the most rapidly expanding cuisines in the world (Laudan 2015, 248–250). These critical developments were not without their consequences in Ireland, specifically, in this case, the emergence of the term “kitchen” paralleled by the increasing prominence of relishes.

Plausibly, the emergence and use of “kitchen” instead of *tarsann* and *annlann* was due to at least two factors. First, mass emigration from Ireland to the UK and North America was substantial. Whelan calculates that “at least” 8 million emigrated between 1801–1921, and “roughly one in two people born in Ireland in the nineteenth century emigrated” (2015, 900).

Secondly, what Lucas terms “linguistic anglicization” ensured that by 1851, barely a quarter of the largely illiterate population spoke the Irish language and only 5% were without some knowledge of English. Lucas concludes that the use of English by the literate, and the consequent association of Irish with poverty, ensured the decline of the Irish language (1968, 139).

Even so, there is substantive evidence of the equivalence of “kitchen” with *tarsann* and *annlann* and its usage up to the mid-20th century. In her Ulster dictionary, Macafee notes that kitchen, mostly in use during the 17th to the early 20th centuries, is anything served along with bread or potatoes as a relish, a sauce, or as seasoning (Macafee 1996, 195, 285). Likewise, Kinmonth notes that kitchen was commonly used during the 19th and 20th centuries, and that it referred to the use of buttermilk, milk, or salt, with a basic meal of potatoes (Kinmonth 2020, 516, note #17). Share gives two meanings for kitchen: “(Savory cooked) food” and “make a meal out of nothing” (1997, 160). He also provides quotations from early 20th century literature on Mayo, Antrim, Donegal, and the Blasket Islands, demonstrating the use of kitchen. For example, “Sladdy [...] Was classed along with butter, meat and fish as *anlann* or kitchen”⁵ (Matson 1996 quoted in; Share 1997, 260). Similarly, Dineen translates *tarsann* in Irish phrases from Monaghan, “it will be kitchen for the cabbage”, and Donegal, “we shall have kitchen with the potatoes” (1927, 1182). Examples of its use are also found in the National Folklore Collection: “When the ‘beastings’ are cooked they are put out on plates to cool. Then they are used as ‘kitchen’ with potatoes for dinner”⁶ (National Folklore Collection a). Others note that kitchen is a relish or condiment in Dublin in 1944 (Ua Broin and Hogan 1944, 175). Usage is also denoted in a regular national newspaper column in the 1950’s, The Herb Garden, which declares that “herbs are the best kitchen for potatoes”, and that “Sauce from Sage, Tree Onion greens, ground wheat and fat, is a favorite kitchen”. The column also recommends that monotonous diets “can be greatly enjoyed by varying the kitchen, or annlann”, that relishes can be spiced with herbs, and that “Condiments can consist of toasted Horse radish or dried, powdered Tansy, used just like pepper” (Norris 1956).

Fittingly, within generational memory of the famine, kitchen was also used in another sense, meaning to serve out sparingly. One account from 1913 gives the example of being at a funeral meal and hearing someone say to a stranger who had been asked to carve at one end of the table, “‘kitchen’ that turkey for there are a good many to go roun” (Byers 1913). Clearly, if any households were unable to kitchen a meal for a visitor, the meal would be considered a poor one, to say nothing of failing to provide the traditional level of hospitality.

In parallel with the emergence and usage of kitchen, 19th century Ireland was exposed to the popularity of a growing range of food products, particularly relishes, coming from other parts of the British empire. Both Fernandez-Armesto (2002) and Laudan (2015) cite “cultural magnetism” as the intangible force where communities emulate the foodways of cultures of superior prestige.⁷ Hence Irish tastes arguably emulated those evident in Britain, whose own cuisine was impacted and augmented by the Indian chutneys, pickles and curry spices

imported by the merchants of the East India Company (Ray 1991, 104–105). Noting that recipes for these items first appeared in English cookery books early in the 19th century, David makes clear that the development of relishes, ketchups and sauces followed close behind,⁸ initially to meet the empire's need for long lasting products for shipment by sea, and also to provide some variety for crew and passengers (1970, 9–13).

As a proven Francophile, David often said of her compatriots: “Nobody has ever been able to find out why the English regard a glass of wine added to a soup or stew as a reckless extravagance and at the same time spend pounds on bottled sauces, gravy powders, soup cubes, ketchups and artificial flavourings” (1958, p 22). Her query neatly illustrates the degree to which the culinary colonialism practiced by the British Empire, such as India, resulted in gastronomic counter-colonization where both returnees and migrants (merchants, civil servants, administrators, and the military) from the colonies added to Britain's (and therefore Ireland's) gastronomy (Mulcahy 2019). This is ably demonstrated by two lists: first, by Mason and Brown who list twenty seven sauces, relishes, curry powder and chutneys in their inventory of traditional British foods (2004, 315–331). Second, Findlaters, a chain of grocery stores in Dublin (1835–1965) offered no less than fourteen different pickles, eleven mustards, nine Heinz's specialties, and thirty one “Sauces, Relish, etc.” in their 1904 Grocery List, which suggests considerable demand built up over a long period of time (Findlater 2001, 541–550).⁹

As an indication of the extent of the influence of the empire and the popularity of relishes, Findlaters marketed a bottled sauce called Dargai Dash to mark Piper Geordie Findlater winning the Victoria Cross in 1897 during a military incident at a hill station called Dargai on the border of India and Afghanistan. A footnote to the Findlater history notes that the *Irish Figaro* newspaper approved the name, observing that “the slightest reference to the heroic conduct of our troops at Dargai arouses the blood much in the same way as a ‘pick-me-up’ of this stimulating sauce does when taken as such” (2001, 14). Later on in the book Findlater suggests that Irish cooking was “quite limited” and that the popularity of readymade sauces such as Dargai Dash is evidence of that (2001, 320).

Nevertheless, as David points out, American exports of cheap canned tomatoes ensured that, after vinegar and mustard, tomato ketchups became the most popular and the cheapest English condiment, available to those who could not afford the upmarket merchants like Findlater. Generically known as “sauce”, commercial competitors such as the very popular HP, OK, Flag and many other brands were very successful (1970, 9–13).¹⁰

Ireland's Appetite as a New Emerging State

The emergence of a republic on the island of Ireland early in the early 20th century did not appear to reduce the

effects of the “cultural magnetism” referred to earlier. In addition to Britain and its empire, the movement of people in general, and in particular the Irish diaspora, ensured that other foodways, such as America, France, Italy, and later China, were as attractive, if not more so. A very obvious example is Irwin's recipe for “Green Tomato Chow-chow” (1949, 187). Originally chow-chow was a Chinese sweetmeat which became an American term in the mid-19th century for a mixture of pickled mixed vegetables in mustard (Ward 1923, 107; Davidson and Jaine 2006, 183). A less obvious one is this rhyme, related by a twelve year old boy from Co Roscommon:

Little Tommy Tucker
Sings for his supper
What shall we give him
Meat, bread and butter

How shall he eat it
It must have a savour
I am sure he will relish
York shire for flavour¹¹
(National Folklore Collection b)

Despite, or perhaps because of, this wider range of influences, Irish cookbooks appear to have consciously reflected the traditional Irish practice of kitchen in their use of *annlann* in their recipes. For example, in her cookbook, Kinney has a recipe for *Sicín in Annlann Yoghourt* (Chicken in Yoghourt Sauce) and, although this is her only recipe using *annlann*, it is an adaptation of a dish she enjoyed in India. One wonders whether the association with India and spices is a reason for the use of *annlann*? (1977, 62). Similarly, but on a much bigger scale, FitzGibbon dedicates an entire chapter to “Sauces—Anlanna” which includes over 45 recipes (1991, 124–139). Given that her book was about traditional Irish food, the use of traditional terms is to be expected.

Similar to the British experience in the 19th century, growth in Irish products made in the new republic signifies how mostly indigenous commercial entities recognized the opportunities which lay in the existence of a culture using condiments and relishes. Of particular interest is Chef Brown Sauce. The “Chef” brand, which includes ketchup and salad cream, can be traced back to 1921 when Willwoods started making sauces and vinegar for the Irish market and it is still in production. The business was clearly leveraging the popularity of Brown Sauce in Britain. Ayo describes Brown Sauce as a condiment served with food, normally dark brown in color, whose ingredients included a varying combination of tomatoes, molasses, dates, apples, tamarind, spices, vinegar, and sometimes raisins (2012, 48). As Share points out, many businesses were content to replicate familiar British products and to mimic their brands. Thus TD Sauce appeared as the native equivalent of HP Sauce (Houses of Parliament)¹² (Share 1998).

Similarly, salad cream became an Irish favorite in the mid-20th century. Ayto tells us that salad cream emerged in the mid-19th century, when the first reference to it was in 1858. It began as salad sauce, a traditional English dressing for salads where the main ingredients were cooked egg yolks and cream, unlike the raw eggs and oil that constitute mayonnaise. It then evolved into a post-World War Two mass market convenience food from industrial producers like Goodall's or Heinz in Britain. Ayto also notes that Heinz tried to stop commercial production of salad cream in 1999 but had to change its mind after strong consumer protests, thus signaling how strong the popular taste for relishes and condiments was at the end of the 20th century (Ayto 2012, 320). According to Doorley, Salad Cream looked like mayonnaise, but the texture was like that of a tomato ketchup and it had a tart, creamy taste (2010, 67–71). An additional factor for its success in Ireland is explained by Myrtle Allen of Ballymaloe House. She reminds us that a dressing for salad in 20th century Ireland was invariably a cream dressing, rather than mayonnaise or French dressing, as oil was not considered a food in the first half of the 20th century (1988, 30).

Closely linked to the popularity of Salad Cream was Sandwich Spread, another post-World War Two mass market convenience food from industrial producers like Heinz. According to Ayto, sandwich spread was a commercially produced savory paste for use in sandwiches, starting in the 1930's (2012, 349). With an Irish perspective, Doorley describes it as a spreadable blend of Salad Cream, mustard and finely diced carrots, celery, gherkins, and red peppers (Doorley 2010, 71).

Final Comments

It is important to appreciate and understand where our food practices have come from, how they have evolved and who has influenced them if we are to lead responsible, sustainable lives. This paper has attempted to achieve that by showing how a specific cultural and social practice manifested itself in Early Ireland, in 19th century Ireland when it was a part of the British empire, and in mid-20th century Ireland as a new emerging state. On the basis of the evidence provided, it is clear that the cultural practice of adding an appetizing supplement to a contemporaneous staple food after 1,400 years has essentially remained in place, having evolved and adapted to several fundamental movements in population, diet, food supply chains, political masters and the effects of globalization during that time. As the popular focus turns to a "farm to fork" philosophy, it might turn out to be a useful practice to have in our cultural and social toolkit.

Notes

1. Thudichum classified his groups as: (1) common salt; (2) peppery substances (e.g., pepper, cayenne); (3)

- aromatic substances (e.g., cinnamon, clove); (4) parts of cruciferous plants (e.g., mustard, horseradish); (5) aromatic herbs (e.g., cardamoms, ginger); (6) acid condiments (e.g., vinegars, verjuice); (7) odoriferous parts of plants (e.g., rose leaves); (8) culinary colouring matters (e.g., saffron); (9) sugar.
2. Katz and Weaver's reclassification was as follows: (1) salt; (2) sugar or other sweeteners; (3) pickled foods such as chutney; (4) spicy and hot foods such as black pepper, chilli pepper, mustard, horseradish; and (5) compound sauces like ketchup, soy sauce, fish sauce, salad dressings.
3. The *Crith Gablach* is one example.
4. In addition to the British empire, Laudan includes Canada, United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand
5. Sladdy (Irish *sleaidi*) is an edible seaweed.
6. The first milking's of a newly calved cow, also known as *colostrum*
7. See also (Collingham 2017)
8. For a sense of the scale of the commercial development, see (Colquhoun 2007, 220, 276). One company (Cross & Blackwell) were selling 40 different pickles and sauces.
9. In 1888, Heinz introduced a sour pickle relish known as Piccalilli, and an India Relish in 1889, as part of the 'Heinz 57' range aiming at both the American and British markets (Davidson and Jaine 2006, 378).
10. HP Sauce, registered in 1912, so named because it was used in the restaurants of the Houses of Parliament (Ayto 2012, 48,177)
11. The reference here is to a British brand, Yorkshire Relish which is similar to other brands like Worcestershire Sauce, Lea & Perrins, and others which are still extant.
12. Meaning *Teachta Dála*, Irish language for a member of *Dáil Éireann*, the lower house of the Irish Parliament)

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