

Deep Roots: Old-time Scottish Foods

by Wilma Heberling

Ask anyone for an example of “What is a Scottish food?” and you will most likely get responses such as “haggis”, “Scotch eggs”, and perhaps, “oatmeal.” Some might know that shortbread is Scottish. Well, the Scot’s pantry and kitchen goes a little beyond these items.

First, it is good to know that the Scots, in years past, were not a wealthy race. There were a few “moneyed” people, or those who inherited land, and they were the property owners. The vast majority of Scots worked hard and lived in rental property. It wasn’t that they had no desire to have land, the bare truth was that most of the land was already owned either by “the Crown” or by those with hereditary titles or land grants. It is only in relatively recent history that land became available for the “common folk,” particularly in the north. For example, my grandfather built a home for his family on the land that his grandfather had built upon. The home was theirs, but the land was not. They had to pay rent on the land belonging to the Croft. They never owned the land upon which the house was built.

Scotland, also, does not have a kind climate. Only in the south, and southwest, is the weather mild enough to grow some more exotic crops. North of Edinburgh, 65 degrees is a warm day. In this sort of climate, things that grow best are hardy foods—like the people! These are items such as oats, barley, potatoes, turnips, leeks, cabbage, parsnips and peas. Even beans and lettuce are difficult to grow in the north without a “cold frame”—mini-greenhouses that cover the rows of plants to protect them. Fruit that thrived were all types of berries: raspberries blackberries, red currants, black currants (and in “cold-frames” perhaps strawberries). Apples were the only hard fruit that were possible. Even in southern Scotland, peaches were a “hot house” fruit as were grapes. In the south, pears, plums and of course, berries, also thrived. In the southwest and south one could grow wheat and maize and a variety of garden vegetables including beans.

The one food in abundance all over Scotland is fish. No place in Scotland is more than 50 miles from the ocean, and the fast-flowing rivers contain salmon and trout. One of my dearest memories from childhood is “*guddling*” for brown brook-trout. To do this, you had to lie on your abdomen, leaning over the bank of the *burn* (stream) at a “good spot”—usually with an overhang and a deep-ish pool under it. Then you carefully maneuvered the hand—always keeping the fingers moving, until you had come about half-way up a fish. Then, in one quick move, the fingers closed on the gills and you jerked it onto the heather. These were taken home, cleaned, rolled in oatmeal and fried. No fish ever tasted as sweet. Of course, since 1750, mutton has been the most abundant meat. Before that there were herds of black cattle. Both mutton and beef were stewed or roasted. Rarely were they cut in steaks.

For the Scot, in times past, fast-food meant either a pie and chips or fish and chips. “Chips” are French fries. The pies were small, round mutton pies (now made from beef) with a hot water pastry crust. These were served up hot, sometimes with gravy,

sometimes with over-cooked peas, and were quite delicious. Another favorite “take-out” was “*mealie pudding*,” or “*white pudding*.” Don’t be fooled by the name “pudding.” This was a fat, 5 or 6 inch long sausage made with oats, onions and suet. It was steamed; then it was cooled. It was then deep-fried before eating. This was served with chips. Not quite as common in some areas was “*black pudding*.” This was a blood sausage prepared in a similar way as the white. Black puddings were often served sliced and fried at breakfast. The fish, for fish and chips was cod or haddock.

As well as the small round “Scotch pies,” the Scot does like food wrapped in pastry. Forfar Bridies are a delicious meat pie. The finely cut meat, or ground beef, is often mixed with onion, seasoned and put in a flaky pastry turnover. Like many Scottish foods, they are named after the town in which they were first made. Deep-dish meat pies were also popular. Bridies were often purchased at the Bakery.

Favorite home-cooked meals ranged from “*mince and tatties*”—ground beef and gravy with mashed potatoes, Shepherd’s pie, *Finnan Haddie*, Scotch broth, sheep’s-head broth, pea and lentil soups made with ham hocks or ham-bone, stewed or boiled chicken (these were usually old hens that had quit laying), to beef or mutton stew. Fish of any kind including “partans” (crabs) were prepared in a variety of ways. Vegetables were usually peas, carrots, Swede turnips (rutabagas), cabbage most of the time overcooked, and of course potatoes.

Desserts were puddings of the milk pudding variety – think Jello pudding – rice, semolina and tapioca. Baked puddings were sort of like cobblers but with a cake-like topping, and steamed puddings such as treacle or jam. This was a sponge mixture topped by the desired sauce, steamed for a couple of hours, and served with a pouring custard. Another favorite was gingerbread. *Biscuits* (cookies) most frequently eaten were Abernethy, Parkins, digestive and rich tea.

Breakfast was easy. Porridge ruled the day! Other choices were any kind of eggs, bacon and fried tomatoes (hot-house, of course) with toast, fried kippers, *Baps or Butteries* (morning rolls depending on what part of the country you lived in) spread with butter and/or jam. Marmalade was popular as was honey. “French toast” sometimes called back then “soldiers pancakes,” was more frequently served in the evening. Coffee, in times past, was not as popular as tea.

Talking of tea, there were two types of tea. Afternoon tea was usually a mid afternoon bite with scones, Scots pancakes (drop-scones), Empire biscuits, and perhaps, sultana or Dundee cake. The scones were served with butter and jam...no cream or strawberries. Scones came in a variety of styles. There was the soda scone, a non-sweet bread – substitute baked on a “girdle” (griddle); bare-meal scones, made of barley whole-meal and also cooked on the griddle; treacle scones, like the soda-scones but sweeter and containing treacle (molasses); and oven scones—more like what is now considered a scone in a Texas bakery. Oven scones could be sweet or not, or contain currants, raisins, or no fruit. Scots pancakes were a sweet, light pancake cooked on a griddle. Oatcakes are made from oatmeal and – yes – lard, baked on a griddle and used to be “finished” by

toasting next to the fire (now they are finished in the oven). The last type of scone is the potato scone. They are the thickness of a flour tortilla, and made from left-over mashed potatoes mixed with flour. They are rolled thinly and baked on a griddle. They were often served at New Years.

The Scot loves his cakes and topping the list would be sultana (golden raisin) cake, and Dundee cake. These are light fruitcakes containing only raisins and sometimes a few chopped maraschino cherries. The Dundee cake would have the addition of ground almonds. Gingerbread, both cake-like and sticky were much enjoyed. The gingerbread tended to vary depending on which part of the country one lived in. No matter where, however, it was mostly enjoyed spread with butter. Sponge cake such as Victoria sponge was a favorite in tea-shops. That is two sponge cakes sandwiched together with jam and sometimes whipped cream, and dusted on the top with powdered sugar. Other bakery items were “cream cookies” (creamed-filled sweet buns), cream horns-puff pastry cornucopias filled with cream, and the aforementioned Empire biscuits. Shortbread cookies sandwiched with jam, covered with a white glaze icing, and with a half cherry on top.

So there you have it. I have, of course, not covered everything. Each region had its own specialty. Not a very exciting diet, but good wholesome food for the most part (except of course for the sweet stuff!). I was fortunate to have lived in a variety of areas. I started in the very north, moved to the Galloway region in the southwest, and ended up on the east coast outside Edinburgh. Where I last lived was a fishing village and every summer we would get rides across the Firth of Forth to Kirkcaldy, in Fife, on a fishing boat. Very exciting stuff!!

So what about haggis and Scotch eggs and the likes? Well, haggis was reserved for Robert Burns' birthday or Hogmanay. Scotch eggs were rarely if ever served except in the city, and shortbread was strictly a Christmas/New Year treat along with black bun and dried fruit.

The next time you visit Scotland, try to envision a country devoid of MacDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut, and Tandoori take-away. It will be hard, but it might give you an idea of what it was like in the past.