

# Food, folklore and St Brigid

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St Brigid of Kildare is one of the three patron saints of Ireland and has a strong connection with food and farming. St Brigid's day traditionally marks the beginning of spring and the start of the agricultural year, and the day has long been celebrated in a variety of ways.

**Cairíona:** So Saint Brigid's Day falls on the 1st of February, and it marks the first of the four quarter days of the Irish calendar year, and these days are significant in that they divide the year into seasons and they essentially inform agricultural work that should happen at that time of year. And actually we still go by that calendar in Ireland. So the 1st of February is the first of spring and still in Ireland, in spite of what the weather might be like. And so the other the other quarter days then are May day, the 1st of May, and that's the beginning of our summer in Ireland, and Lughnasa or August, which is the beginning of the harvest, and then Oíche Shamhna or Halloween, which marks the end of the harvest and the beginning of the winter.

**Jeremy:** There are so many stories and legends associated with Saint Brigid, who's one of the three patron saints of Ireland. Not all of them have to do with food by any means, but a fair few do. And so to find out more, I turned to an expert.

**Cairíona:** My name is Caitríona Nic Philibin, and I am a Research Ireland scholar and a PhD student in the Technological University of Dublin. I'm in my third year of my PhD. I'm a chef by trade, so my comfort zones are either in the kitchen or behind a screen reading these days. Yeah. And my research is based on food in folklore archives in Ireland.

**Jeremy:** And are all the quarter days celebrated the night before. Or is Saint Brigid special in that respect?

**Castríona:** So all of the quarter days are celebrated the night before, and it's believed that on the eve of a quarter day that time is liminal. So there's kind of a thinning of the space between the real world and the other world. And there you see a lot of, you see a lot of a juxtaposition between Ireland's kind of pagan past and Christianity in that, you know, we celebrate fairies, but then the poor souls or the old souls, and you see that at Saint Brigid's Day as well.

**Jeremy:** I've also heard that Saint Brigid's Day is called Imbolc.

**Castríona:** And there is some kind of controversy over what it means. I don't do my own research to kind of figure that out, but I suppose the most significant thing for me is that all of the different meanings all relate to food production. And so the one that I suppose that makes sense to me as a Gaelic speaker, an Irish speaker, is that it means in the belly, in bolc. Bolc is actually the Irish word for belly. And so it's related to the beginning of the lambing season. But there are also suggestions that it could be linked to milk or milking. And we see suggestions that it's specifically derived from ewe's milk, the word, the word imbolc. But again, there we see that connection to food and food production.

**Jeremy:** So what are the foods of of Saint Brigid?

**Castríona:** So we see lots of potatoes, unsurprisingly in Irish cuisine, and but also dairy. Dairy is really, really significant to Irish cuisine even before the introduction of the potato. And Brigid herself is also, was also considered to be a master brewer. And there is one miracle attributed to her that she turned a bathtub of water into beer, which sure would make her very popular.

**Jeremy:** And was Saint Brigid herself known as a cook?

**Castríona:** So not specifically as a cook, although there is one miracle attributed to her where she did cook. The miracle tells that she had some unexpected guests, a group of I think it was priests and their retinue, and she had no food. so she sent her servant to to get some food, and the servant came back with a seal, which apparently Bridget cooked so superbly that they had the best meal they had ever had in their lives.

But more often we see miracles around kind of hospitality, which I suppose that one also could be linked to hospitality. But where Brigid

creates food, where there was no food before for people, be they poor people or people who call on her. And then we also see miracles where she manages to convert people from paganism to Christianity again through the use of foodstuffs, milk in this particular case, where she called on the house of a pagan and they had no food to offer her, but she was parched. So they gave her a drink of milk from the churn, and they poisoned it. Of course, Brigid knew that it was poisoned, so she made the cross on the drink with a piece of straw from the ground, and the drink was safe. And therefore the pagans, seeing her, her powers, were converted and became the best Christians in all of the parish.

**Jeremy:** And who was she? How much do you know about Saint Brigid herself?

**Catriona:** So my understanding of it is that the stories about Saint Brigid have changed, you know, throughout the course of history. But we know that she was born in Dundalk, County Louth, which is just a border county in Ireland between the Republic of Ireland and the north of Ireland in around 451 AD. And we know that her father wanted her to marry a rich man, but that she was very much dedicated to her beliefs. And really the stories about Brigid's kind of kindness, they start from when she was around a teenager. We also know that she established a monastery in County Kildare, and that is why Saint Brigid's Day is celebrated, you know, with some significance in County Kildare. But then after that, as you can imagine, as the long time has passed and the stories change, I suppose, to suit different circumstances.

**Jeremy:** And to celebrate Saint Brigid's Eve. Are there special dishes that are cooked specifically on that evening?

**Catriona:** Yeah. So my own work utilises folklore archives, and that's where I get a lot of my information, or most of my information from. And what I have found is that they would make boxty to celebrate Saint Brigid's Eve. Boxty is a mixture of cooked mashed potato, grated raw potato and either buttermilk or egg, and it can be cooked on the pan and you sometimes see it referred to as boxty pancakes. Or it can be boiled as a dumpling and that would be served with melted butter and sugar. And it's also a dish that you find at Christmas time, which suggests, you know, that the celebration of Saint Brigid or Saint Brigid's Eve, was as significant a holiday as

Christmas would have been, which is not the case anymore, although we have seen a huge resurgence in the celebration of Saint Brigid today.

Otherwise, we have reports from folklorists of dishes that would be consumed in the celebration, where we would have mutton and bacon and fowl and colcannon, which is mashed potato made with onion or scallions and again, buttermilk and butter. As well as sowans. I don't know if you've ever come across sowans.

**Jeremy:** That's fermented oats?

**Castríona:** Yeah. So it's like the original oat milk. I think it's amazing that we had oat milk in Ireland long before there was ever a trend for it. So it's fermented oatmeal and oat husks, and it can be made into either a, or consumed as either a drink, depending on how thin it is or kind of a flummery, so it sets with the starch from the oats.

**Jeremy:** But these dishes, I mean, when I've visited Ireland, boxty is everywhere. So has it expanded from being a special dish to something that you get any time, any place, like so many luxury foods or special foods have done? Or was it always kind of common but just special on Saint Brigid's Eve?

**Castríona:** I would imagine it would have always been common, considering the ingredients are ingredients that would have been on hand for a good part of the year in Ireland. I think probably you would see the celebratory aspect of it in the serving of it, perhaps with sugar, as sugar would not necessarily have been easily available. I mean, for me personally, growing up in Ireland and we would have eaten a lot of traditional foods growing up, I actually never had boxty until I went to a restaurant in Temple Bar called the Boxty House, a really good restaurant for anyone who's ever visiting Temple Bar in Dublin. But I think it depends on where you come from. So you see a good concentration of boxty around the border counties Cavan, Monaghan and so not necessarily everywhere.

**Jeremy:** And what about the dairy aspect of it? You mentioned dairy being important. Were there special dairy dishes for for Saint Brigid's Eve?

**Castríona:** So I think more so we see the use of dairy in dishes, and then we also see stories linking Brigid to dairy, kind of which drives

that idea that that dairy was significant. So, you know, there was a tradition that you would leave your butter outside on the windowsill or on the Clyde (???), which is an old type of stone wall, for Saint Brigid to bless as she passed on Saint Brigid's eve. And that would protect your supply of dairy for the coming year. Saint Brigid herself was ... There are miracles about Brigid being able to milk the cows three times a day so that she could feed everybody in the monastery. Yeah, it was it was quite a significant foodstuff.

**Jeremy:** Yeah. Modern dairy is only just catching up with that. What about, what about these Saint Brigid's crosses? Now, I've seen them. But what's the significance of Saint Brigid's crosses? And what do they look like?

**Catriona:** I'm sure you've seen the four legged Saint Brigid's cross. And I think a lot of people think that that's the most common. But actually, that was popularised in the 1960s when our national broadcaster chose it as their logo, so that is the cross that that most people know. And as I said, it's four legged and it is made from rushes. But there are many, many kinds of different crosses. And I think the biggest collection of them in Ireland is in the Museum of Country Life in County Mayo. It's well worth a visit for anyone visiting the west of Ireland. It's a really beautiful museum, and so many of the crosses are made with rushes, and they may have four legs or three legs or ... And they come in various different sizes, and they would be hung around the house to welcome Saint Brigid. Or they could be given to newlyweds to protect their house or ... And to ... In the hopes that they may produce children. You see a lot of things around fertility at Saint Brigid's Day with the spring awakening. But in terms of food, we see crosses used in sheds for animals, where they would be hung above the door to protect the animals. But then we also see them in the planting of crops.

So there's a beautiful story that a folklore informant told actually in County Roscommon whilst making a cross himself. And we see that same juxtaposition between Ireland's pagan past and Christianity, where he is making a cross with a small sheaf of unthreshed oats, potato and a slender rod of willow. He calls it a scallop. The cross would then be thrust up in the thatch and left there until the first sowing of the oats for the year, after which it would be removed and the seed used from it. In the first planting before planting, the seed would be covered in hen dung, a sovereign remedy against witchcraft

and fairy machinations, and then sprinkled with holy water and a little salt. The cross would then be replaced until the first sowing of the potato, which would then be cut up and used as the, you know, the first seed potato on Good Friday. And then it would be put back up on the thatch and removed the following year and replaced with a fresh cross. So again that's you know, that juxtaposition. We see the hen dung and the holy water when really you've got fertiliser and liquid.

**Jeremy:** But in the old pagan tradition, hen dung is more than just a fertiliser?

**Castriona:** Yes. Yeah. Absolutely. But I think the interesting thing is that we are seeing because Saint Brigid's Day itself is a Christian holiday. But within the celebration of it, we are also seeing the kind of carrying on of those pagan traditions, perhaps unbeknownst to people, through superstitious practices.

**Jeremy:** Well, and finally, is there a tradition around Saint Brigid of of charity? I mean, you say she fed people who came to her and fed the whole monastery and all the rest of it, but is there a general tradition about hospitality to strangers?

**Castriona:** Yes. Well, again, you know, in those miracles that I mentioned before, she feeds people who come to visit her. But there is also another miracle that I came across in the course of this research of the Schools Collection, where Brigid called to a house that a man had no food to offer her, and the cupboards were bare, and but he showed her kindness. And after she left, he found that the cupboards had been completely stocked with everything that he might need. So you do see some kind of charitable donations of food also.

**Jeremy:** Let's just talk about one other thing. You said earlier on that there's been an expansion in the celebration of of Saint Brigid's Eve, Saint Brigid's Day. How has that taken place? And what do you think has been driving it?

**Castriona:** I would say that ... So there are several factors. There's one very practical factor in that after the pandemic, the Irish government added a bank holiday to the Irish calendar, and it is on Saint Brigid's Day. So, you know, there is all of a sudden kind of a drive and funding for celebration of that day because it's good for tourism,

it's good for business, and it's good for the hospitality industry. So that would be one one aspect of it.

I also think in general, we've seen a huge resurgence in interest in traditions and folklore, which I think, again, we can maybe link to the pandemic. I do think after a big scare, I suppose people tend to maybe look inwards and go back to their roots. And so we have seen a, you know ... There are other traditions, not just Saint Brigid's Day, like the Mummers or the Wren Boys on Saint Stephen's Day have become really popular again. So, you know, I think that those two reasons have been big driving forces in the resurgence of the celebration of Saint Brigid's Day.

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