



Celebrate Saint Patrick's Day with Stories & Traditional Irish Soda Bread

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Saint Patrick may be the patron saint of Ireland but his day, March 17th, is celebrated far and wide. It is a day for parades, fiddling and dancing, green beer and feasting. Will you hop a plane to Dublin and take part in their Saint Patrick's festival? Maybe you'll head to New York for the world's oldest and largest Saint Paddy's Day parade. Once there, you can join the hundreds of thousands of marchers, fifiers and drummers or the millions of spectators lining the route. Maybe you'll stay closer to home and spend the evening in your favorite pub.

Intercontinental airfare not in your budget? Crowds not your thing? Not into green beer? Forget these typical Saint Paddy's Day festivities. How about letting one of Ireland's great traditions help you take your celebration in a different direction? Let the ancient art of Irish storytellers inspire you. Invite your friends around for a cozy evening. While you enjoy a wonderful meal together, invite everyone to share a special story or two. Yes, stories. Before radio, television and the internet, long, cold winter evenings were often filled with legends and tall tales. Everyone has at least one story to tell.

Now, some of your friends may be intimidated by the idea. You yourself might be wondering if it's a good idea. What to tell? How to start? Okay, take a deep breath. Now remember you probably tell stories all the time. (No, I don't mean the tall tale you told your boss about having the flu last week. Instead of bed, you spent the day enjoying fresh powder on the ski slopes!)

Let your mind wander. Before you know it, a special memory will take hold and a story will unfold. It could be your first kiss, favorite summer vacation or learning to ski. Don't worry, it will come. Need some focus? It might help you and your guests to know that most Irish tales fall into a few categories. So consider the following when you ponder the possibilities:

Tales of adventures and voyages. Don't worry; your escapades do not have to be epic to be interesting. As long as they are told from the heart, your adventures will easily charm your audience. Think back to your first day of school or summer camp. Or that special day you spent with a favorite uncle or grandchild hiking up Mount Kearsarge or sailing on Lake Sunapee.

Stories of romance, courtship and tragedy. What about that first kiss? Perhaps you were the instigator and planted a big smooch on an unsuspecting classmate during recess. And your high school crush; did you woo her and win her or tragically lose her to a handsome senior? You remember him; he was not very bright but drove a Mustang convertible, played lacrosse and didn't have pimples.

Sagas of battles and heroics. So you aren't a knight. You have no armor. How about food fights in the school cafeteria or week long battles of Capture the Flag. These skirmishes may lack the epic grandeur of a medieval legend but they will remind your listeners of good times gone by.

Magical visions of leprechauns, fairies and ghosts. You may be hard-pressed to find a leprechaun in your garden but maybe you have an eerie story to share. Perhaps you experienced a strange evening around the Ouija board back in the fourth grade or honeymooned in a haunted castle in county Clare.

A final word when preparing your tales.

Remember that your goal is to entertain. Concentrate on the stories that make you smile, even laugh. Unless you can tell the saga of your divorce with razor sharp wit and wry humor, leave it for another day. Think festive feast; not group therapy. Have a wonderful evening, filled with tall tales and good fun.

Bon appétit!



Traditional Irish Soda Bread

Traditional Irish Soda Bread is not made with butter, currents, eggs and seeds. These fancy extras are Irish-American inventions. Enjoy the simplicity of this country bread!

Makes 1 large loaf

3 1/2 cups all-purpose flour plus more for dusting
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
About 1 1/2 cups buttermilk

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Place a piece of parchment paper on a baking sheet.

Put the flour, baking soda and salt in large bowl and whisk to combine.

Stir in enough buttermilk to form moist clumps. Gather the dough into a ball and turn it out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead the dough until it just holds together, about 1 minute.



Shape the dough into a round about 6 inches in diameter and 2 inches high. Put the loaf onto the prepared baking sheet. Cut a 1-inch deep X across the top of the dough, extending almost to edge.

Bake the bread at 425 degrees until it is golden brown and sounds hollow when tapped on bottom, about 35 minutes. Transfer the bread to a rack to cool and serve warm or at room temperature.