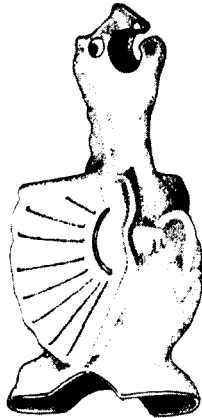


29. Recipes from Wales

Traditional Welsh cookery is elusive. In previous centuries it was overshadowed by the English cookery which was practised in the better-off households. At the present time, amid the general enthusiasm for rediscovering local and regional cuisines, efforts have been made to reconstitute a corpus of Welsh recipes; but much of what has appeared in print is pseudonymous and poorly documented and can be traced back to the out-of-print *Croeso Cymreig* (A Welsh Welcome), a book produced by the Welsh Gas Board which had its origin in a general competition for good recipes, whether Welsh or not.

It is fortunate that one person, Mrs Minwel Tibbott of the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans, has conducted some systematic, oral research, finding out from older people what they can relate about their traditional methods of preparing food. Two of the recipes below come from *Amser Bwyd*, the book containing the results of her work (also available in English, as *Welsh Fare*).



In general, Welsh seafood cookery displays a Celtic character, showing affinities with Irish and Scottish recipes. It also, of course, exhibits some specialization in the kinds of seafood which are or were locally abundant, such as cockles, laver and herring; and, on a higher plane, the magnificent salmon and sewin (salmon trout) which are taken in Welsh rivers. I have illustrated these themes in what follows and have also taken care to include one recipe which uses the Welsh leek and invokes the Welsh talent for baking.

In connection with this last recipe (page 464) I exhibit here something which serves both as the emblem of Wales and as a useful aid in the kitchen. It is a Welsh pie dragon, which takes the place of an ordinary pie-glass in the middle of a pie. Like the other, it serves both as a support for the top crust and as a vent for the steam; but has the added attraction that the steam issues from the dragon's mouth.

Berwi Gwyniedyn mewn Llaeth

Sewin (salmon trout) cooked in milk

serves four

Wales is famous for its salmon trout (page 45), for which the local name is sewin. The name Welsh salmon was also applied to it in the past. It used to be so plentiful that it was not just a luxury food for the English gentry living in Wales but something which most people would eat from time to time; and there are, therefore, genuine Welsh traditions for its cookery. The most popular way of serving it was to cut it into steaks and fry these in bacon fat or butter. But it might also be steamed or poached, with fennel. And there is this interesting recipe from Dyfed (formerly Carmarthenshire), which I have tried and found excellent.

sewin, a piece weighing 600–700 g
(1¼–1½ lb) cleaned, to provide 4
good steaks
milk, ¾–1¼ litre (1½–2 pints)

a little salt
sprigs of fennel (optional)
farm (or other) cream, 200–300 ml
(about ½ pint)

The amount of milk needed will depend on the shape of your cooking pot. If the piece of fish fits it snugly, the smaller quantity will do; but you must have enough to cover the fish.

Bring the milk to the boil, add a little salt and lower the fish gently into the pot. If you wish, you can wrap it in a muslin first, so that it can be got out easily later. You can also add fennel sprigs. Let the milk come back to the boil, then keep it gently simmering for a time (about 30 to 50 minutes) which will depend on the greatest thickness of the fish (cf. page 258). When the sewin is done, lift it out, let it cool a little, cut it into four thick slices and serve it with hot baked potatoes and fresh farm cream. I would add lettuce leaves and a sprinkling of finely chopped fresh chives.

The dish is also very good if served cold.

The drawing shows a Welsh coracle fisherman, no doubt setting off in search of sewin or salmon.



Môr-Lysywen o Llandulas

Conger eel as cooked at Llandulas

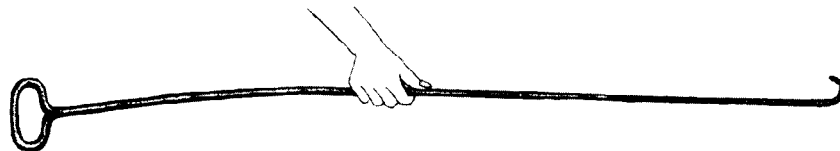
It was in the Opera House at Warsaw that someone told me how certain quarrymen in the north of Wales fish for the conger with iron rods. Proceeding therefore to Llanddulas, I found in Dennis Rogers a willing informant. Like his father and grandfather before him, he looks forward every year to the summer months when the conger is to be found close inshore. September is the best month of all; and the combination of a very low tide with a hot and thundery atmosphere offers ideal conditions.

The implement used is an iron rod formed into a handle at one end and a blunt hook at the other. (A sharp hook would tear right through the flesh and is therefore useless.) The one used by Mr Rogers and illustrated at the foot of the page is a little shorter than most, but has been in use for two generations and caught a prize specimen in the 1930s.

The procedure is to go down to the water's edge at low tide and to poke the hooked end gently under large stones or rocks. If a conger is there, it can be felt squirming around. The rod is then manipulated so that with a sudden pull it will engage in the conger's flesh and draw it out. (Spectators who think that the fisherman is looking for crabs are startled almost out of their wits when a six-foot conger shoots out by their feet. Mr Rogers recalls one onlooker who fell full length into the sea, so great was his consternation.)

The conger thus caught is taken home and hung up by a cord around its neck. A careful incision, right round the neck and below the cord, is then made with a razor blade. The cut must go through the skin but not into the flesh. Nippers are then used to roll the skin back from the cut towards the tail. 'It's hard work until you get half-way down – then it comes off like a glove.' The conger, now all pearly white, is gutted and cut across into steaks, ready for cooking.

Mr Rogers then steams the steaks for 20 to 30 minutes, after which he removes them from the steamer and lets them dry out a bit before pan-frying them. He uses pork dripping, a staple in traditional Welsh cooking; just enough to cover the bottom of the pan. And he puts the steamed steaks straight in without any batter or other coating. As the steaks fry, he turns them over and over until they are well done on both sides; and that's all there is to it.



Pennog Picl

Welsh soured or pickled herrings

serves four

This recipe for Soused Herrings was in use in the west of Wales in the not very distant past, and will be worth reviving when herrings are again to be had.

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| fresh herrings, 4 | bay leaves, 2 |
| chopped chives, 1 tbs | whole peppercorns, 4 |
| chopped parsley, 1 tbs | vinegar, as required |
| salt and pepper | watercress and shredded celery |
| mixed spices, 2 pinches | salad oil, to taste |

Clean the herrings, make each into a double fillet, wash and dry them. Lay them on a board, skin side down, and sprinkle the chopped chives and parsley over them, also salt and pepper to taste. Then roll the fillets up and bind or skewer each one firmly. (Or, if this suits either you or your pie-dish better, you can leave them flat.)

Put the fillets in a pie-dish, sprinkle the mixed spices over them, add the peppercorns and bay leaves and a teaspoonful of salt. Cover the fillets with a mixture of three parts vinegar to one part water. Bake slowly in a moderate oven (355°F, 180°C, gas 4) for 1 hour.

When the dish is cold, remove the skewers or binding from the fillets, wipe off any spices or bits of bay leaf and arrange the fillets in a serving dish. Garnish them with watercress and shredded celery; and season with salt and pepper and salad oil to taste.

This dish was made for immediate consumption. But the Welsh also have a way of preparing Pickled Herrings, which will keep for some time. This starts on standard lines – the cleaned herrings, with onion rings and pickling spices, are covered with three parts vinegar to one of water – but has a surprise ending. A teaspoonful of black treacle, which used to be the main sweetening agent in Welsh cookery and was sold by the jugful in Welsh grocers' stores, is dissolved in a little warm water and then poured into the mixture. This is followed by a little cornflour which has been blended with cold water. The dish is then baked in a slow oven for a long time, until the small bones have 'melted away'. These pickled herrings would subsequently be served with potatoes baked in their jackets.

Of course, fresh herrings were eaten too. I was told in the north of Wales, not far from Conway, that the vendors of fresh herring used to cry: 'Penwaig ffres – pennau fel plismyn a boliau fel tafarnwyr', meaning 'fresh herring – with heads like policemen and bellies like publicans'. The policemen came into it because the head of a herring, set upright, is shaped like a policeman's helmet.

Casserole of Smoked Haddock (or Smoked Cod)

serves three to four

This unpretentious and convenient little recipe comes from Swansea.

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| smoked fillets of haddock, ½ kg (1 lb) | finely chopped onion, 1–2 tbs |
| milk, ¼ litre (½ pint) | finely chopped ham, 2 tbs |
| water, ¼ litre (½ pint) | pepper, to taste |
| margarine, 30 g (1 oz) | flour, 2 tbs |

Place milk, water, margarine, onion, ham and pepper in the casserole. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes.

Cut the smoked fillets into neat, bite-sized pieces and add them to the mixture in the casserole. Simmer for another 10 minutes or so. Five minutes before the dish is ready, mix the flour to a smooth paste with a little milk, add it to the casserole and stir while the mixture comes back to boiling point.

If your fillets had a good colour, the whole dish will come out in a fine van Gogh sunflower yellow. Serve it with mashed potatoes and a garnish of parsley.

Pastai Pysgod a Chennin

Fish and leek pie

serves four

This is an adaptation of a recipe which, I confess, first came to my notice in North America. I think that it must have been taken there by a Welsh emigrant family.

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|--|---|
| cod or other white fish, cooked and flaked, ½ kg (1 lb) | salt and pepper |
| leeks, 4 large or 6 smaller | white sauce, ½ cup |
| margarine, 60 g (2 oz) | short-crust pastry, enough to cover the dish |

Cut the leeks into pieces 4 or 5 cm (2 inches) long. Heat most of the margarine (of which the rest serves to butter your baking dish) and cook the leeks lightly in it, until they are slightly browned. Then lay them in the baking dish, add the flaked fish and seasoning, and pour the sauce over all. (It is not a bad idea to have some grated cheese in the sauce, but this is optional.)

If the baking dish is wide, use a glass funnel or a Welsh pie dragon (page 460) in the middle. Lay your pastry on top in the usual way and bake in a moderate oven (355°F, 180°C, gas 4) for 20 minutes or until nicely browned.

Gurnard will do quite well for this dish, instead of cod or cod-like fish.

Bara Lawr

Laverbread

Mrs J. Kenney, who lived at Swansea early in the last century, used to pick her own laver (page 251). She believed it to be very rich in vitamins, iron and iodine, and always served it for Sunday breakfast.

‘It has to be washed well to remove the sand. It is boiled, then chopped finely, made into pats and rolled in fine or medium oatmeal. It is fried with bacon in the bacon fat till golden brown. Eggs or tomatoes can be added to the pan and seasoned with salt and pepper.’

Now this recipe, from an unimpeachable source, will sound familiar to anyone who has read recent books on Welsh cookery. They all say that you should make your pats or cakes or balls of laverbread and then ‘coat them with oatmeal’. But when I have tried it with the prepared laverbread which one buys nowadays it simply will not work. The laverbread is too moist to retain any shape. What I do, therefore, is to mix the laverbread with oatmeal and form it into balls or pats; then carry on as indicated above. The results are perfectly good, but the puzzle remains – why could you make balls seventy-five years ago, but not now? I think that there must have been a change in the method of preparing the laverbread, but am open to other explanations, including the rather obvious one that I am less deft than Welshwomen.

In Swansea market, Mrs Coghlan, one of the laverbread vendors, told me how she cooked, or rather prepared, it – for, as she pointed out, what she sold had already been cooked by her for 9 hours! She grills her bacon on the grid of her grill-pan, letting the bacon fat drip down into the bottom. When the bacon is done she removes it, and the grid, and puts the laverbread in the hot fat. She makes a hollow in the middle of the laverbread and spoons some of the fat into this; then passes the whole thing under the heat for a minute or two, takes it out, turns the laverbread over and repeats. The laverbread is then ready to be eaten with the bacon.

Mrs Coghlan’s laverbread is all Welsh, gathered by herself on the Welsh coasts. She will stir the tub of it for you, to show how the prolonged cooking has ‘got the moisture out. That’s how people likes their laverbread, it’s solid. Now, you goes to some people and what you get is watery . . .’ Her eloquence and sincerity convinced me that her laverbread must be the least watery obtainable. But even with this I could not make ‘pats’ which could be coated with oatmeal.