

# The Truth About 'St. Patrick's Day' Corned Beef and Cabbage



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When you think of Saint Patrick's Day, you're thinking shamrocks, right? Along with pinching, funny little green plastic hats, the beer in your cup and the Chicago River, both dyed green, and leprechauns.

But on March 17, our Irish-American friends also think of corned beef and cabbage, probably with colcannon and soda bread on the side.

I do, too, even though according to 23andMe, I'm only 2% Irish.

That's fine, because more than 2% of St. Patrick's Day traditions aren't 100% Irish either. To begin with, Saint Patrick himself wasn't Irish. Little Patricius was born with a monogrammed silver spoon in his mouth to fourth-century Roman aristocrats in high-rent Britannia, which makes him about as Irish as George Bush, Sr. was Texan.

Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland for his missionary work in Olde Hibernia, although contrary to the pious legend, he never illustrated the doctrine of the Holy Trinity to the druids with a three-leaf clover. He didn't rid the Emerald Isle of snakes, either. So, let's call St. Patrick half Irish. Like Irish Coffee.

The potatoes in colcannon were originally from South America, and the baking soda in soda bread is an American invention of the 1840s. On the other hand, corned beef has a 100% Irish pedigree. Beef from County Cork cattle was salted and exported to England for centuries before the refrigerator and Oh, Boy! Obertos, salt was the most effective meat preservative.

Since you didn't ask, the word "corned" has nothing to do with a summer picnic's corn on a cob. The corned of corned beef comes to us from an older sense when corn meant "a grain" — as it still does in England and on the spice shelf at the market in peppercorns. The large salt crystals used in preserving beef, like what we call rock salt, looked like grains.

Over time, the salt beef market crashed with changing English trade laws, and the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s killed a lot of farm laborers. By mid-century, when several million hungry Irish had landed in American cities, traditional corned beef was a luxury as unaffordable as caviar back in Ireland.

Finding salt-cured beef brisket at affordable prices in their cities' Jewish delis was a pleasant surprise for the new Irish Americans. Jiggs, the main character in the popular comic strip, "Bringing Up Father," was a famous connoisseur of corned beef and cabbage, which may be why it's still called a "Jiggs Dinner" in Canada.

Next thing you know, along with the novelty of parades, corned beef had become the main dish in American St. Patrick's Day dinners.

Who cared that everyone back home in Ireland still preferred back-bacon? Besides, March 17 was a holy day in a Catholic country, and all the pubs were closed.

Corned beef and cabbage dinners on St. Patrick's Day were unknown in Ireland until recently. Then, like Cinco de Mayo parties to Mexico, a new American custom was retro-exported to its supposed homeland.

The hundreds of Irish cookbooks I've studied to research this article are unanimous in their head-shaking about American St. Patrick's Day celebrations: "We have nothing like it in Ireland!"

They say that on March 17, everyone is 100% Irish. Alas, on March 18, some of us wish that we hadn't been.

Sláinte.

## St. Patrick's Day

### Corned Beef and Cabbage Dinner

Serves 4 for dinner with leftovers for next-day sandwiches. Allow 3½+ hours

#### Ingredients:

3-5 pounds corned beef from Market House Meats in Seattle.

(Corned beef from many other sources is fine, but I think this is the best.)

16-20 ounces of Classic Coca Cola (Really! This is from Market House's old recipe on purple paper.)

1 green cabbage cut into 8 wedges

4 carrots peeled and quartered, cut into 2-inch pieces

8 small potatoes

#### Instructions:

Preheat oven to 350°. Place corned beef in large, ovenproof covered cooking pot. Add Coca-Cola and enough water almost to cover the meat.

Cook covered in the oven for 3 plus hours (an hour per pound or more; just not less, or it will be tough).

When tender, transfer beef to a large platter and tent to keep warm. Add to broth the quartered carrots, cabbage wedges and potatoes. Simmer for 35 minutes.

Slice the beef against the grain and serve with the vegetables.

Serve with bowls of good horseradish, whole-grain Dijon mustard and plenty of Harp Lager or Guinness.