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Any way you slice it ...

Classic Irish soda bread will leave all eyes, and tummies, smiling

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There are many ways to celebrate the patron saint of the Emerald Isle, and for me, green beer is not one of them. But, a dense moist loaf of bread with its origins in Ireland is. Everyone can enjoy a slice fresh, with scrambled eggs, any kind of stew, roasted fish, or simply on its own with butter and a good mug of hot tea. A little honey, jam or marmalade would not be amiss if you're going the breakfast and tea route. There are two versions below – the first is the more traditional loaf, the second, a bit of fantasy on the theme of Irish soda bread, tarted up with fruit.

One important characteristic of Irish soda breads, though, is the cross slashed in the top. The symbolism is ancient, and has a practical use. As the bread rises in the oven, the cut spreads, getting the heat of the oven into the centre of the loaf and ensuring an evenly baked bread.

IRISH SODA BREAD

3 cups (750 mL) all-purpose flour

1 cup (250 mL) whole wheat flour plus 1 Tbsp. (15 mL)

3 Tbsp. (45 mL) granulated sugar

1 Tbsp. (15 mL) baking powder

1 tsp. (5 mL) baking soda

1/2 tsp. (2 mL) salt

1 large egg

13/4 cup (425 mL) buttermilk

1/4 cup (50 mL) canola oil

Line a large rimless baking sheet with parchment paper; Set aside.

In a large bowl, whisk together all-purpose flour, 1 cup (250 mL) whole wheat flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt.

In a separate bowl, whisk egg; whisk in buttermilk and oil. Pour over dry ingredients; stir with a wooden spoon just until dry ingredients are moistened and form a ragged dough.

Turn dough out onto floured counter. With floured hands, knead until dough holds together, about 10 turns. Place in centre of baking sheet; pat into a 9-inch (23 cm) circle, about 3-inches (7.5 cm) thick.

With a serrated knife, cut cross about 1/2-inch (1.25 cm) deep in surface. Sprinkle top of dough with remaining whole wheat flour. Bake in centre of 350F (180C) oven until a skewer inserted in centre comes out clean, about 45 to 50 minutes. Let cool on pan for 5 minutes; slide loaf onto rack to cool completely.

Makes about 20 slices.

Variation: Currant and Fruit Soda Bread

To dry ingredients above, add 1 cup (250 mL) currants and 1/2 cup (125 mL) mixed candied fruit or chopped dried cherries or cranberries. Add 2 tsp. (10 mL) grated orange rind to buttermilk mixture. Instead of sprinkling unbaked loaf with whole grain flour, adorn top with an easy glaze you drizzle over baked loaf while it's still slightly warm from oven. Glaze consists of 1/2 cup (125 mL) icing sugar and 1 Tbsp. (15 mL) orange juice, mixed together.

NELLA CUCINA:

Keep your eye on what's happening in the Nella Cucina kitchens on Bathurst St. An example of what's cooking at the culinary school is the Kids March Break Cooking Camp 2009. From March 16 to 20, daily from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., aspiring chefs and mini foodies can enjoy a day or two, or the whole week of hands-on cooking classes in a professional kitchen. All materials are provided and kids from six up, no matter how much cooking experience they have, are welcome. The cost is \$75 per day, with a special offer of 15% off and a \$75 gift certificate for future classes if a child is signed up for all five days. The gift certificate may not be used for Kids Camps or Kids Cooking Classes. Check out nellacucina.ca for more information.

DOWN TO THE COUNTY:

That high-energy county, Prince Edward County, is doing its best to lure people down the 401 for a hit of pleasure. First off is Countylicious, March 13 to 29. Appetizer, entree and dessert for \$30 (tax, tips and beverages not included) at participating restaurants such as Harvest, Clara's, The Bloomfield Carriage House, Blumen Garden Bistro, Amelia's Garden, Currah's Cafe, Merrill Inn, Devonshire Inn, Portabella and the Restaurant on the Knoll Overlooking the Sandbanks. For a whole weekend getaway, there are accommodation packages at some of the lovely country inns the County is proud to have. New this year are complimentary tasting tickets Countylicious patrons will receive for a Prince Edward County winery. Check out countylicious.ca.

The second sweet reason to head down to the County is the 8th Annual Maple in the County, March 28 and 29. On offer, pancake breakfasts, sugar shack demonstrations, wagon rides, Murray McLauchlan and French Canadian music concerts. Of course the pancakes will be "lip-smacking" and the music "toe-tapping" and what a great way to push winter back into its shell. Check out mapleinthecounty.ca.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET:

To the Dufferin Grove Market where, Thursdays from 3 to 7 p.m., you can sense what grows in Ontario, and what's available from storage. In the weekly market newsletter, market manager Anne Freeman reports that one of the market vendors, Greenfields still has lots of celeriac – celery root. This beige bowling ball of a vegetable has a wonderful full celery flavour and makes a delicious spring salad. Here's a blend of vendors' recipes. Simply peel a medium celeriac and grate it coarsely on a box grater. Scoop it into a bowl and immediately add the juice of half a lemon (2 Tbsp./30 mL) to brighten the flavour and keep the celeriac's ivory colour from darkening. Then add a good spoonful of mayonnaise, a dab of Dijon mustard and a few grates of pepper to taste. Toss, taste to ensure the seasoning is perfect, and enjoy.

Celeriac is also wonderful peeled, cubed and boiled with potatoes for a memorable bowl of mash. When the vegetables are tender, mash with a potato masher or fork, stir in a goodly spoonful of butter, salt and pepper to taste, and hot milk for extra fluffiness and smooth texture. And you can go one step further by turning the mash into a crusty-topped gratin. Scrape it into a shallow ovenproof dish and sprinkle a mix of freshly grated hard cheese – Parmesan, Gouda or Asiago – melted butter and breadcrumbs over the top. Bake it in a 400 degrees F (200 degrees C) oven until crusty, about 12 minutes.

The market is in the north end of the park which is across from the Dufferin Mall, on Dufferin Street south of Bloor. Check out dufferinpark.ca.

START PRACTICING – NOW!

The Blue Mountain area may well be famous for skiing, but it is also one of the longest established apple growing areas in the province. Four years ago the Blue Mountain Village Association (BMVA) organized an apple pie contest and I was one of the lucky judges alongside the mayor of Blue Mountain and the esteemed chef Michael Bonacini. I guess the BMVA decided that if Wellington County can have a Butter Tart Trail, Grey County must have a Blue Mountain Apple Pie Trail that will lead visitors to the orchards, markets, restaurants serving a great apple pie, and showcasing the best bakers. The BMVA is holding the 4th annual Quintessential Canadian Apple Pie Contest as part of Blue Mountain's annual Apple Harvest Festival on Thanksgiving weekend and challenging apple pie bakers to go for gold. The BMVA is also creating The Guide to Blue Mountain Apple Pie with info about where to get the apples, and how to bake the pie yourself.

Very soon, I hope, the BMVA will have full information about entering the 2009 contest on the Blue Mountain website villageatblue.com.

In the meantime, get to work on your flakiest pastry, your fine apple filling and friends willing to indulge while you perfect the quintessential pie!

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