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## *Cottage dishes and reminiscences*



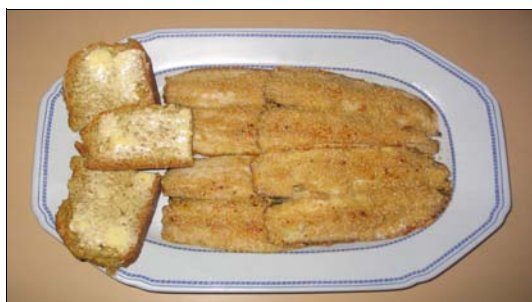
### HERRING IN OATMEAL

Its true to say that in days past oatmeal was the staple diet of the majority of Highland dwellers but at the same time salt and fresh herring also played a huge part in feeding families, particularly those living near the coast.

So here is a very simple recipe for fresh herring that has stood the test of time. Secure the herring as fresh as possible, but defrosted fish do quite well too. The herring must be split and preferably filleted, but filleting is not necessary. Thoroughly coat both sides of the fish with a medium milled oatmeal laying them skin side up on a suitable receptacle when finished, don't be afraid to sprinkle 'left over' oatmeal over the fish at this point.

Now put on a shallow frying pan to heat, traditionally you would use beef dripping. The dripping you use it must be **HOT** before you hold each herring by its tail and gently place it in the hot fat, skin side up. It does not take long for the oatmeal coating to reach a lovely crispy brown. Now with a spatula turn each fish over for a similar time on its back before storing them in a hot oven while the rest of the herrings cook.

If you are alarmed by the spluttering fuss the hot fat makes when you put a herring into it for the first time remove the frying pan from the heat for a brief period. Note if the fat is not hot enough you can end up with a rather soggy mess of unappetising herring, but please be vigilant when heating the dripping. **DO NOT LEAVE THE PAN ALONE EVEN FOR A FEW SECONDS, IT BECOMES VERY INFLAMMABLE AT THIS TIME!** Just why the procedure for coating and frying the herring is as directed, will become apparent when you serve the cooked fish as they will be flesh side up on the plate, undamaged and pleasing to the eye and appealing to the palate. As seen in the adjoining dish with some home photograph, complete the baked buttered soda bread.



Filleted fresh herring fried in oatmeal at Seacrest, ready to eat with home baked

# HOUGH BONE SOUP

By Morag MacDonald

In days of yore Hough bone soup was a favourite country recipe and it is only of late, relatively speaking, that Hough soup has gone out of fashion. Due no doubt to the effect of BSE and the Government's ban on the sale of bones contributed to the everyday reduction in the soup's availability by present day Scottish cooks.

However like all regulations there are ways of sidestepping the ban and the rewards from a plate of Hough bone soup far outweighs the minimal risk of contracting Mad Cow Disease from a bovine's knee joint.

Wash the Hough bone thoroughly and place it in a pan half full of cold water. In a separate pan brown one or two chopped onions and grate a couple of carrots. When the first pan reaches boiling point add the prepared vegetables along with some pre-mixed Bisto powder and simmer for up to an hour. Add seasoning to taste, serve garnished with parsley and a side plate of soda bread and butter.

Hough bone bree can also be used to set a variety of meat dishes including setting agent for potted heid. And last of all it is a grand way of cleaning your dog's teeth as he/she gnaws away at the massive bone.



A Hough bone oozing with joint oil and goodness, ready for cooking.



Finished product at Seacrest, note wee highlights of oil floating in the soup.

## POTTED MEAT

Potted Head (or heid) was always a favourite and relatively cheap dish, usually available from the local butcher in our village on his twice weekly rounds during or even before WW2.

The genuine dish had a distinctive taste and although it was largely made up of ox head meat etc. it was really enjoyable. Its not too difficult for the everyday cook to produce her/his own dish but it is impossible to acquire the real old time ingredients. However potted meat as illustrated can be a satisfying substitute, and for the squeamish eater, more palatable. Boil up some rough cut meat, not too fatty along with a pig's trotter and quartered onions until tender.



Mince or chop up the onions and meat, sieve the bree into a separate dish. Put the meat back in to the pan, cover with bree, season with salt and black pepper, stir then put it all into a dish and allow to set. Serve as you wish. Delicious.

# LAMB GIGOT CASSEROLE

Traditionally in days gone by, lamb gigot was a dish for the 'better off' in Scotland and therefore was not well appreciated by 'the masses'. Now-a-days however lamb gigots from the other side of the world are flown fresh and vacuum packed with a price tag well within the resources of even the most meagre off financial pockets and so can be enjoyed by all families.

Some cooks believe that casseroiling the lamb leg, as opposed to roasting the joint, can lose some of the flavour and maybe they have a point, however done in a casserole dish with the lid in place there is a much wider margin for error and more leeway for getting the finished dish right first time.

Vacuum packed meat needs to be thoroughly washed after the being exposed to the air for the first time as it can be slightly smelly due to the natural juices exuding from the meat. This does not do any harm to the joint.

For variation and differing tastes you can experiment with other than the everyday vegetables that one tends to use when casseroiling lamb gigot. On the illustrated joint however I just used leek stock along with chopped leeks, carrot and onion. The leg was lightly coated with mint sauce. The whole dish was left in a hot oven (200) for an hour. Then some swede and sweet potato were introduced on a separate roasting tin containing a little oil. Thereafter the heat was turned down to half heat and left for a further forty five minutes. The finished result speaks for itself along with the boiled jacket potatoes.



Lamb gigot casserole ready for the oven at Seacrest.



The finished product showing the wonderful texture of the lamb.

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# HAGGIS

*Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face, Great chieftain o the pudding'-race!* Scotland's National Bard, Robert Burns' eloquence says it all.

Haggis has been around for a long time and is mostly compiled of sheep's pluck including the lites, suet, oatmeal, onions and seasoning. Fortunately now we can buy them ready made and in a variety of sizes, to suit taste and pocket. Mashed potatoes and neeps are a must.

This is one of the occasions that I advocate the use of a Micro Wave oven to heat the 'meat' thoroughly. Be sure to take the metal tags off the ends before you do! (Forks only).



Haggis, neeps and tatties at Seacrest

## MELBA TOAST

Home made Melba Toast is well worth the effort it takes to produce slices using a domestic electric toaster. A square thick sliced loaf is best. Put the slices in the toaster set the control between 3 and 4 and press down the carriage. When the first two slices pop up lay them on a flat surface, not standing up as they tend to bend while cooling in this position. Pop the next two slices in to the toaster and repeat the process.

With the flat of your hand on the first toasted slice gently seesaw a bread knife through the toasted piece until you have two complete thin pieces of one sided toast. Repeat the process on the other cooled slice, now put the toasted sides face to face then put them back in the toaster, switch it on. Sometimes the thin slices can warp and can jam the toaster's release mechanism. If this happens switch the toaster off at the plug before trying to release the jammed slice of Melba Toast. Do not fiddle with a knife or similar while the toaster has a live connection to the mains.



Cool the toast in a rack and serve with salted butter.

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## JELLY WITH A DIFFERENCE

*Jelly with a difference* may not be everybody's choice of an accompaniment for salads or other cold dishes. It is certainly different yet adds lots of exciting colours and flavours to what could well have become a rather drab table display.

The sweetness of the jelly contrasting with the varied taste of the fruit or vegetables it contains certainly stands out as something totally different and should not be discarded out of hand.

Instead of the normal pint of hot water needed to mix a modern packet jelly you must just use half the amount of water and stir vigorously until the whole jelly has become liquidised. Lets say you are starting with a red jelly then it is logical to use it for your fresh cooked chopped beetroot. Allow the jelly to cool before pouring it over the vegetable in a container.

The green jelly is treated in the same manner and the cucumber is peeled and diced then proceed as before.

Fresh jellied tangerines have a special flavour and can be served with cold meals or hot, such as roast duck.



Jellies with a difference at Seacrest

*Jelly with a difference* has a limited shelf life, so it is best made a day or two before the planned meal, not more. Put the containers in a fridge to become cold and the jelly firmly set. During the time the tubs are held in the fridge there is a lovely fresh smell of cut cucumber every time you open the fridge door!

# BRAISING STEAK CASSEROLE

When I was a boy I doubt very much whether I had ever heard the words 'braising steak' let alone taste it. What is now referred to as braising steak we knew as stewing beef and to be truthful even after considerable cooking in those far away days it was not always tender. The British Government's ban on beef on the hoof over 30 months old being slaughtered however has altered that, so now-a-days braising steak is easy to tenderise in the pan.

Casseroling begins by first removing any gristle and some of the fat from the shoulder steak and then cutting it into smallish pieces. Next you can, if you wish, roll the pieces of meat in plain flour and (this is a must) lightly fry the pieces until sealed.

Cooks can be spoiled for the choice of vegetables that they can add to a casserole dish, from the 'run of the mill' garden vegetables, (if they are just harvested from your own garden they are hard to beat), right up the exotic. The choice is truly yours. Add sufficient stock (or wine) to cover the meat, put your cut vegetables in next then the seasoning and give it a stir so that the meat will not be all at the bottom of the dish. For guaranteed results and no badly burned pieces of meat, closely cover the ingredients with a piece of tin foil before fitting the casserole dish lid. Pre heat your oven at 200 and leave it at that for one hour after putting in your dish, then turn it down to one hundred and twenty-five leave it in the heat until you are ready to eat it. Do not open the oven door unless you have to. Provided the tin foil is reasonably close fitting there should be no cause for concern nor the need to 'stir it up' until you are ready to dish.

The casserole illustrated, was made up as follows; Shoulder beef cut thick then 'managed' as before. Next a bottle of red wine was emptied in the casserole dish after the meat was added along with chopped red, yellow and green peppers, sweet potato plus a small handful of dried apricots. No seasoning was included at this stage. The whole dish was allowed to stand overnight before the meat was drained through a colander then rolled in flour and sealed in a frying pan, reunited with the wine and vegetables. The usual tinfoil 'heat shield' was set in place and the dish was cooked as per recipe. The smell of the wine whetted appetites and when this simple meal was dished along with mashed fluffy potatoes it was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone. Try it.



The simple and delicious sweet braising steak recipe before cooking at Se-



Cooked casserole at Seacrest, note most of the wine has been absorbed.

## SCOTCH PANCAKES (DROPPED SCONES)

Like many other traditional Scottish dishes, pancakes are afforded myths which are fanciful to say the least. One of the most common such myths relating to successful pancakes is that you must stir the basic mixture with a wooden spurtle, stainless or nickel plated spoons do not do the job effectively, resulting in an inferior product. Nothing can be further from the truth it matters not a whit what you use to mix the batter with.

Here are a few basic rules for the production of quality Scotch pancakes every time. Firstly you need a heavy bottomed girdle (sometimes called a griddle) once you have established an acceptable surface on the girdle, this is done by use, **never wash it** or use it for other purposes such as making a toasted cheese sandwich or similar, but making oatcakes or scones on it is OK. The next important item is to establish the correct temperature setting on your cooker, thereafter maintain that setting. (This takes practice, most beginners turn the heat up too high for a start. Put your girdle on say number 2/3 electric and leave for at least 30 minutes before starting to cook, once the correct setting is established you do **not** need to adjust it during the bake. Experience and experimentation are a great teachers, when you get it right, the pancake faces will be a uniform toastie brown. No fancy patterns or burns!

Method;- Sieve a quantity of S. F. flour into a baking bowl (say 10/12 ounces) next add two table-spoonfuls of granulated sugar, a pinch of salt, a teaspoonful of cream of tartar, (helps keep the pancakes fresher longer, I believe) and a teaspoonful of Baking Soda. Thoroughly mix the dry ingredients before cracking two fresh eggs (free range if possible) into the mix, stir them in and don't worry if the result at this stage is somewhat lumpy. Now add a quantity of chilled milk and again stir/beat vigorously until you have achieved a smooth fairly thick batter.

Next, if you are happy with the consistency of the batter, cover the bowl with a damp tea towel. Place the bowl if possible in a refrigerator for an hour or more, otherwise keep the covered bowl in a cool place. The chilled batter tends to rise at this stage. Before cooking knock it down again, you may need to add another DROP or TWO of milk but be careful not to overdo it! Thirty minutes or so before you are going to start your pancake run put your girdle on to heat. When ready test drop one ladle/spoonful of batter onto the heated surface. When the pancake is ready for turning you will see air bubbles popping open on top, then with a suitable spatula turn the pancake over. If it looks good, it will be good, and so now you can really begin to cook three or four pancakes at the same time.

Once you have started to visible NOT to stop the lot has been cooked. phone or door bell.) For use a wire tray sat on a flat towel spread over it and un-cooked pancakes until they or cold with salted butter some whipped cream. Next if placed in a toaster for a



Pancakes hot of the girdle and ready to eat

cook the pancakes it is ad- production until the whole (Ignore the blasted tele-cooling purposes its best to surface with a clean tea other towel spread over the have cooled. Delicious hot and homemade jam plus day pancakes are nice to eat few minutes before serving.

# GIRDLE SCONES

My memories of super girdle scones go back all of 68 years when as an eight year old along with other loons from our village we would scour the countryside during the last week in March and the first two weeks in April, for Peewee's eggs. On our rounds we invariably called in at one old lady's cottage to offer her a share of the collected eggs. This brought a response from the cottar, 'Will you take a scone?'

Naturally the answer was always, 'Yes' and while *Ga* buttered the scones and then spread them with home made crowdie we would go to the well and refill her enamelled water pails placing them carefully back on the shelf, that was over her pan cupboard in the lobby. Perhaps it's a romantic notion from youth but I honestly believe that I have never tasted such good girdle scones since. I often try to better that memory but to date I have failed. So here we go with my favourite recipe;

Sieve about 16 ounces of flour along with a good pinch of salt, a teaspoonful of baking soda and one of cream of tartar plus sugar to taste into a bowl then give it a good twirl with a spurtle/spoon before introducing about 3 ounces of lard rubbing it in thoroughly by hand. Break a free range egg into the dry mix followed by some curdled milk (Buttermilk is also good). Mix very thoroughly until you have a soft dough. Too soft dough, add a little more sieved flour, too dry a dough, add a wee drop of milk.

Now we have reached the correct consistency, flour your work surface and dump your scone dough thereon. Split the dough into four sections and with a floured roller roll out each of the sections individually until about ½ inch thick. Now cut them into four triangles, then shake a little flour on them again and place them onto a preheated girdle. The girdle needs to be a wee bit hotter for scones than pancakes. After say three minutes turn one of the scones over, if it is a nice mottled brown turn the rest over. Again, after about a similar time, lift the four off the heat and onto a tea towel covering a wire mesh tray. Cover with another tea towel, and if your appetite can bear it, allow them to cool while you tend to the next batch of four. Repeat the process until you have finished baking the lot. The edges of the cooked scones should appear dry as a sign that the scones are properly cooked. You will have to experiment with the thickness of the scone and the heat of the girdle. Practice makes perfect.

Treacle scones use the same recipe except for the introduction of a tablespoon of black treacle in a small amount of hot water added to the mix. Girdle scones can be eaten with various dishes or just by themselves, with real butter and home made jam or Crowdie, or they can be split and filled with a variety of centres. The possibilities are enormous and entirely up to YOU.



Girdle scones straight off the girdle at Seacrest.



Treacle scones right off the girdle at Seacrest.

# OATCAKES

It has never been quite clear to me just why these delicious offerings are referred to as 'oatcakes' for the process of cooking them is reminiscent of cooking 'biscuits'. In other words they **must** be cooked twice to enable them to reach the crunchy texture they are famous for and also enhance their keeping qualities.

Again as with other Scottish or traditional Highland recipes there are many variations of the 'theme', here is mine handed down from at least two generations before me. Unlike factory produced oatcakes I do not use flour nor any raising or preserving agents in my mix.

For starters it is best to start practicing with a small quantity of ingredients as it takes a wee while to master the process and get the mix cut up and flattened into the required size before it begins to cool. So we'll use half measures for starters. Before going any further with your preparations you must put on you girdle to heat, similar to the pancake setting, maybe a fraction higher.

Now put about a half a pound of medium/pinhead oatmeal and salt to taste, into a baking bowl and mix these together. Next pour over the dry mix some very hot water, again stir well, next add four ounces or thereby of pig's lard into the heart of the mix and, using a spurtle, mix the lard well in. Set the bowl aside for a few minutes while you sprinkle your baking surface with dry oatmeal. If the mix is now cool enough to handle but certainly not COLD, use your hands to make a few balls placing them on the baking surface and then sprinkle some more oatmeal over them. With the heel of you hand flatten the first ball down to about ½ of an inch thick turn it over using a spatula or similar and then roll it out. Initially you will find it a little tricky but persevere sprinkling oatmeal as needed over the mix and the work surface.

Next when the rolled out ball is flattened to say a ¼ of an inch using a small tumbler force it through the mix, this leaves you with a tidy round oatcake. Now roll it out a bit more and finally you will be left with a appetising thin pre-cooked product. Make four such rounds and sprinkle them sparingly with dry oatmeal before popping them carefully on the girdle, allow them to cook for three/four minutes per side. While this is happening remix the shredded edges of the oatmeal mixture that came from the tumbler's action and repeat the process. If need be you can add a small amount of hot water to the leftovers.

If you got the mix right the first time you are lucky and you should be able to turn the oatcakes over without breaking. In days gone by the second stage of cooking the oatcakes was done by leaning them against a flat iron on the side of the grate to dry. Nowadays we turn our oven or grill on, and placing the wire tray under the heat, to become crisp and dry. sprinkle the oatcakes with ished product a really deli- age in an airtight container to cool completely. Won- Crowdie. Tip; If the oat- are turning them over your you need to adjust the Photograph illustrates me-



Oatcakes, freshly baked by the author at Seacrest.

first-stage cooked oatcakes on a leave them for as long as it takes The dry oatmeal that was used to during preparation gives the fin- cious nutty flavour. Before stor- make sure you allow the oatcakes derful to eat with salted butter and cakes insist on breaking when you mix is 'too short'. In other words amount of lard in future mixes. dium and well fired oatcakes.