

Cockles and Mussels



“There are many cockle strands on the Irish Coast and the cockles are much used for food in these districts. They are gathered with an iron spoon into a tin can as the tide recedes. Little mounds on the sand (*not to be confused with the rag-worm casts*) show where they lie and the spoon digs them out. Never gather the cockles lying on the surface as these are dead. We all know cockles must be ‘alive, alive oh’”. (*“An iron spoon” was a rounded trowel-like tool, with a longish handle – used for planting potatoes.*)

Preparation of cockles (*and mussels*): wash under running water, if possible, to get rid of the sand (*not many houses had running water back when this was written*). To scald: this is done to open them. Into a saucepan put a very little water, just enough to cover the bottom. Add the washed cockles and bring to the boil. Strain. Put on the lid and replace on the fire for a few moments. This opens all the shells. Any liquor should be kept for soup. (*Waste not, want not*).

Cockles for supper: The cockles are now put in a dish in the middle of the table. Everyone helps himself and eats them out of the shells. It is a case of ‘listen to them eating cockles.’ (*Maybe a lot of slurping noises!*) *Miss Irwin’s recipe (collected from the village of Dundrum) specifies the cockles should be scrubbed before cooking, and served very hot, out of their shells, with butter, salt and pepper. All she has to say about mussels is that they are cooked by using the same recipes as cockles!*

A wee bit of maritime history...36



FREE

SEASIDE RECIPES FROM THE OLDEN DAYS

part 2 “Shellfish”

Some old recipes from “The Cookin’ Woman” - Miss Florence Irwin

Miss Florence Irwin (1883 – 1965) was well known in County Down, particularly in the Little Ards around Portaferry. She collected and published traditional recipes from across Northern Ireland - in her column in “The Northern Whig” and in her book “The Cookin’ Woman” (published by Blackstaff Press, 1986). Comments and explanations to Miss Irwin’s recipes are *in italics*, all the rest is from her own pen.

Periwinkles (Glenarm willocks)

(or just whillicks around Strangford and the Little Ards)

“Wash well to remove the sand. Put on in cold water, bring to the boil. Drain. Cool and remove the little round black top (*that acts as a door to the opening*). Pick out the fish with a pin and dip it in oatmeal and eat it off the pin. This recipe was given me by a Glenarm girl.” (*No information given as to seasonings or if the oatmeal is cooked or dry. Despite being caught easily in baited pots, Miss Irwin did not make any mention of Whelks - locally called Buckie Whelks. Perhaps they were not a polite food.*)



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Clams (scallops). This is a Portaferry recipe for cooking them.



“There has been a revival in the fishing of these in the last few years (post 1945), and from Donaghadee to Portaferry it is now a thriving industry.”

Heat the clam on the top of the range or in the oven till it opens. Wash and take away the black part of the beard, leaving only the white and orange fish. Scour the deep half of its shell. Put in the clam, sprinkle with a little lemon juice or vinegar, season well. Cover with breadcrumbs. Dot with pats of butter. Cook in a moderate oven about 1 hour.” (*I'd put a spoonful of fine-grated Parmesan in with the breadcrumbs & butter and take care not to over-cook*).

Limpets. (Kilclieff [sic] recipe)



“Chip the limpets [sic] off the rocks with a worn-down knife. Wash in seawater to free from sand. Put in a pot with cold water, slowly bring to the boil. Drain. Eat as they are, or dip in oatmeal and fry.” (*Or they are very good if cleaned, beaten thin on a board, egg-washed, pressed in seasoned flour or fine oatmeal and fried quickly in hot butter*).

Prawns – Brown shrimps – Dublin Bay prawns – Oysters

These are not mentioned by Miss Irwin, they may have been considered as not suited for use in the ordinary family home, or as 'famine foods' eaten but not spoken of. However, Mrs Beeton has many recipes...

Prawns or tiny brown shrimp are gathered in a hand net from a sandy bay, boiled, served. Potted shrimp (astonishingly delicious): boil, shell, mixed with hot, salted butter, flavoured with mace and cayenne; packed into tiny pots, covered with more hot butter, sealed & chilled. Eaten with hot toast.



Scrubbed, opened, eaten fresh. Or, wrapped in bacon and baked in a very hot oven. Or cooked into a beef and oyster pie. They used to be food for the poor, but sadly, no longer so!

Dublin bay prawns (scampi; langoustines). Today they are boiled to eat cold. or the tail meat is battered and deep fried.



Lobsters and Crabs (locally called cribbins)

Although widely caught by local people, Miss Irvine only mentions recipes based on tinned lobster and crab. As these shellfish could be kept alive for several days wrapped in a basket of wet seaweed, it may simply have been more sensible to sell them to wealthy customers instead of eating them!



Lobster soufflé (also works with crab). 1 tin lobster; 2 fresh whittings, 1 gill cream; 2oz butter; 2oz flour; 1 gill fish stock; 4eggs; pepper, salt, lemon juice. Bone the whiting and put the bones on with water to cover and some vegetables and seasonings and boil for 25 minutes. Strain. This stock is used for both soufflé and sauce.

*You should have 8 ounces whiting meat and 8 ounces lobster. Pass both through the mincer. Now make the foundation sauce. In a small saucepan put the fish stock and butter, when boiling stir in the dry flour, and beat rapidly and make all to a smooth paste, when it leaves the sides of the pot it is ready. Add this to the fish and beat in the eggs a little at a time. When well beaten and smooth rub through a wire sieve. Season well. Finally stir in the cream stiffly whipped. Steam in a greased soufflé tin very gently for 30 minutes. Turn out on a hot dish, have a good sauce ready, made half with milk and half with fish stock, and pour this over. Garnish with parsley or put a dash of paprika pepper on top and send to table at once. (*If using fresh boiled lobster, pick it very clean, adjust the amounts of everything to match the weight of lobster meat, make the fish stock with the carcass, reserve a slice of tail meat per person for garnish and make the serving sauce with cream, some shredded leg meat and the coral from the carcass. Can also be made as individual servings.*)*