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Butter Woman, Farmer’s Wife and Housewife of the Year: Tracing Women in Ireland’s Domestic Food History

Gemma M. Carney

Queen’s University Belfast

Abstract

This article uses three distinct roles to sketch out the influence of women on Ireland’s domestic food history. Drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources including the Irish Butter Museum, the Irish Farmer’s Journal and qualitative interviews the article charts a course for tracing women’s integral role in the maintenance of food culture and traditions through a century of significant social and cultural change. As butter women, farmer’s wives, and housewives, women interacted with state and social structures in ways which demonstrate how patriarchal principles dominated Irish culture and society throughout the twentieth century. The paper concludes that examining these roles demonstrates that women played a more significant role in the history and development of Irish food than has been recognized heretofore.

Keywords

Feminism; older women; gerontology; memoirs; cultural history

Here is a woman that has no more milk of her own. They shouldn’t allow a woman like that to breed because a man should always keep his wife in the milk. The old woman, God bless her, raised every child on the didi [breast] (Arensberg and Kimball, 1940, 204).

In their famous study, *Family and Community in Ireland*, Arensberg and Kimball (1940, 203) outlined the patriarchal system of familism in Ireland where women “always kept several paces behind their man” but were valued and praised for their ability to produce offspring. The starting point for this paper is the words of a male interviewee who Arensberg and Kimball describe as a “small farmer.” They explain how he is “praising an old woman, the head of the household, to one of the authors and contrasting her to her son’s wife, both being listeners” (Arensberg and Kimball, 1940, 204). In the quotation, fecundity extends to producing breast milk as well as the children themselves. While it is not the core subject of this paper, I use this most fundamental form of female food production as a springboard for thinking about how rapidly food and drink traditions may be lost. Breast-feeding has been in decline

since the Foundation of the State and by late twentieth century it appeared to be at risk of being consigned to the past (Clear 2000). Given that it is an exclusively female role, breast-feeding also seems a good place to begin my engagement with women's various roles in domestic food production. I trace women's influence on Irish food customs through three distinct roles in Irish history - the Butter Woman (1890s to 1920s) the Farmer's Wife (1930s to 1990s) and the Housewife of the Year (1967 to 1995).

My search for women's role as makers and preservers of food memories begins around the period leading up to the Foundation of the State. By focusing on "butter women" who were active producers of butter on farms in the early decades of the twentieth century, I carve out a space for understanding the position of women in the Free State's economy, culture and society (Bourke 1993). The re-classification of butter and eggs from farm fresh to industrial foods, and the transfer of production processes from the home to the regulated space of the dairy or factory wrestled control of this work from women's hands into those of, invariably male, creamery managers (Duggan 1987; Cronin, 2005).

In the second section I outline the role of the Farmer's Wife, a position that becomes integral to the evolving national narrative of Ireland's successful transformation from agrarian society to a modern, industrial economy. Note the change of terminology - butter *women* were replaced with the more overtly patriarchal *farmer's wife* - a respectable, but unpaid position. For this section I home in on the work of Myrtle Allen, via her *Irish Farmer's Journal* column "Cookery with Myrtle Allen" in which she directly addressed other farmers wives. The column, thereby, offers a record of what women were cooking at home in the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, I turn to the mid-late twentieth century and the Calor Kosangas Housewife of the Year competition (1967 to 1996). I examine the recipes and stories of women who took part in the competition, whose oral histories form part of a pilot project at Queen's University Belfast. Participants report a strong focus on food and cooking in the competition. From 1986 the competition was televised on RTÉ (the national television and radio broadcaster) and became more pageant-like, with regional finalists being scored for the food they produced and on their performance in a televised interview with a national icon of twentieth century Ireland—Gay Byrne. I draw on the experience of winners from 1972 and 1975, a period when the competition was a cookery competition which was not televised. Rather, it acted as a source of inspiration for members of the Irish Countrywoman's Association whose members travelled in droves to see six finalists display their culinary skills.

The paper concludes with a discussion of how these three phases of domestic production sketch out important aspects of Ireland's social and cultural gender history. As 2024 is the year when Ireland's government failed to find the words to put on a referendum to remove the special position of women in the home from the

constitution (Article 41¹), it feels timely to use food to undertake an exploration of what that role was, is now and could be in the future.

Butter women – forgotten food producers

A visit to the Irish Butter Museum in Cork in 2022 revealed the absent presence of women in the historiography of butter. While the presence of women is implied in the museum, which focuses on the long history of butter and in particular its production in Cork, women's labour is not explicitly considered in the exhibition. Yet we know that historically domestic food production was women's work. Rural Irish homes were built by people's own hands, and, like Ernhaus style homes all over Europe the "cooking hearth was the lynchpin of the dwelling" (O'Reilly 2011, 193). At a time of high fertility and high mortality which characterized Ireland's demography up until the end of the twentieth century, mothers needed high calorie foods such as carbohydrate rich potatoes and brown "cake" bread to fill up the seven or eight stomachs that lived under one roof (Clear 2000). Homemade butter, melting onto Irish soda bread or over a bowl of new potatoes steamed in their jackets. This image of butter melting on "spuds" is still iconic for advertisers of Irish culture and food as is evidenced by the Kerrygold showreel that is played in the entrance of the Butter Museum. While engaging in nationalist nostalgia around dairy products is one of the most pleasurable aspects of Irish gastronomic study, it is a romanticized version of culinary history. Nostalgia often focuses on pleasurable consumption, while ignoring the sacrifices made by producers.

There is no nostalgia in Joanna Bourke's history of "Dairywomen and Affectionate Wives." Her forensic analysis of Irish women's transition from husbandry to housewifery confirms my observations from the Butter Museum. "In the nineteenth century, dairy work was dominated by women. By World War One, it was dominated by men" (Bourke 1990, 149). The smoking of fish, making of butter or baking of bread was done by women, for their families rather than for financial gain, and so remained, like so much of women's lives, invisible, hidden behind the shutters of the domestic sphere. Doubtless the money women earned by selling butter and eggs was an important part of household income, though the extent to which women maintained control over how their earnings was spent is unknown. For instance, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society made references to the importance of eggs and butter in Ireland's economic and agricultural trajectory, but omitted to mention

¹ Article 41 of the Constitution of Ireland (1937) states that "In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" (see [Irish Statute Book](#)). An attempt to amend this Article by referendum on March 8, 2024 was defeated. At the time of writing, it is unclear why exactly voters rejected the wording of the proposed amendments.

that these products were traditionally the responsibility of rural women (Doyle 2019, 73). Hence, it has been left to social historians who analyse the role of gender, such as Bourke to redress this balance. For instance, in her analysis of agricultural reports (1894–1927) Bourke charted the transformation in women’s fortunes from “butter women” who received a wage to unpaid farm wives, setting the scene for housewifery as the primary female occupation for generations of Irish women from the foundation of the State. This is further evidenced from Cronin’s (2005, 179) oral history of creamery workers which concluded that “women were really not welcomed in the creameries.” In other contexts, food was used as a device in some oppressive practices designed to punish women who failed to reach patriarchal ideals of womanhood. Fallen women such as those who were sent to the Magdalene laundry² were deprived of the pleasure of eating tasty food as part of their punishment. Willams (2022, 648) offers a visceral and illuminating example of how food was made deliberately bland as “a sensory embodiment of the punishment and powerlessness” experienced by women in Magdalene laundries until 1996.

By the time the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) was published in 1937, women’s roles as mothers and homemakers were codified by various articles, not least 41 (see footnote 1). As the case of the Magdalene laundries demonstrates, not all women were equal and some, such as farmer’s wives, fared better under the patriarchal regime, at least in terms of access to good food. Next, I turn to the work of those women, classified as farmer’s wives who contributed to household income through unpaid labour in the home and on the land.

Farmer’s Wives – transforming and preserving food practices across generations

Bourke’s (1990) analysis of women’s demotion from skilled dairy women to farmer’s wives engaged in home duties is confirmed by Clear (2000) and Duggan (1987, 68). Duggan documents the “process of reconstructing the farming woman as the farmer’s wife” through analysis of *Farmer’s Gazette*, *Irish Farming News* and later, *Irish Farmer’s Journal* through the 1950s and 1960s. Duggan’s pithy review of women’s pages of the farming press charts an editorial obsession with efficient husbandry of chickens and eggs as women are encouraged to sell eggs in order to make cash to increase family income. However, when the national policy began to focus on industrial production of eggs, that work was deemed too complicated for

² Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes were institutions set up by the State and run by Christian churches across the island of Ireland between the 1920s and 1990s. Unmarried pregnant women were sent there. The testimonies of women and children who spent time in these institutions points to them being places of punishment and deprivation (see <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mbhl-final-report.pdf>).

women denoting “a new gender-based definition of work roles: women are housewives, men are farmers” (Duggan 1987, 65). These roles were based on gender norms rather than skills, as many farmer’s wives engaged in farmyard work and animal care as regularly as their husbands. I followed up on Duggan’s analysis by homing in on the cookery column of the *Irish Farmer’s Journal (IFJ)* and examined the columns of Myrtle Allen, whose writings, according to an editorial published after her death offered “rich insight into the significant transformations taking place in food production and consumption behaviours at the time” (Contributor, 2023).

“Cookery with Myrtle Allen” is one of the few female-authored columns featured in the *Irish Farmer’s Journal* in the 1960s. From her first column in 1962 Myrtle makes the case for home produced rather than processed food. The content of her column is designed to be used in the kitchen by women, like herself, who are feeding large families on small budgets. In *Three Inexpensive Soups for the Cold Days* she laments the synthetic taste of packet, dried soup admitting that “I had to throw out the lot” (Allen, 1962, 24). As well as quality and flavour, Myrtle shows regard for conservation of food culture and traditions such as cooking from scratch. For instance, she recommends the purchase of a *Moulin Legumes* (a food mill) which “should be basic kitchen equipment for any kitchen where food is really “cooked” as distinct from kitchens where food is merely reconstituted with water, heated and dished up” (Allen 1962, 24).

Myrtle’s writings demonstrate that what we feed our families is an artifact of our values regarding everything from health and nutrition to a sense of place and even national identity. Ballymaloe historian, Regina Sexton displays a photograph of a page from Myrtle’s diary (though no date is provided). Sexton remarks, “As a farmer’s wife knowledgeable in the intricacies of food production [...] Myrtle appreciated that [...] eating is an agricultural act” (Sexton 2021, 330). In Myrtle’s diary, which is displayed on the same page of Sexton’s article, are some handwritten words that are struck through - “*But nobody cares about flavour any longer, not to that degree anyway. Where are we going? Do you know what I mean?*” The striking through of these questions perhaps indicates that Myrtle was tussling with the issue of flavour, as though it were a conceptual and practical problem in her life’s work. These are the words of a woman who feels compelled to act when something is missing or lost. There is ample evidence of this commitment to preserving food culture throughout Myrtle’s writings. For instance, in a column from the *IFJ* in August 1969 she judges traditional recipes using yellow meal which were sent in by readers. Pointing out the significance of yellow meal in the Famine diet, Myrtle remarks “It is now about 120 years since yellow meal first reached our shores. Few people use it now and soon it will be a forgotten food” (Allen 1969, 25).

Arguably, Myrtle’s writing about cooking in the official publication of the Irish Farmer’s Association, a powerful state lobby, was an important contribution to the development of Irish food culture. By recording, creating, and curating a living history of what we eat, or *should eat* at home, Myrtle also exhibited the economic

and cultural value of farmer's wives to the national cultural narrative. Given the level of engagement with letters from readers in her column, it is clear that many farmer's wives felt that Myrtle spoke *for* them as well as *to* them. Through interacting with her readers - farmer's wives like herself - she enhanced their esteem in a cultural narrative around food, home, family and tradition.

Next, we turn to another role in Ireland's domestic food history, the housewife. We use the testimony of winners of the Housewife of the Year competition who, like Myrtle had the courage to have their culinary skills judged and dissected in public.

Housewife of the Year – food memories of the competition

When Jane Kelly entered Housewife of the Year³ in 1972 she was a 29-year-old married teacher and mother of two who was fluent in the Irish language and had already completed a dress design course as well as her teacher training. "Housewife was a general term used to describe anyone who was married" (Author Interview, November 2023) she explains when I ask what it meant to be a housewife in 1972. Jane refers to her domestic science training at preparatory school as integral to her life as a home cook. She is keen to explain that there was a strong emphasis on domestic science at school. "It was more than just cookery" (Author Interview, November 2023). Jane can still remember the school diagram which demonstrated that milk is a complete food "So you learnt the value of food... I can still see these in my mind's eye. I know the nutritional value automatically" (Author Interview, November 2023). In the scrapbook she made of her time in the competition is a cutting of the initial advertisement from a 1972 *Woman's Way* magazine. The advert states that "first prize has increased to £500 cash presented by W. & C. McDonnell Ltd., along with a Calor Kosangas Leisure Five Star automatic cooker from Calor Kosangas." The advertisement continues "Emphasis this year will be on simple everyday cookery which is in keeping with every housewife's concern with rising prices." In her description of the Limerick Regional Final, Jane confirms the centrality of cookery to the competition. She baked a harvest pie with fruits of the season and felt that her efforts to make a pastry from scratch in the limited time allowed were rewarded by the judges. In the national final she roasted a pheasant, an unusual (and cheap) option as the bird tended to be available free of charge during the shooting season. The pheasant recipe was risky, however, as the need to

³ Ireland's Housewife of the Year was a national competition which ran from 1967 to 1996. It was sponsored by Calor Kosangas and McDonnells Food. The interviews with two former winners used in this paper were conducted in November 2023 and February 2024 and are part of a pilot project at Queen's University Belfast (with Trish McTighe and Shonagh Hill). Ethical approval has been granted from the School of Arts, English and Languages at QUB. The interview with Jane Kelly was conducted by the author at Queen's in November 2023. The interview with Barbara Hartigan, was conducted by Trish McTighe in Barbara's home in Limerick in February 2024.

let the bird hang and age precluded her from practicing the dish before the day of the competition.

In the issue of *Woman's Way* published on 24th November 1972, Jane is interviewed and photographed with her roast pheasant. The bird is elegantly decorated with its own feathers. In the interview Jane tells me about the hard work it was to get prepared for the competition, as she had to bring everything she needed to compete, including cutlery and crockery. She even stopped *en route* to pick some fern leaves at the side of road, which she used to decorate her table. In the *Woman's Way* interview, she is described as “pretty, dark-haired Mrs. Kelly, mother of two little daughters aged 3½ and sixteen months. “I’m a working wife” she told us “And I have continued my teaching without a break.” Jane’s work outside the home was a point of interest throughout the competition.

Recipes for her menu appear in *Woman's Way*. The Irish seafood cocktail is “served on a bed of shredded lettuce and garnished with lemon peel.” The main course of Shannon Pheasant Julienne begins by recommending that the cook place “½ lb. of rump steak into the body of the bird for flavour” and to “rub it all over with butter and lard on top with a slice of fat bacon.” Full fat dairy products feature throughout the menu. The first course contains cream and mayonnaise and the dessert, a mandarin gateau, is iced with buttercream and recommended to be served with “lightly beaten fresh cream.” In my conversations with Jane she has mentioned the irony that menus from the 1970s appear to contain more “fattening” ingredients such as cream and butter, but even a cursory glance at family photos at the time reveal that obesity was not the public health problem it is today.

A few years later, literally dying of boredom at home with small children who kept interrupting her attempts to paint, portrait artist Barbara Hartigan decided to enter the 1975 Housewife of the Year. Between entering the competition, getting through the regional heats and into the national final, Barbara gave birth to her second child. So, by the time the national final came round, she was breast-feeding a seven-month-old baby and could not leave her daughter at home. In our conversation she remarked how unusual and difficult it was to breast-feed at the time, as reported in *Clear's* (2000) volume on women’s household work. Barbara decided to travel to the competition in Dublin with her husband Leslie. Leslie drove around with the baby and toddler in the car while she cooked a three-course meal of smoked mackerel paté with brown bread, cheese fondue with steak, and blackberry pavlova with flaked almonds. When the baby was hungry Leslie knocked on the window of the competition kitchen and Barbara asked to be excused. She breastfed her daughter in the car then came back into the competition kitchen to continue competing. Barbara went on to win Housewife of the Year 1975, and, to this day is convinced that the tenacity she displayed in managing to feed both baby and judges on the same day won it for her (Research Interview, February 2024). It is, perhaps, an uncanny reminder of the point made at the opening paragraph of the

paper - that women's role in food production is embodied, personal and deeply related to the needs and wants of others rather than themselves.

Discussion – tracing women in domestic food history

In her exhaustive account of *Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922–1941* Clear makes a number of references to census data which referred to women as engaged in home duties as misleading. Very often farmers' wives were to all intents and purposes actually farmers. A combination of cultural expectation that men, not women engage in paid work and small, ineffectual farm holdings meant that many men had to work off the farm to generate a cash income, "[i]t was quite common for inheriting women to work the small farm while their husbands worked for wages locally" (Clear 2000, 25). Yet, at the same time women were expected to be able to cook and clean to a high standard. Clear (2000) reports how Canon Davis from Galway caused uproar in 1938 when he asked, "Can Irish Girls Cook?" in a letter to the *Irish Independent*. Of the many responses to his inflammatory question published by the newspaper, perhaps most relevant to this paper is that of Kathleen Maguire nee Ferguson, a pioneer of cookery lessons at the time who said, "Make domestic science compulsory for girls, and leave out compulsory Irish, and you will have a very different country, though to say this would be resented" (Maguire, 1938). The fact that women's expertise in the kitchen was a raging debate in the main nationalist newspaper circa 20 years after the foundation of the Republic offers evidence of the fact that it was the cultural norm for women to be responsible for feeding others within the home. Given that Jane Kelly, speaking to me 50 years after winning housewife of the year, emphasized the importance of domestic science in her life as a home cook, Kathleen Maguire may have been right.

Conclusion – women's work is a core element of Irish food traditions

There are two important broader points that I am trying to make with this paper. The first is a call to arms for all of us who value the work of those who produce and cook food as meaningful and valuable human endeavour, especially when it is unpaid. Most of this work is domestic and so is left to women. Therefore, women's work is a core element of Irish food history. Related to this, I set out to show that work which is done in the home, and more specifically the kitchen, is one of the most useful ways in to understanding and explaining culture. Second, the industrialisation of food production, while it may bring benefits, such as cheaper food which is ready-to-eat, does lead to some losses in terms of flavour and quality. We lose the personal touch of "simple, everyday cooking" when we industrialise our food production. Food memories are as much about the context of the meal, how it was produced, where and by whom, as it is about having expensive ingredients and

sophisticated or fashionable approach. Eating together is a core element of what makes us human. Preparing and eating food is one of the most important ways that culture is passed down between generations. Food memories are integral to the process of constructing and re-constructing our social history as we move from one century to the next. As the opening quotation on breast-feeding viscerally illustrates, women are absolutely integral to the maintenance and passing on of food traditions. As butter makers, farmer's wives and housewives, women have played a much more significant role in the history of Irish food that has been recognized heretofore.

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