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This trending decor aesthetic is simplistic and quaint

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No green thumb is required for growing these resilient plants

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16 local spots, from home renovations to vintage finds



a fresh take

HOME IS WHERE THE FOOD IS

HOW A SINGLE BITE TRANSPORTS ME BACK HOME

With Katie McCall, owner of Two Wild Seeds bakery

It seems like only yesterday I was Irish jiggging around the kitchen with my mom and sister, bagpipes blasting “Scotland the Brave” as we prepared our family’s annual St. Patrick’s Day dinner. Potato peelings and shredded cabbage littered the floor, and the buttery, sweet scent of soda bread laced with currants and licorice-essenced caraway seeds wafted from the oven.

When I’m asked about my home or upbringing, I — without hesitation — immediately refer to food.

Looking back, my happiest memories have intrinsically been tied to preparing or sharing meals. So, when COVID-19 hit last March and canceled our family’s 20-year-plus tradition of St. Patrick’s Day dinner, it felt like the end of an era.

Holidays have always been paramount in my household, and with an ethnically diverse background to boot (Dad’s side of Eastern European/Jewish descent and Mom is from the British Isles, Scandinavia and Germany), the celebrations were robust. In other words, there was no shortage of cultural influences under our roof — or in our kitchen.

Yet as a kid, I secretly envied my friends who were 100% anything; at times I felt awkward explaining

what Hanukkah was, or why we also celebrated Christmas. It wasn’t until my early 20s that I not only fully appreciated but also embraced the history, experiences, traditions and cuisines that made me *me*.

One tradition that I embodied early in my teens was Irish dancing. After 10 years of ballet, pointe, tap and jazz, my sister and I switched to Irish and lovingly became known as the “O’Kritzbergs” in the dance circuit. I was addicted to the culture, people, music, competitions, curly wigs, glitter, tiaras, embroidered dresses — and, naturally, the food.

The first two weeks of March were jam-packed with festivals, parades, news appearances and live performances around Chicago and the suburbs. To commence the festivities, my mom, a fabulous cook, tapped into her Scottish-Irish heritage and prepared a St. Pat’s meal. Tender corned beef, boiled cabbage, sauteed carrots and sweet peas, Colcannon (a traditional peasants’ dish of mashed potatoes, cabbage, leeks and cheese, baked to golden perfection), soda bread slathered with Kerrygold butter, shortbread cookies and a fabulously rich Baileys Irish Cream-infused dessert graced the table. Over time, this meal became more than just delicious food: It was tradition.

Fast-forward to 2020, and it was the eve of St. Patrick’s Day when we received news of the lockdown. With a slew of special orders lined up for our infamous Irish soda bread at Two Wild Seeds, we feverishly scrambled to call customers and reschedule pickups. In the midst of it all, we realized our annual dinner would be called off.

Determined to carry on tradition, I scoured Instacart for corned beef, cabbage and potatoes. No-go. Everything was sold out; apparently cabbage and toilet paper were both hot commodities. Instead, I tucked an extra loaf of soda bread under my arm and headed home, where my husband and I dug out rice, frozen shrimp and limp veggies and made stir-fry. I warmed up the soda bread and played Irish music. We watched “Lord of the Dance” and laughed until we cried, as our 2-year-old son hopped haphazardly around the living room, mimicking dance legend Michael Flatley.

It certainly wasn’t the St. Patrick’s Day dinner I remembered, but there was something incredibly heartwarming about creating new traditions under our own roof ... and that little bite of soda bread was all I needed to feel right at home again.

But this year, I’m buying groceries early.



MOM'S ST. PATRICK'S DAY COLCANNON

SERVES 8

- 5 pounds potatoes, mixed red and Yukon Gold
- 6-7 scallions (or 2 leeks), trimmed and thinly sliced
- 1/2 head small-to-medium cabbage, chopped
- 1/2 - 3/4 cup heavy whipping cream, warmed slightly
- 1/2 - 3/4 cup milk, warmed slightly
- 1 cup (2 sticks) salted butter (Kerrygold preferred)
- 1 package Kerrygold "Blarney" cheese, grated
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Olive oil

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Wash and peel potatoes, leaving some clean areas of peel on for texture and flavor. Cut into quarters and place in a large pot filled with cool water. Add the teaspoon of salt and cook potatoes until just fork tender but not falling apart. Drain and return to stovetop.

Cut 1 stick of butter into small cubes and add to the hot potatoes, along with the warmed cream and milk. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and gently whip the potatoes with a handheld mixer until creamy and soft, but not gluey. Add more milk and/or cream until desired consistency is achieved. Cover and allow to sit while preparing the cabbage.

Remove cabbage core and any outer, damaged leaves. Chop cabbage and mix with the sliced scallions or leeks. Add to a large saute pan with a drizzle of olive oil and 2 tablespoons of butter. Cook for several minutes on medium to medium-high, turning often to avoid burning, until cabbage has softened and lightly browned in some areas. Add 1/4 cup water and cook another 2-3 minutes until the water has absorbed.

Gently fold the vegetable mixture into the pot of whipped potatoes, plus 1/3 of the grated cheese. Turn the potato mixture into a buttered casserole dish. Sprinkle with the leftover cheese. Melt the remaining 6 tablespoons of butter and drizzle over the top.

Bake for about 20 minutes, or until the top is lightly golden and heated through. Sláinte!

■ Katie McCall is a bona fide Midwestern girl. Raised on four acres of rural property in Yorkville, she was taught to respect nature and all of its bounty. From foraging morel mushrooms in the woods to picking wild raspberries for homemade jam, Katie feels most at home when in nature and preparing food for others. When she's not running the downtown St. Charles bakery Two Wild Seeds, she can be found nose-deep in cookbooks, exploring the outdoors with her family — and eating ... always eating.

