

Jumbo Breakfast Roll

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On 6 January 2006 comedian Pat Shortt, in his alter-ego of showband star Dixie Walsh, graced RTE's *Late Late Show* and sang an ode to one of Ireland's most popular 'meal solutions':

Two eggs two rasher two sausage two bacon
two puddin's one black and white
All placed like a tower on top of each other and
then wrapped up good and tight
If you're having some tea the milk's over there
and you'll find sugar in the bowl
Says she: 'Do you want some sauce on that?'
says I, 'I do in my roll'

Thus was the Jumbo Breakfast Roll [JBR] thrust into the popular consciousness. So successful was Shortt's paean to the JBR that his song topped the Irish charts for six weeks, ultimately becoming the top-selling single of the year, outselling global superstar Shakira in the process.

Meantime, the JBR was making a central appearance in the best-selling Irish book of 2006, David McWilliams's *The Pope's Children* (discussed elsewhere in this volume). One of McWilliams's emblematic characters, Breakfast Roll Man, a small-time but busy and prosperous building sub-contractor, is suffering a hangover after a heavy night at the Red Cow Complex, and seeks culinary salvation at the hot food counter of EuroSpar:

He is dazed, staring at the side of the hot food counter supplied by Martin Food Equipment, Dundalk, watching the condensation dribble onto the congealed oven plate of solid scrambled egg. Cuisine de France ads are everywhere. He bets the French baguette and smelly cheese merchants never expected black and white pudding smothered in brown sauce dripping over their poncey baguettes²

¹ I am indebted to contributors to the Association for the Study of Food and Society [ASFS] listserv for their invaluable responses to my queries about the JBR and breakfasting practices in various cultures.

² McWilliams, D. (2006) *The Pope's Children*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, p. 190

As described by Shortt, the ‘classic’ JBR consists of a large white bread roll (known as a semi- or demi-baguette) sliced lengthways and buttered. It is then filled with cooked pork products that may include rashers of bacon, sausage(s), white and/or black pudding and a fried egg, perhaps also with cheese, mushrooms or tomatoes. Not surprisingly the JBR has been labelled a nutritional disaster. VHI nutritionist Nuala Collins calculates³ that the JBR (with a cup of tea with sugar and milk) supplies a total of 1,200 kilocalories – almost half of an adult male’s daily energy requirement. The saturated fat content of a JBR alone can greatly exceed the recommended daily allowance. And this damage is done even before the roll is supplemented with cola, crisps, chocolate, mayonnaise, coleslaw or ‘spicy wedges’ – all of which are quite likely to appear as an accompaniment to the JBR.

The JBR is typically purchased at a convenience store (c-store), either a small-to-medium sized retail premises on an urban street (rarely a supermarket), or at a combined petrol-station forecourt/c-store operation. The JBR may be consumed on the premises, but is specifically designed for easy one-hand-held consumption in the car, van or truck. Quintessentially it is the food of choice of the (male) construction industry worker or inter-rural commuter, but its appeal seems to extend beyond such social boundaries⁴.

The JBR as a type of food product is not unique to Ireland, yet it has developed a distinctive Irish accent, one strong enough to appear as local in the language of Shortt and McWilliams. Its origins putatively lie in the nineteenth century, in the foodways of the industrial workers of Britain and/or the solid farms of post-Famine Ireland. The remarkable story of the JBR shows us how, in the space of a decade, a ‘traditional’ dish, the ‘Full Irish Breakfast’, an offspring of the Irish tourist industry, has been reshaped and repackaged. Through the activities of one of Ireland’s most dynamic food conglomerates (IAWS), within the country’s fastest-growing retail sector (the c-store sector), the JBR has emerged to be marketed through the reshaped and reimagined forecourts of glocalised oil companies to a mobile cosmopolitan workforce content to dine at the dashboard in a car-centred cuisine.

This chapter unpacks some of these factors. It suggests that, just as semiologist Roland Barthes could discern the contours of French culture beneath wine and milk, steak and

³ VHI healthcare ‘What’s in a fry-up?’ www.vhi.ie/hfiles/hf-461.jsp

⁴ The reader will observe that this chapter does not refer to any research carried out with consumers of JBRs. This is a topic for a future study.

chips, and pink-tinged ‘oriental cookery’⁵, the JBR expresses much about contemporary Irish society: a society of speed, mobility, enterprise and excess, but one with an ability to construct the new from the traditional; to reincorporate the familiar within the innovative. The JBR is perhaps the ultimate symbol of our contemporary Celtic Tigerland.

The origin of the species

The JBR finds its precursor in the Full Irish (Breakfast), that well-established staple of the Irish B&B industry. The same assemblage of rashers, sausages and pudding as found in the roll can share a plate with potato bread, boxty, baked beans and so on, according to local and regional variations. While we in Ireland take the cooked breakfast for granted (even if we rarely, or never, go the whole hog, as it were) we may fail to realise its distinctiveness amongst the foodways of the world. It takes a visitor, in this case French anthropologist Jerome Martin, to reveal just how strange a concoction this particular meal may appear to be:

I arrived in front of a house situated in Lucan in a very cosy estate. The house was really similar to all the others right beside it, except of course for the little sign announcing it was a B&B. I literally spent these days sharing the life of a single old woman who transformed the rooms of her children, now gone, into rooms to rent. I also discovered for the first time the concept of the Irish breakfast. For an Irish person, or even for me now, the remark can appear as quite surprising, but at this period the shock of eating this salty fat food in the morning was very real. At 8 o’clock in the morning having to eat an egg, two slices of bacon, two spicy sausages, a fried tomato, white beans served in a curious sweet tomato sauce and slices of a fried dark thing called pudding, was truly at the limits of the possible.⁶

The origins of the ‘Full Irish’ are unclear; indeed its close cousin the ‘English Breakfast’ has been described by a breakfast expert⁷ as ‘a culinary mystery’. Both involve a lot of meat, principally pork products. This suggests their genesis as a popular meal is relatively recent, as meat has only come to dominate the diets of the majority in these islands since the mid-nineteenth century, though the Irish have always eaten pork

⁵ Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*. London: Paladin.

⁶ Martin, J. (2004) *Kneading identities: Irish students and the appropriation of food symbolic properties*. PhD thesis, NUI Maynooth. p. 18

⁷ O’Connor, K. (2006) *The English Breakfast: The biography of a national meal with recipes*. London: Kegan Paul.

when they could get their hands on it⁸. Prior to the economic growth that accompanied the expansion of industrial capitalism and the British Empire, the majority of the population breakfasted, if at all, on bread, oats or potatoes, often cold leftovers, accompanied by water, milk, tea or beer.

It has been suggested that the 'cooked breakfast' is an offspring, in England, of the groaning sideboards of food that the landed gentry consumed from about the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Such meals were lengthy, masculine affairs that featured much offal, game, fish, pies and other heavy foods, as well as fruits, breads and preserves. As part of the 'civilising process' this meal was gradually lightened and spread into the aspiring upper and middle classes, shrinking in extent and complexity until it developed by the mid-nineteenth century into the relatively standardised 'cooked breakfast' we are familiar with today. A similar process appears to have occurred in Ireland, where the cooked breakfast made its appearance in the households of the Ascendancy and the large farmers, before diffusing amongst the broader rural population. Consumption of meat in working class urban areas remained low until the twentieth century⁹. In Britain, by contrast, a hot breakfast seems to have made an earlier appearance amongst at least some of the (wealthier) elements of the working class. In a history of Victorian food Andrea Broomfield reports that in northern Britain roadside vendors would set up stalls on the routes to factories, where:

soft large rolls, known as baps in Scotland, were popular with labourers because they were cheap and designed to hold a ham, fried egg, or sausage filling. After swallowing a mug of coffee and returning the mug to the vendor, the labourer continued on to work while eating breakfast¹⁰

Sound familiar?

Half-baked ideas

It is one thing for the population of a country to develop a taste (even if long nurtured) for a hot meaty breakfast, another to shape a national pattern of consumption of a particular dish. After all, it has taken over two centuries of exposure to Indian foods for the population of England to embrace Chicken Tikka Masala as their new national dish.

⁸ Sexton, R. (1998) *A little history of Irish food*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan. p. 44.

⁹ Clarkson, L. A. & E. M. Crawford (2001) *Feast and famine: A history of food and nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920*. Oxford. p. 106

¹⁰ Broomfield, A. (2007) *Food and cooking in Victorian England: A history*. Westport CT: Greenwood. p. 26

As O'Connor reminds us, 'every national meal has a biography that begins with the ingredients and becomes a cultural narrative over time'.¹¹ The story of how the JBR emerged as arguably Ireland's national meal does indeed contain many strands.

One strand is a very Irish story – the rise and rise of the Irish food and agribusiness conglomerate IAWS, and in particular its baked goods division. Every Irish person is now familiar with that ubiquitous IAWS brand - *Cuisine de France* - and the company has been rapidly expanding into the UK and the USA, where it has purchased a number of major bakery brands, including the American foodie's favourite bread: La Brea sourdough. IAWS is now a €2bn per annum business with operations across Ireland, the UK, Europe and North America. Virtually every convenience store in this country now features a prominently-located display cabinet with an array of 'freshly-baked' bread products, including baguettes, croissants, bread rolls and sweet pastries. The secret behind this process is par-baking, and IAWS is a world leader in the deployment of this technology.

Par-baking is a process that allows retailers to offer a range of 'freshly-baked' or even 'home-baked' breads without having to employ any skilled bakers or install any complex baking technology. Bread products are manufactured at a central location, 80% baked and then flash-frozen. In this state they can last almost indefinitely (if kept frozen) and, unlike conventional bakery products, do not go stale. They can be distributed across vast distances, for example from IAWS's La Brea bakery in New Jersey to Tesco in Sligo, and then finished-off in special ovens that require no more than a push of the right button.

The rise of the par-bakers, and IAWS in particular, has been attributed in part to a more critical public's rejection of the industrial bread produced by the notorious Chorleywood Bread Process which, while it allowed for bread to be produced very rapidly, in great quantities and thus cheaply, has been blamed for the rise of tasteless and textureless sliced-pans. The last decade has seen the rise of small bakeries and the emergence of 'artisan' breads. The par-baking process arguably allows for higher quality breads to be sold anywhere, though 'real' artisan bakers claim that par-baking is no less industrial than the older mass-production methods.

¹¹ O'Connor op cit, p. 4

Nevertheless, par-baking has brought the semi- or demi- baguette (or panini or bap) to a Mace or Gala or FarePlay near you, and thus has been a major element in the emergence of the JBR. The bread-making process can be operated by low-paid, unskilled staff and as the bread can be 'baked' to demand, there is little or no waste. The *Cuisine de France* ovens are accompanied by other technological developments, such as the Martin Food Equipment hot deli displays noted by McWilliams's Breakfast Roll Man, as well as their Turbo Chef ovens that can speedily heat up anything from a pizza to a tray of rashers. As has always been the case, the development of popular food products has been based at least partly in the development of innovative technologies.¹²

C-stores – now you see them, now you see them

The most rapidly developing arm of the Irish retail sector in the past decade has been the convenience store (or c-store in the business jargon). Ireland is recognised as having amongst the most dynamic c-store sectors in Europe, and this is largely due to the success of the Musgrave group, now one of the Europe's leading retail groups. In 2006 there were 211 Supervalu stores and 350 Centras (both parts of the Musgrave group, along with Londis, DayToday and DayBreak) and nearly 400 Spar/Eurospar shops¹³. Musgrave was Ireland's second largest employer in 2006, with over 24,000 employees. It is fair to say that almost any Irish settlement over 500 people has a convenience store: a stark contrast with the situation in much of Britain where the spread of retail deserts in rural and suburban areas has been a matter of widespread concern.

It has been posited that the dynamic growth of the convenience store sector in Ireland can be attributed to the rapid economic growth of the Celtic Tiger: prices in c-stores tend to be significantly higher than in supermarkets and c-stores in the Republic (unlike in the North of Ireland) tend to attract higher income customers. It has also been suggested that the current cap of 6000m² for retail units, under Irish planning legislation, has prevented the development of out-of-town mega-markets to the extent seen in the US and the UK. The demographic structure of the Irish population, with a high proportion of younger people compared to other western societies may also be a factor. Another key driver is the high (some would say excessive) car-based mobility of

¹² den Hartog, A. (1995) *Food, technology, science and marketing: European diet in the twentieth century*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press.

¹³ *Irish Independent*, 19 October 2006, business section, p. 11

Irish people: we have one of the most car-dependent capital cities in Europe¹⁴ while Irish people are amongst the most likely to drive to work rather than use public or alternative forms of transport.

Thus it is no surprise that the fastest growing type of c-store is that located on the petrol station forecourt. The overall number of petrol stations in Ireland has been in decline with the withdrawal of some major global players (such as Statoil and Shell) from the industry, to be replaced by an indigenous oil company, Topaz. The rationalisation of the sector has seen the emergence of much larger, more sophisticated forecourt operations, where fuel retailing is typically combined with a c-store (eg Maxol and Mace), restaurant, deli, ATM, post-office and other services. It is usual now for forecourts to derive greater profits from the ‘ancillary’ aspects of the business, rather than the relatively low-margin fuel business. This has interacted with the new forms of Irish mobilities, as pointed out in 2005 by *Checkout* magazine:

the choice of where to stop to buy fuel is increasingly influenced by the quality of the food and drink offer. Compound this with the fact that 70% of us have breakfast alone Monday to Friday, the forecourt has become a place to start the day. Not only do we find ourselves on the road much earlier in the morning in order to beat the traffic, increasingly we are driving through traditional lunch hour and evening dinnertime to get home again. With so much time spent in the car it is not surprising that customers are looking for – nay, depending on - quality food and drink offers to cheer up their day.¹⁵

This trend is underpinning, suggests the author, the emergence of new niche businesses that foreground the ‘state-of-the-art food/snacking offer’ such as the Applegreen chain of forecourts. It is within such combined food/fuel depots that the JBR is such a popular ‘snacking’ choice.

Our ‘snacking’ culture

As previously suggested the JBR is not unique to Ireland, though perhaps its distinctiveness lies in the constellation of factors that contributed to its success. As well as its more distant continental cousins, the French *baguette* sandwich and the Spanish

¹⁴ Wickham, J. (2006) *Gridlock: Dublin’s transport crisis and the future of the city*. Dublin: tasc/New Island.

¹⁵ Bradley, A. (2005) Forecourt food from new fashion to new fuel. *Checkout*, October

bocadillo, the JBR has much closer American relatives, which have emerged from a somewhat similar context. Thus in the Western United States, the Tex-Mex ‘breakfast burrito’ (or even the Jumbo Breakfast Burrito!) is a food item that is rapidly expanding in popularity, where:

pork products and eggs, often with hot sauce, and sometimes cheese, are wrapped in a flour tortilla. ... (while) in the Northeast of the US there is the ‘breakfast sandwich’, which is an egg, usually scrambled, with a pork product of your choice, on a roll, or sometimes on a bagel, with or without cheese¹⁶

According to Michael McGuckin¹⁷:

the ‘national identity’ of the breakfast burrito is most obvious in the early morning hours, when laborers line up in rural Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and Southern California convenience marts to pay for their gasoline, get a cup of coffee and grab something for breakfast. Hispanic workers invariably purchase the breakfast burrito, while (though less uniformly) Euro-Americans are buying what is essentially the same bacon and egg breakfast, but served on a hamburger bun, English muffin or a ‘croissant’ in the form of a sandwich.

According to a recent report¹⁸ on ‘what America eats’ the convenience sector is rapidly growing as a source of meal items, with a fifth of consumers now eating breakfast ‘on-the-go’ at least three times a week. In 2006 thirty-three meals per person per annum were eaten in the car, including eight breakfasts – the highest level recorded. Breakfast is one of the most rapidly growing ‘dayparts’ within the American fast food industry and it is likely that as well as the forecourt/c-store sector the fast food industry is also actively stimulating the growth of the ‘breakfast-on-the-go’ sector. Given the close links between American and Irish food service companies¹⁹ it is likely that similar trends are operating, or will operate, in Ireland.

It may well be that such companies are kicking at an open door, if Jerome Martin’s analysis of Irish eating habits is accurate. Martin had the challenging experience of moving from France to Ireland in the early 2000s, in order to better understand Irish foodways. His research involved stints working as a chef in a pub in Lucan; as a manager at the Maynooth Supermac’s, as well as living in shared housing with Irish students for an extended period of time. His PhD thesis, completed in 2004, records the

¹⁶ Thorn, B. posting to ASFS listserv, 3 December 2007 [asfs@lists.nyu.edu]

¹⁷ McGuckin, M. posting to ASFS listserv, 3 December 2007 [asfs@lists.nyu.edu]

¹⁸ Sloan, E. (2008) What, when and where America eats. *Food Technology* January. p.20

¹⁹ Peillon, M. Coffee aromas. In M. Corcoran & M. Peillon (eds) (2006) *Uncertain Ireland: A sociological chronicle, 2003-2004*. Dublin: IPA.

profound culture shock he experienced on encountering our thoroughly disordered approach to food and eating, at least by French standards.

Thus, he exclaims²⁰: ‘in Ireland, from what I could see ... exactly the same food could be served in the restaurants from 11am to 9pm’. He observed school children promiscuously eating sandwiches and sweets in shops during their lunch breaks, rather than sitting in school canteens; he spied sandwiches in the lunchboxes of primary school pupils that contained ‘meat, cheese and veg all together’; and children going straight from school to the chipper at 2pm in the afternoon. He was led to conclude that in Ireland:

notions of table, meal and timetable did not ... seem to be linked together in the ... school. Furthermore this triplet did not seem to be either respected as an everyday routine inside the functioning of the family. [Thus] having a meal in Ireland does not seem to be inevitably joined to the idea of sharing a meal, but rather seems to hold the primary function of filling the stomach, and this, at every opportunity.

It was not rare, he suggested, to see Irish people having six, seven or eight ‘food intakes’ a day, a figure that could be doubled if one counted teas, coffees and other drinks. The contrast with the clearly structured meals and eating timetables of French culture could not be more stark. Things only got worse when he moved in with his student subjects:

the students do not give that much importance to first of all the specific denominations of their food intakes – that they often call ‘food breaks’ – and secondly to any kind of respect for these breaks as regulators of their daily social rhythms

They were dissociated from food as a cultural marker – and did not experience food as a social event. Nor could they connect ‘eating’ with ‘cooking’. Martin was stunned by the space accorded to crisps and minerals in Irish supermarkets; struck by the supremacy of the toaster and the kettle in the students’ kitchens (the better to make toasted sandwiches, tea and pot noodles); and concluded (rather harshly perhaps) that ‘most of [the students] think they are cooking while spreading some butter on slices of bread, and simply adding some packaged material to it’. All of this led him to posit the ‘disappearance of the meal in modern Ireland’, or at least its radical redefinition.

²⁰ Martin op cit

The JBR – fuel for the Celtic Cub?

We have seen that the Jumbo Breakfast Roll is a food product or ‘meal event’ that can be placed at the intersection of numerous vectors that criss-cross contemporary Irish society. Some of these have their origins in the distant past – the Irish have been relishing bread and pork products since at least the sixth century and show no signs of letting up. Others are more recent in development – the modern convenience store and garage forecourt are highly noticeable and intrusive additions to our urban and rural fabric. The success of both is largely predicated on the sale of profitable ‘hot deli’ products such as the JBR. These opportunities must of necessity be underpinned by the sustaining technology – and we find this in par-baking and turbo-cheffing technology that allows c-store staff to easily, rapidly and cost effectively prepare and deliver ‘fresh’ fast foods such as the JBR. These ‘offers’ are made within the context of a food culture that apparently pays little store by ‘traditional’ notions of when and where or what it is appropriate to eat. We have a fluid approach that tends to equate ‘food’ with ‘fuel’ – so it is doubly appropriate that so much of our food is now purchased at outlets that can offer both (and Lotto too!).

The emergence of the JBR is no accident, nor is its high profile eruption into Irish mass mediated culture in 2005/6. It reflects some of the key drivers of the Irish economy – then perhaps at the peak of its boom - including some phenomenally successful indigenous Irish firms in the food and retail sectors. And while it is related to similar cultural manifestations elsewhere, it represents a real example of *glocalisation* – the process whereby hybrid entities can emerge from the interplay of local and global cultures. It truly is an aspect of our material culture that speaks to many in Irish society for, as the man says:

whether you’re a chippie or a sparkie or a brickie or a
team just tarring the road

Or a shower of lads coming home from the razz with a
crowd or on your own

If you’re working up a ladder or peeling pigs bladder or
find yourself digging in a hole

There’s no sight better than melting butter, from a jumbo
breakfast roll.