Irish Hearth Tales



O'Leary's

A Taste of Ireland
A Touch of Home

Pan Fried Potato Cakes - Necessity is the Mother of Invention Recipe





With the thousands of pan-fried potato cakes recipes distributed throughout the internet and in a multitude of cookbooks, which one is right for you? The answer lies in the ingredients you may already have.

Many, many moons ago, as a first year high school student and during my first teenage year at a convent school in Ireland, cooking (as well as knitting and sewing) was part of the curriculum.

The class was called Domestic Science, but some of us, as a young group of suffragette supporters, had another name for it, housewife in training.

We had both theory and practical, meaning we got down and dirty in the convent kitchen with lard, butter, flour, different cuts of meat and everything else you could imagine.

Not forgetting of course, a beef or chicken stock cube for our savory dishes.

We also had homework to do from our "All in the Cooking" cookbook and were queried and tested on our studious efforts the following day.

For me, one cooking class in particular was not at all something I was looking forward to.

I was actually a nervous wreck for a couple of reasons.

First of all, ingredients were never provided, we had to purchase or resurrect our own necessary items for the class. In this case, cottage pie was the dish de jour.

Our shopping list was as follows:

Half a pound of ground beef (in Ireland called minced meat) together with, one small onion, one medium carrot, a quarter pound of mushrooms (optional, thank God), two ounces of green peas, four *large* potatoes, two

ounces of butter, half a teaspoon of salt, half a teaspoon of pepper, two table spoons of flour, and of course one beef stock cube.

Q. What this has got to do with pan fried potato cakes.

A lot, read on.

Now that shopping list doesn't seem too outlandish and out of grasp for a cooking student to put together does it?

No, of course not if you happen to have the ingredients in your own kitchen at home, and if not, if you have the money to purchase them.

I, like many other broke and ambitious students back in the day in Ireland fell into both categories mentioned above, no ingredients at home and no money to buy them.

My mother's answer to any request of a purchase a day or two before payday was;

"it will have to wait until Friday when your father gets paid. You'll have to do without, use your imagination and make something else!"

A fat lot of good that was going to do me. It's Wednesday night, my cottage pie debut is Thursday morning at 9am and I can't call or text a friend to find out the status of their ingredients (it was a no phone era).

My only option was to scrounge around my kitchen and muster up an onion, a half teaspoon of salt, half a teaspoon of pepper, about an ounce and a half of butter, two tablespoons of flour, and two not so large potatoes.



I will get back to my meager ingredients in a moment after I tell you about my second fear, a cross-examination on the recipe and method of a cottage pie.

Our homework assignment for cooking class was to know the recipe and method without looking at the book.

Back in those days in Ireland, a synopsis of a page of text was not appropriate. Off by heart standing front and center for the class was the one

and only way the nuns would accept your *multi-paragraph* homework assignment, unless of course if it was a written assignment.

Then, for your own sake, you had to have a margin on the left no more than an inch wide and only on a copybook with lines. Don't dare go outside the lines.

No ink stains (fountain pen era) and definitely no disjointed handwriting. Each letter had to be joined at the hip and completely legible.

I'm rambling on now; that's a whole other story.

Perhaps I will share it with you another time. Let's get back to the Q's and A's of cottage pie.

I don't know about you, but for me it's hard to study when my mind is chock-o-block, full to the brim of, *not having all the necessary ingredients for cottage pie and worrying about the consequences!*

Some nuns in my era were sticklers for having all your i's dotted and t's crossed.

They had a way of putting the fear of God into you if you presented them with something they didn't want to hear.

Humiliation added homework and three Hail Mary's was your penance! Our Domestic Science Nun, Sister X, was one of these.

I had heard many a horror story from my older sister and her friends about this particular Nun.

Excuses were not entertained at all by her, and I was about to be added to her lengthy list of insubordinate and contentious (her usual words) students.

She went strictly by the book. There were no shades of gray. In other words, you must have all the necessary ingredients at the tip of your fingers and all the knowledge on the subject on the tip of your tongue.

Do you see where I'm going with this, I had neither!

Pan Fried Potato Cakes. The Next Morning

Of course, it's a dark, rainy and dismal Thursday morning in Ireland, no surprises there, except my mood is in line with the weather.

The joy of being all grown up and a first-year student in the Presentation Convent had dissipated.

Instead, I carried a gunny sack of *what should I do thoughts?*

Should I play truant? Should I pretend I'm sick and do a U-turn? Should I lie and say I forgot some of my ingredients? Should I do this, should I do that?

Off I go with my head held low to face my fears.

All of my classmates are scurrying up the cloister to the kitchen. Some are checking and double checking their ingredients, some are studying from an open “All in the Cooking” book, and some are like me… scared out of their wits for obvious reasons!

Everybody stood to attention at their designated workstation.

The moment had come. Those of us without the main ingredient and humble offerings (in some cases no offerings at all) were praying for a miracle.

I thought sure I was going to be called upon to give the recipe and method verbatim of cottage pie. I was in the line of fire as Sister X in her black habit and dangling rosary beads paused at my station.

Sister X: “Miss O’Leary, I don’t see your minced meat? Nor do I see your medium carrot, your green peas and your ingredients are shy two ***large*** potatoes!”

She paused, took a deep breath and stared at me, “And where’s your beef stock cube?”

My only recourse was to tell the truth and blame my mother.

After all, she did say *“use your imagination!”*

“I’m sorry Sister, I don’t have all the ingredients. My mother said they will have to wait until payday; I should use my imagination and make something else.”

I really hoped this answer (or excuse) would bail me out!

Sister X (still staring): “Miss O’Leary, what do you propose to make with the ingredients you have that is going to compare to a cottage pie?

“Pan fried potato cakes Sister,” I answered as though it was already set in concrete in my repertoire of recipes.

I was living dangerously, but my options were very limited, remember, *no excuses at all were entertained by my Domestic Science teacher Nun, Sister X!*

“Here it comes,” I thought to myself, my cottage pie class is going down the tubes and me along with it.

Time stood still for about twenty seconds. Nobody moved a muscle, not even Sister X.

She had paused for thought as she continued with her stare!

This is where I am compelled to give credit to Sister X.

Instead of the expected penance and the usual script of spit and polish your soul, she agreed with tight lips and a simple nod.

And, then announced to my classmates who were in the same boat as myself to do likewise with their imagination, and those without ingredients to partner up and help the person beside them.

If you knew Susie, like I know Susie, this was a major milestone for Sister X, and a turning point for me.

I knew then my imagination, thanks to my mother's nudge in that direction, could cook up a storm!

I won't say my pan-fried potato cakes were top of the class. Nor will I say Sister X mellowed and allowed such practices from there on in.

On the contrary.

She made us plan for our cooking class, both practice and theory two paydays ahead of schedule. Thus, reverting back to her philosophy of no excuses and suffer the consequences if not adhered to.

At any rate, I have tweaked my pan-fried potato cake recipe since then and added a few different ingredients here and there.

I make my potato cakes according to what ingredients I have. I have also extended my potato cake repertoire of recipes to both sweet and savory.

Why not?

When you put your imagination to work in the kitchen and stretch it beyond its boundaries, great dishes are created and find their way to the cockles of your heart!

Pan Fried Potato Cakes Recipe

½ kg potatoes, peeled and chopped
2-3 tablesp. mixture of milk and cream (½ & ½)
Knob of butter
2 tablesp. onions or green onions, chopped
Salt and black pepper
Herb Butter
50g (2 oz) softened butter, mixed with chopped scallions, chives, parsley, crushed garlic and lemon juice
Serves 4

Method

Potato Cakes: Place the potatoes in a large pot. Cover with water. Season, bring to the boil, then simmer until the potatoes are cooked.

Drain well, then mash really well with the milk, cream and butter. Whip in the green onions and season well.

Divide the mixture into four and shape into four potato cakes. Dust each one with a little flour and fry in hot butter until golden brown on each side – keep warm.

Pan Fried Steak

Season the steaks with salt, black pepper and olive oil. Heat the pan and cook the steaks to your liking. Remove from the pan and keep warm. To the juices in the pan, add some beef stock, dash of whiskey, knob of butter and season to taste.

To Serve

Place the warm potato cake on the plate with the steak on top. Spoon on herby butter and drizzle the sauce around the plate.

