

Keyword: Haggis

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Now that we have all -- metaphorically, at least -- put away our turkey platters, menorahs, tinsel, and embarrassing party hats, it's time to get ready for the first big blowout of the year. I'm referring, of course, to celebrating poet Robbie Burns' birthday on January 25.

All over the world, there are holidays honoring patriots, warriors, saints, royalty, the signing of treaties, gay pride, children, parents, workers, animals, foods (witness Blini Day in Russia and the Feast of the Radishes in Mexico), culture in general -- even April fools -- but how often do we pause to reflect upon and tip our hats to the artists who have brought grace and beauty and a bit of the eternal into our lives?

As far as I can determine, Scotland is the only country in the

world to have created a national holiday in honor of a poet. It's part of why I find the Scots so lovable, beyond their great good humor and love of the underdog. An appreciation for the romantic -- the sublime even -- always struggles to the surface of their persistently restrained and impassive culture. Not to mention their having found a way to turn the imbibing of profuse quantities of whiskey, whilst declaiming indecipherable poetry, into a patriotic responsibility.

Robbie would be the first person to raise a glass to himself on this happy day. He literally considered himself to be God's gift to the world, and was a notorious bon vivant who took great pleasure in drinking everyone in town under the table. A legendary womanizer, he died the day his ninth legitimate child was born, leaving behind a total of 15 known offspring.

But his lusty style of living was balanced with a deep love of humanity. His poetry glorified all things Scottish, elevated the working man, celebrated the beauty and mystical powers of women, spoke of savoring moments of deep contentment and the small miracles of nature. Ploughing a rough field one November day in 1785, Burns ruined the nest of a field mouse. Afterwards, in his poem "To a Mouse", he wrote with genuine humility:

I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,
And fellow mortal.

Burns' poetry touches a spirit that bonds people of all

nations, creeds and colors. He wrote from the heart in the colorful native Scots language, with an emotional vitality that, some 200 years later, still seems fresh and contemporary.

His best-known work -- the one that has made him arguably the most-quoted poet in the world -- is, of course, the universal song of parting, "Auld Lang Syne". Every time we turn the page on a new year, or century, or millennium; it is this one song which rings out at midnight in every time zone across the globe, with millions of people singing along.

But, on Robbie's birthday, there is one poem which stands above them all. It is the central organizing principle of the traditional gastro-literary event known as the Burns Supper. It is, of course, "Address to a Haggis".

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face, (All hail your honest rounded face,)

Great chieftain o the puddin'-race!

Aboon them a' ye tak your place, (Above them all you take your place)

Weel are ye wordy of a grace as lang's my arm.

(You're worthy of a grace as long as my arm.)

According to Catherine Brown, author of *A Year in a Scots Kitchen*, Burns' message in this poetic salute to a questionable bit of cookery is: "Don't judge by appearances. Honor the virtues of sense and worth, found not in fancy French ragouts and fricassees, but in a democratic dish which makes the least attractive parts of an animal into something worth celebrating."

Hmmm....

What's a haggis, you may well ask? I was afraid of that, and those of you with squeamish sensibilities might want to hum aloud for a wee while.

Haggis is a food (not a creature -- though some argue that it may actually be a precursor to the Loch Ness Monster) consisting of chopped sheep's 'pluck,' (heart, liver, and lungs), mixed with oatmeal, onions, and strong spices, stuffed into a sheep's stomach, and oven baked. It ends up looking rather like an oversized 3-dimensional rectangular football. And the Scots wonder why their cuisine has such a bad reputation?

At the Burns Supper (which is a bit like a deranged seder), the haggis is ceremoniously borne in by the chef, preceded by a kilted piper. Behind him comes the waiter with a bottle of whisky. The procession then walks -- quoting from the Handbook of the Burns Federation (founded in 1885) -- "sunwise round the company".



"Address to a Haggis" is duly recited, after which this meat

piñata is ceremoniously stabbed with a sword. Note: A sharp knife may be used by those who don't happen to belong to 13th century militia reenactment associations. Someone will recite Burns' Selkirk Grace:

Some hae meat, and canna eat,
And some wad eat, that want it,
But we hae meat and we can eat,
And sae the Lord be thankit.

After the stabbing and grace, the merry company stands and toasts the haggis with a glass of whisky. The meal is served. According to the aforementioned official handbook, a typical bill of fare would be: cock-a-leekie soup, haggis warm reeking, rich wi' champit tatties (mashed potatoes), bashed neeps (turnips), gusty kickshaws (hot savouries), tyspy laird (sherry trifle), ither orra eattocks (sweets and puddings), and a tassie o' coffee.

Following the meal, guests are invited to give speeches on Burns and declaim his poetry, with great gusto. The subsequent "Toast to the Lassies" and response thereto give participants of both genders an opportunity to wittily mock and insult each other, although protocol dictates that all toasts should "end on a conciliatory note". More whiskey, poems, songs, are brought forth; and, not surprisingly, more whiskey.

The evening concludes with the entire company -- or at least those whose verticality is not totally compromised -- standing up, linking hands and singing "Auld Lang Syne".

Heeding the advice of the Scots Kitchen lady -- "Wherever

there is a haggis, there can be a supper" -- I decided to try to order a haggis and some other Burns supper sundries online, so that I could hold my own little soiree. Little did I know that the importation of haggis from Scotland is banned by the USDA. I was informed of this in no uncertain terms.

Mark Hibbert, of ScotHampers.com, wrote "Thanks for your email, but unfortunately I can not send you any samples of haggis which is always connected to Robbie Burns, due to the fact that your import regulations in the states ban the import of haggis and all related meat products (I have not met a mad haggis yet!), unless it is tinned which is not very good! The malt whisky we sell is another story -- we can't send you that either! Never mind about bananas and cashmere some trade bans have existed for years, if I could send haggis from Scotland to the states I would be a rich man. Regards, etc."

Mr. Barry Davys, of Scotland'sFinest.com sent me a whimsical and rather Talmudic note on the finer points of presentation of the meal: "There are variations on a theme when it comes to serving the Haggis. One of the most contentious issues is should the "dram" (glass of whiskey) be served alongside the Haggis or poured over it. There is no convention but it is down to personal taste. As you can imagine it is served both ways with plenty of heated debate. Personally, I think this is because the participants can understand the problem - - unlike original Burns which can be hard to fathom."

He also volunteered a wealth of historic information about Scotland: "Originally, Burns was not popular in the Highlands; he was a lowlander from Ayrshire. His popularity

has now spread and the story of the spread of Burns is similar to that of the Kilt. The Kilt was a Highland Garment but was banned by The English in 1764. When the ban was lifted, royalty started to wear it and its popularity spread in the lowlands. Funny how we were fashion victims even then."

Whisky-cake.com had no problem graciously sending me a free sample of their product, and responded with this virtual haiku:

A sample is on its way.

Not sure if it will get there before the 25th?

Enjoy!

Regards, Alister Asher

Haggis for Burns suppers has been known to be spirited through customs in the luggage of Scots visitors. At one checkpoint in Africa, the airport was cleared when an official thought he had uncovered a bomb. One of the best stories I've heard on this subject is told by Scottish musician Andy M. Stewart. On a visit to his American in-laws, he brought along some canned haggis. His bags were searched after a dog smelled something sheepish through the tin. Andy tried to explain to customs what a haggis was. When asked "What's in it?" he replied, "That's the point -- nobody knows!" He collapsed into spasms of laughter when asked if he could "prove country of origin." Could there really be any question?

The Scots do take a lot of ribbing for their many peculiar customs (the tossing of large objects is something I won't even get into here). But let's remember that they also had a hand in transforming our world in many significant ways. In addition to James Watt's invention of the steam engine,

which gave birth to the Industrial revolution, other Scottish innovations include television, the telephone, penicillin, the bicycle, highway pavement (named after one John Macadam of Ayr) , and the water-repellant raincoat. And there's my personal favorite -- Dolly, the first cloned sheep.

So I say -- the time has come to get on the bandwagon. Let's recognize that the Scots are really on to something, and embrace this kooky holiday. Tune up the bagpipes, get that heraldic sword out of the closet, head to the dry cleaners' with your kilt, and stock up on some pricey single malt. Get ready for a big-time poetry slam. This January 25th, let's take a moment to commemorate a poet whose legacy reminds us that life is for the living, that even a creature as lowly as a mouse deserves a bit of consideration, and -- most of all -- that old acquaintances should never be forgotten.

As a genuine Scottish toastmaster might say: "My Lord, Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to be upstanding and join me in a toast to that remarkable man, the Immortal Bard, Robert Burns."



Photography by
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