‘This is all very well, but where in Ireland can you get fresh tarragon?’: Myrtle Allen and Herbs: Towards the Creation of an Irish Food Identity

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Abstract: In February 1966, Myrtle Allen of Ballymaloe House, Shanagarry, East Cork, enticed readers of her food column, ‘Cookery’, in the *Irish Farmers Journal* with a description of casserole roasted chicken. Her instruction to bake the chicken with tarragon and butter in a covered casserole with the resultant juices thickened with a teaspoon of flour and a quarter pint of cream to make a sauce, was she notes ‘The best and simplest way I know for cooking a broiler…’ However, for her readers, this best way of cooking chicken would remain elusive and beyond their reach: tarragon chicken would have to remain the stuff of food fantasy. Fresh tarragon was not widely available in Ireland, Myrtle Allen’s seedsmen ‘smugly crossed it off’ her list year after year and her ‘precious sprig propagating in [her] garden’, was brought to her by a ‘foreign friend’.[1] In the absence of tarragon- as evident in Myrtle’s[2] question, ‘where in Ireland can you get fresh tarragon?’- she chose to give a more detailed recipe for ‘casserole roasted chicken’ where the elusive foreign herb is replaced with a mainstream bouquet garni.

This is but a snippet glimpse of Irish cookery in the mid-1960s but however brief an anecdote, it can be argued that it is a rich, dense and deep image of a food and culinary culture in the process of change, and within that context of change, Myrtle Allen, an unassuming and unpretentious farmer’s wife with six children from the small and little-known village of Shanagarry near the sea in East Cork, would through her cookery, writings and food activism come to question, direct and shape Irish food culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. This paper will describe and discuss how her relationship with herbs can be taken as an edifying case study of a community and a food culture in flux.

Herbs were highly profiled in the newspaper articles Myrtle Allen wrote and in the dishes she served from 1964 in the Yeats Room in Ballymaloe House. She wrote the House menus on a daily basis depending on season, what fish and shellfish were landed that day at the nearby fishing village of Ballycotton, and on what farm produce was to hand from the home farm or from a local community of small food producers. These menus were invested with the energy of production, with the variety of the seasons and the peculiarities of place: they were an expression of a particular cultural approach to food production and to sustainable and considered consumption patterns. Nowadays, these elements – local,

seasonal, sustainable food production and consumption with a tangible and honest link to place – fill the narratives of a contemporary discourse on how we might eat better and live more meaningful lives.

But in the 1960s, Myrtle's approach was wildly out of step with current trends. Writing in the *Irish Farmers Journal* [hereafter *IFJ*] from 1962 until the early 1970s with encouragement from Journal editor Paddy O'Keeffe, her food columns in the Farm Home Pages section of the paper were clearly at odds with cultural norms as was her food philosophy as mediated through the dishes she served in Ballymaloe House. At that time, as Ireland was undergoing rapid social, economic and cultural changes, Irish food and dietary patterns together with customary or traditional approaches to cooking were often eschewed and undervalued as the country took a more progressive approach to production and it took its gastronomic cues from outside trends and fashions.

Myrtle's opinions and her approach to food and cookery were clearly out of step with prevailing fashions that were eager to embrace a more modern food system, one that valued a global sense of diversity, novelty, convenience, and ethnic cuisines. She was a contrarian disturber but she was also progressive in her approach. What made her different was that she was not swayed by outside influences but rather she aimed to validate the internal, she looked inward and strove to elevate home-produced food and in doing so she emerged as 'one of the most important individual creative talents in the history of the Irish State'.[3]

Foremost in her food philosophy was maintaining the flavour quality and integrity of ingredients and their flavour presence in the finished dish. Myrtle gives a seven-point outline of what determines flavour in her presentation to the 1987 Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery (Taste): cultivation method/feeding; cultivar and breed; sourcing; freshness; cooking style; presentation and dining ritual/performance and a leaning toward tradition.[4] It can be argued that she used herbs in each of these steps to execute her food ambitions. Accordingly, her distinctive sweet and savoury creations featured not only tarragon but sweet marjoram, sweet cicely, and scented geranium leaves, and in turn these would become some of her best-known signature dishes. Myrtle recognized not only the complimentary synergetic culinary relationship between herbs and lead ingredients in dishes but she also advocated for the transformative power of herbs in creating distinct taste profiles of meat and dairy produce from animals grazed on 'old pastures full of herbs and particularly with trefoil',[5] which in turn gave ingredients a distinctive local character. This approach was viewed as counter-productive, if not damaging to efforts at economic, social and agriculture improvement and development, and a break with tradition and custom was presented in popular and populist narratives as one means to escape stagnant and backward lifestyles. The theme of imposed development and improvement ideologies is strongly threaded through the history of Irish food in the modern period and the nature of culinary engagement with herbs is often used in gauging the health or otherwise of

the nation's dietary regime. In this respect, the changing interpretations of the role and meanings attached to the cultivation and use of herbs in culinary contexts situates Myrtle Allen's relationship with these ingredients in the broader historical continuum.

This paper marks the first detailed analysis of Myrtle Allen's contribution to the formation of a modern food identity for Ireland, viewed through her engagement with herbs. It argues that an exploration of Myrtle Allen's relationship with herbs will elucidate the food philosophy of a gentle but driven woman who was at once ahead of her time and very much of her time in an era of considerable socio-cultural change in Ireland. In turn, this analysis will provide a contextual background from which to map the extension, reception and impact of her philosophy in domestic and international communities of food producers, chefs and consumers. However, the most important source material for this research is the body of material from Myrtle Allen's archive of papers. Following Myrtle Allen's death in June 2018, this researcher/author assessed Myrtle's personal archive in advance of the Allen family's bequest of her papers to University College Cork. Herbs feature strongly and consistently in her body of papers and this focus on her relationship with herbs will provide a rare insight into the Myrtle Allen archive, which is now in the process of being catalogued at Special Collections & Archives, University College Cork.[6] The discussion below is confined largely to the work of Myrtle Allen in the 1960s and it is based on material and insights taken from the early menus from Ballymaloe House, Myrtle's journals of food writing and her early food articles in the *IFC*.

Myrtle's relationship with herbs evolved steadily as she built her relationship with food through her cooking, her cookery classes, her food writing and her food activism. The relationship built tentatively with the early recipes and menus for the House noticeably herb-shy: the opening nights menus in the House dining room, the Yeats Room, are typical of their time and as yet without a distinctive character. Subsequently, a slow-building profile for herbs is evident as the House extended its early menus to accommodate a growing customer base: an early booklet of menus from 1964 features routine and expected meat/fish and herb-pairings: herb butter for steak; rosemary with lamb, and Ballycotton plaice in herb butter (see Figure 1).[7] To this point her engagement with food shaped through family inheritance or cookery training conformed to set and expected ways with food. Her childhood food culture aligned to typical middle-class contemporary trends: her mother's handwritten recipe books follow a pattern of recording recipes to produce good, plain and substantial savoury dishes[8] where the herbs, predominantly the trio of thyme, parsley and bay, are used in set if not mandatory ways as flavourings for soups, stews, and a miscellaneous assortment of savoury dishes. The only herb isolated for individual treatment is parsley where it is called upon to play multiple roles as a dish flavouring, a decorative item for sprinkling over cooked dishes[9] and of course in the ever-present parsley sauce.[10] And amongst the handwritten recipes, a single scrap newspaper cutting advises to 'make more use of mint'.[11] In Myrtle's childhood

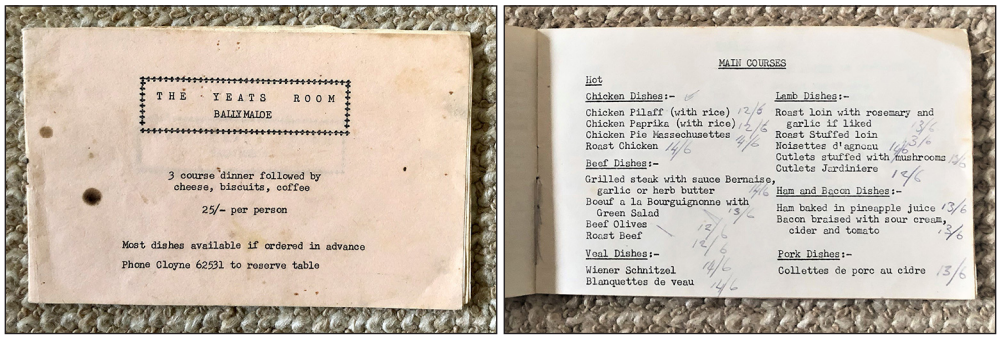

FIGURE 1. Small booklet of menus detailing the courses and meals served in the opening season of the Yeats Dining room at Ballymaloe House, Co. Cork. 1964.

food culture, herbs play side-line and secondary roles utilised in repetitive and customary ways. Equally, her unconventional cookery training did little to develop further a curiosity to unlock the potential of herbs in cookery that she would in time come to appreciate and apply in her own terms. Myrtle's unstructured, brief and at times rushed training in food and cookery is remarkable when measured against her cookery achievements; here she describes the fortuitous, if not haphazard, events that led to a life in the kitchen:

> I myself, have practically no training in cooking. After school (Frensam Heights, Surrey and Newton School, Waterford) I took some elementary lessons in cookery at the Cork School of Commerce and I spent a week before the restaurant opened in the Cordon Bleu School in London. I was very young and unable to cook when I got married but learned in my own kitchen with my husband's products [and] various books (Philip Harben's "The Way to Cook" gave me the first grasp of the subject)...A restaurant was always on our minds so in May 1964 we started timidly in our own dining room to serve the food we produced and offer the type of dinners which one might expect in any similar large private country house Ireland. This also meant that some money could be put into our big and much-loved house as well as educating our six children.[12]

As a self-trained cook, her experiences in the kitchen were guided by her marriage to a farmer and her immersion into a rural community of small local producers and fisherman whose daily catch was landed at the nearby coastal village of Ballycotton.

> My husband has quite an extensive farming and fruit growing concern. This included a wide range of products, mushrooms, cucumbers, apples, tomatoes, a variety of field vegetables, milk, cream, home grown veal, eggs and so on. We live in a fertile farming area. What we do not produce ourselves we can pick up for free at the moment...watercress from the local streams, quality fat

> geese from my neighbours, fresh fish from the small fishing village Ballycotton, excellent meat from the local butcher who fattens and kills his animals locally.[13]

As a progressive and innovative vegetable grower, Myrtle's husband Ivan hosted regular visits of European commercial horticulturists to his east Cork farm and it was at these gatherings that Paddy O'Keeffe, editor of Ireland's farming newspaper the *IFJ* experienced Myrtle's cooking for family and visiting agricultural advisors. Around the Ballymaloe table, O'Keeffe had a Swiss-inspired breakfast of overnight oats with strawberries and a lunch of fresh mackerel bought on the pier in Ballycotton. Table talk revealed her food philosophy; that food and meals should be simple, varied and tasty and within the budget of a farmer's wife and with the Farm Home Pages section in mind, O'Keeffe invited Myrtle to write a series of cookery articles with the first published on 28 July 1962 to the detail that this food and cookery advice is written 'by a farmer's wife for farmers' wives'.[14] Therefore by late 1964, Myrtle had a media platform to voice opinion on food, ingredients and contemporary agricultural policy as applied to a rapidly changing Irish food system. While the Ballymaloe kitchen and the Yeats Dining Room gave her a place and space to put a physical shape on her evolving food philosophy; one that was increasingly unconditioned, nonconforming and one that was free from the rigidly formulaic approach taken by cookery training colleges and institutions.

Unburdened by such training, she began to develop an increasingly critical and reflective approach to ingredients and cookery styles. Her journals of writings from the period, many of which contain the draft copies of her *IFJ* articles, consider a dish or an ingredient often in multiple temporal and spatial settings. Contemporary food developments are mulled over and considered and are framed for analysis against their impact on local producers, many of whom were her kitchen suppliers. Her past is revisited sometimes as the prompt to her revision, reshaping and reforming of what would become her guiding principles for choosing, sourcing and cooking ingredients. One journal entry recalls a school class in the time of rationing, 'The French Lesson' and her happy curious wonder at two French terms, the concierge and the gourmet and her memory of thinking 'how funny to have a special name for him, we thought, with the reality of porridge & stew ahead and only the dream of a rasher & egg'. This comparative interplay between an outside and a home/internal food culture with an implied tension between of higher order rituals attending good food and a lower order of simplicity embodied in porridge and stew would become her baseline in reshaping her ethos on food. On consideration she constructs her own definition of a gourmet:

> Who's a gourmet anyway? I believe the man who relishes a floury Irish spud carefully chosen for quality, grown & picked in his own garden, cooked in its jacket and served to him fresh form the pot with a shake of salt and a knob of golden butter – he is an Irish gourmet and no one from Paris to New York & back again can tell him a thing about quality + flavour in food. The thing

> about a gourmet is that he is not a snob, but what he eats must be perfect in quality and perfectly cooked, be it an egg, a loaf of soda bread, pâté foie gras or a bottle of wine or even a cup of tea.[15]

A developing critical voice considered food at its most elemental level. In an *IFJ* article, 'Picnic Packs' she revisits the topic of the carefully chosen and cooked potato reiterating the claim above that no more than three ingredients can deliver a memorable, if not visceral gastronomic experience. For a seaside picnic she suggests bringing cold meats, salad and a pot of scrubbed uncooked potatoes. 'Cooked in salt water on the strand & eaten with butter, I tell you, this is the spud of your life'.[16]

Myrtle's maturing food philosophy emphasised three key factors; quality, taste and a deliberate simplicity in cooking techniques, where quality was defined in accordance with how, where and by whom the ingredient was produced or reared. Accordingly, her aim was to support a short food chain of production and distribution, and that which could not be produced at home was procured through local suppliers, while wild foods in season were collected for the home and House kitchen. In this context, farm vegetables and the herb garden played significantly in defining the food style of the House and herbs emerged as leading rather than side-line players in creating a distinctive Ballymaloe cookery style. In another journal entry she acknowledges their importance:

> This year we have an early glasshouse crop of spring carrots which are a treat. Personally I do not go along with the cult for baby vegetables unless they are eaten raw. I find the teenagers have a much better flavour so I pick then when the top of the roots measure approx. [MS gap] cm in diameter. They taste much better than the old carrots at this time of the year and the imported ones are a disaster. Of necessity, I suppose, they have been washed a long time before the arrive in our shops, which does not help them. Freely available outdoors, I will soon be able to pick masses of herbs and rhubarb so they should form the backbone of our menus.[17]

And while Myrtle recognized the importance of herbs in directing cookery style and in framing meal-taste, she was also insightfully sensitive to the role of mixed herbage in grazing pastures in determining the taste profile of meat and dairy produce. In a statement that has now come to embody Myrtle's relationship with food, she sketches a story about the butter she bought from the local farmer, implicit in the detail is the message that diverse grasslands produce pleasant and site-complex flavours (see Figure 2):

> I bought a few pounds of fresh butter from my neighbours, 'That butter you sold me had a marvellous flavour', I said. 'Ah yes' was his reply 'that field always made good butter'. But nobody cares about flavour any longer, not to that degree. My heavens, where are we going.[18]

Recognition of the interconnectedness of environmental factors, agricultural methods and human endeavour in producing quality ingredients also drew Myrtle to Mr. Cuddigan, the butcher in the nearby village of Cloyne as he too grazed and finished his animals on mixed herb grasslands. As a farmer's wife knowledgeable in the intricacies of food production, Myrtle was well-positioned to appreciate Berry's statement that 'eating is an agricultural act'[19] and in turn she located herself in the system to act as the agent to deliver, to House diners and to describe to readers, recipes and dishes that were chosen for quality and taste based on production pace and a sense of place. In effect, her cooking was not a single act but rather an expression of community. In this environment, rather than cultivating the cult of Ballymaloe chef for herself, she remained the consummate but humble professional cook. In an interview with Sue Arnold for the Observer Magazine she 'asserts firmly that good food has very little to do with cooking and everything to do with good ingredients. Of course she appreciated being in the food guides, but what those inspectors should really be doing was checking the raw materials, not the consistency of the sauce or the size of the dining room'.[20]

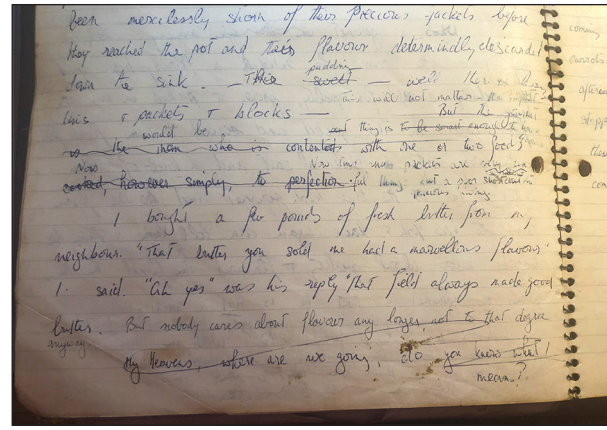

FIGURE 2. 'That field always made good butter'. The famous line that illustrates Myrtle Allen's intuition understanding of the importance of herbs to ingredient quality.

Thus far this descriptive narrative of one woman's development and application of a food philosophy based on home and community food production and her support of traditional farming methods (with herbs playing a central role) can be viewed as merely a local expression of a general style that could be encountered in many country house enterprises. In a present-day context, we recognise the elements of Myrtle's approach – local food in season, slow production methods, quality defined by alignment to the ethics of sustainable production and responsible consumption as the main tenets of an alternative food system that operates, or aspires to operate, at a distance from mainstream practice. However, retrospection and presentism, and the relatively recent coming of age of such discourses, be they located in public, populist or academic fora, detract from the novel, dissenting and sheer eccentric nature of Myrtle's mindset to 1960s Ireland.

The decade saw Ireland break with its obsessive attachment to inward gazing and embrace a more liberal and outward engagement with the world. Lee's near-poetic description puts

colour to the multidimensional nature of change that saw the rupturing of a 'hermetically sealed national culture'.[21]

> From the streets of the city the singing beggars disappeared and so did the horse-drawn cart and the electric tram. More and more the family car replaced the bicycle. Dark limousine colours gave way to fire engine red, canary yellow and French blue. In 1963, the government set up a council for design and *Coras Trachtala* established design workshops in Kilkenny. There was also an invasion of colours that banished the drab clothes of earlier days. A profusion of hair and limitless variations of style marked the new ascendency of the teenager. The ubiquitous transistor pervaded the most remote wilderness and the disco replaced the dancehall. The decade also ushered in cheap overseas travel with rapturous access for the humble citizen to the smarmy delights of the Costa Brava and the Adriatic. Finally, in 1961, with the introduction of a new state television service, young Ireland was indecently exposed to the daily vicissitudes of the universe, the sedentary delights of foil-wrapped entertainment and the uninhabited views of new liberalism.[22]

And while Ireland did not stand apart from its British and European neighbours in experiencing this quickening in social change, the particularities of Irish economic conditions in the decades after the establishment of the Free State left the state especially welcoming of outside influence to effect positive economic, social and agricultural improvements. The state economic policy of protectionism and isolationism disadvantaged farmers in their ability to access markets and good prices, while the economic slump in the post-World War 2 period left the country depressed by emigration, unemployment and the resultant migration from rural areas to the larger cities. Therefore, the drive towards economic liberalization and the departure from protectionism in the First Programme for Economic Recovery (1958-63) brought improvements in international trade and inward investment which in turn disrupted not only the jaded ambition toward economic independence but also the ideologies of cultural self-sufficiency. Added to the mix was the steady progression of the rural electrification scheme which from 1946 transformed Irish rural life. And all the while the mood music in the background sounded out the ambitions of the Treaty of Rome to secure food and stabilise markets with increased production and productivity by applying scientific and technological innovations to agricultural practice and food production.

In this climate of transformation an older order of agricultural and dietary practice was enthusiastically replaced with the objects of technological innovation and the products of science applied to the kitchen; a process which marked the post-Famine period but accelerated in this new era of change and prosperity. For a certain rural demographic, electricity brought the electric cooker to rural homes thereby moving cooking from the open

hearth to the hob ring and enclosed oven. A burgeoning tourism industry afforded rural communities the opportunity to generate income by offering guest house accommodation with a farmhouse meal experience. This kaleidoscope of change with a strong leaning toward outside engagement to effect socio-economic improvement clashed with the vested interests of the tourism industry that was best served by presenting to the outsider an old-world Ireland resplendent with thatch cottages, turf creels and open fire stews. Many of these transitions and the tensions associated with change are played out in the pages of the IFJ and as the Journal's food writer Myrtle often assumes the role of commentator, educator and the soundboard respondent to changes in Irish food culture. Three examples illustrate her reflective responses:

> Are Blackcurrants in danger of becoming one of the forgotten fruits of our times? They don't suit the market too well since they all ripen at once, must be picked immediately…One rarely sees them in the shops and the CERT-Trained cooks on my staff tell me that…It's funny how we can get the strangest fruits from the most exotic tropical countries and forget about our own treasures.[23]

> As the standard of living goes up one kind of food takes a back seat while another become popular…In the fish line, I'm sad to see cod, pollack, mullet and even bream out while plaice, sole and salmon enjoy all the front seats. Bream and mullet are superb fish, good enough to eat cold with mayonnaise like salmon. Cod and pollock are very good also.[24]

> An English visitor toured the west before calling on us some years ago. The scenery was marvellous, but not the food! "Why serve fish fingers when they overlook the sea? Why tinned vegetables, can they not grow fresh ones? Why no cream when the hotel has its own milking herd? Rashers and eggs for 17 meals for a stay of 10 days!" he wailed.[25]

Consequently, her writing often takes on a didactic quality as she supplies planned and structured menu options for guest house owners: simple ways to prepare fresh fish and advice to use fresh herbs to improve the taste quality of dishes. Her instruction for the pairing of roast chicken with fresh herbs, 'The following method for roasting a chicken in butter in a gentle oven demonstrates best how herbs transform an ordinary dish into something very delicious'[26], falls in with her frequent recommendations to include more fruit and vegetables in meal and dietary patterning. The imagined offerings that the typical Irish farmhouse should offer to foreign guests, as outlined below, sets up the purity of Ireland as a haven of respite for those whose food cultures have been denigrated by the industrialisation of food production:

> Ireland has been 'found' by the holiday makers…Most of our guests come from industrial areas where they are restricted physically by urban and

> industrial development. Their food is anything but "farm fresh" most if it will have travelled many miles from its origin'. – they will expect fresh cream and milk from the cow and their children will dream of collecting eggs from the henhouse. 'They will expect homemade scones and soda bread and good country butter if it can be made or bought; freshly caught fish if the coast is near and they will also expect that rarest of commodities on an Irish farm-fresh vegetables and fruit.[27]

Myrtle's attention to the restricted range of fruits and vegetables in the Irish diet is important to consider as it brings to the surface a new iteration of a recurring discourse that linked the lack of diversity and a deficiency of vegetables and fruits in the Irish diet to an uncivilised, weak and underdeveloped food culture. From the late eighteenth century onwards, individuals, groups and government agencies advocated for greater dietary diversity to safeguard against the insecurities inherent in the potato-dominated diet of the rural small farmer and the rural and urban poor. Cultivating a food garden to produce vegetables, fruit, pulses and herbs enhanced nutrition and stretched the utility and availability of more expensive food items, especially meat. The role of herbs in facilitating these sound domestic economy measures is a theme that is consistently expounded either in allegorical, fictional and government reports. The increased attachment to commercial goods – tea, white baker's bread, sugar, cheap fat and fruit spreads- filled the debates and action responses of social reform movements and government directives in the post-Famine period, while the realities of extreme nutritional deficiency of the urban and rural areas was a concern for both the Congested Districts Board and the Departments of Agriculture and Education in the early formative decades of the Free State. The lack of diversity and a propensity to consume poor commercial product above fresh fruits and vegetables was linked not only to the economic health of the nation but also to its social health and the strength of its moral character.[28] Bell and Watson point out the explicit paternal responsibility taken by the Department of Agricultural and Technical Instruction in encouraging labourers to develop 'a potentially idyllic lifestyle, in which the garden played a crucial role and if the opportunity to betterment was wasted it could be integrated into lifestyle choices by education and leadership.[29] The humble herb, therefore, was a means to economic, social and moral betterment, ultimately it could bring fullness and new meaning to the labourers' lifestyles.

That advocacy for fruit, vegetable and herb consumption should continue in Myrtle's polemics can be taken as an indication of the minor role that herbs played in mainstream Irish dietary patterns and accounts for the lack of interest in growing beyond the thyme, parsley, sage (and maybe a bit of bay) trio. The Irish traditional farm pattern of work concentrated on livestock production on a commercial basis with high economic value assigned to meat and milk while women were concerned with the keeping of fowl for meat and eggs and

butter-making for the home and market. With the farm concerned with the fluctuating prices for milk and meat and women exercised with how the design of rural homes might adapt to accommodate electricity and indoor plumbing, herbs were not a priority billing in the routines of rural life. In rural areas, 'herbs' was the collective term used for plants with medicinal properties that were used to treat human and animal ailments. Therefore, for a sizeable proportion of the Irish rural population that made up Myrtle's readership in the *IFJ* herbs did not enter their routine and inherited culinary patterns and to expect the chicken cooked with tarragon alluded to in the opening to this paper was foolhardy at best and at worst decidedly elitist in its disconnect with the realities of rural life. The tarragon sprig brought to Myrtle by a 'foreign' friend would remain foreign and irrelevant to the culinary rhythms of Irish rural life. And while Myrtle's intention was to suggest culinary betterment and sensory enjoyment through the use of a particular herb, the clash of values dramatized in the example of chicken with tarragon versus the chicken with a bouquet garni can be taken as a microcosm of the varying and divergent engagements with outside influences that characterised Ireland in this decade of change. The tensions between the traditional and the new, the local and the global as applied to Irish agriculture and food were played out through the pages of the *IFC* and extended far beyond the example of herb chicken thereby illustrating the complexities of a food environment in flux. That a commentator might recommend the merits of a herb brought by a 'foreign friend' while at the same time exalting a potato cooked in sea water to an audience that was actively displacing an older order with a new one (for instance, replacing traditional medicinal herbs with veterinary medicines) demonstrates the complex and troublesome nature of food and its meanings to food-producing rural communities.

Away from the pages of the *IFJ*, Myrtle continued to integrate and profile herbs in her cooking in the House. By the late 1960s, she had become increasingly reliant on the herb garden detailing in a journal entry 'I become more dependent on my herb garden…Fennel, lemon balm and marjoram grow luxuriantly for us. The tarragon patch also yielded a good crop annually, although friends tell me that it will not grow in the Dublin area'.[30] Fish that she had seen fall from favour were included on House menus with pollack or cod or ling with cream and bay leaves regular offerings. Grey sea mullet with maître de hotel butter and Ballycotton dab in herb butter are listed when available from the boats at Ballycotton, while plaice in butter and herbs was a House regular alongside the chicken with tarragon. These herb-rich meals were offered in the dining room alongside dishes based on traditional ingredients that were well-known to her readers of the *IFJ*: elderflowers; elderberries; blackberries, carrageen moss; eel, mackerel, home-made black puddings; watercress, whortleberries, cockles and mussels, and oatmeal. These ingredients with varying traditional pedigrees were strong representatives of a rural Irish pattern of consumption that balanced home-produced or gathered with shop-bought commercial product. Little if any had market

value and while relished for their individual taste and cooking qualities their connection to customary practice or their status as wild and free ingredients rendered them poor foods relative to the perceived sophistication of commercial goods produce in a more complex and modern food system. But at Ballymaloe, whortleberries with carrageen moss sat equitably with smoked mackerel [with] fine herbes, roast lamb duxelles and potage bonne femme. These inclusive menus were not designed to acknowledge the hegemony of French cookery, nor did they strive to re-create a refined and diluted version of tradition. Indeed the re-creating of tradition was never her objective and the decision to serve traditional Irish food came largely as 'a response to the demand from foreigners'.[31] Ingredients were chosen as directed by her principle to seek out the best quality ingredients and to spot-light their taste features with simple kitchen treatment. But as she pointed out 'simplicity is difficult'[32] and preserving the integrity of the ingredient necessitated adherence to a more complex ethical food and cookery philosophy. The approach was outside the practice of many of her industry contemporaries and her outsider status was compounded further by gender, by her lack of professional training and by her reluctance to follow derivatively kitchen and food fashions. In effect, her wildly unfashionable stance made her highly fashionable, if not something of a curiosity, especially to outside commentators as the intrinsic integrity of her work ethic was recognised, acknowledged and validated by the most acclaimed international food writers and food guides.

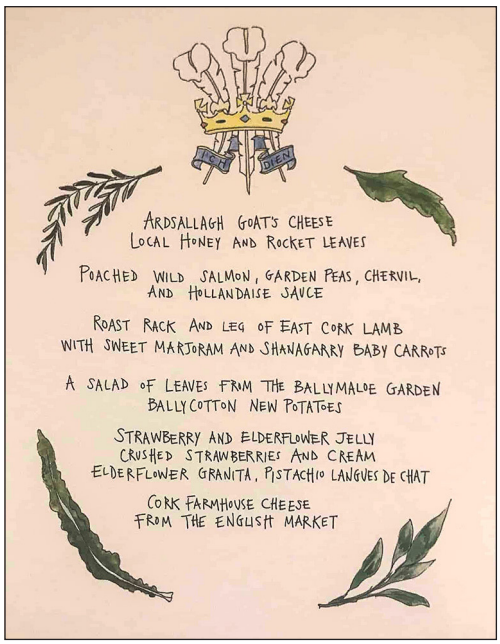

FIGURE 3. The herb-rich Ballymaloe menu for the dinner to celebrate the visit of HRM Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall to Cork, 14 June 2018.

The internal reception and reaction to her work prompted a re-think of the negative stereotyping of Irish food, much of which was the product of self-derision and insecurity that linked to the 'serf-mentality' inherited from a colonial past. The inferiority of Irish food culture, in all its real and imagined complexities, and the associated perceived fragility of a food identity for Ireland was subject to interrogation and re-interpretation as received opinion was questioned in light of the independent thinking of Myrtle Allen. The success of her alternative approach encouraged and supported local food movements, together with certain

communities of chefs and producers to become active practitioners in the formation and creation of a new food identity for Ireland through their work in producing speciality and artisanal produce. Myrtle's construction of a new value system gave creative space to reform, refine, and reshape the question what is Irish food. This dynamic process of reformation illustrates well Appadrai's assertation that 'food…is a marvellously kind of plastic collective representation'[33] that makes the process of tradition-making and remaking fluid, dynamic and mutable. Her thinking also informed a number of external food movement organizations, notably Euro-Toques and she served as inspiration for Claus Meyer in his formation of the New Nordic Cuisine Movement.[34]

Myrtle Allen passed away on 13 June 2018, the day before Cork City was to host a dinner to mark the visit of Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, to the city's municipal art gallery, The Crawford Art Gallery. The menu was prepared by Ballymaloe and it had strong herb elements paired with local produce (see Figure 3). Head chef for the evening was Rory O'Connell and after the dinner he sent out a simple tweet, 'Think we did Cork and Mrs Allen proud tonight'.[35]

Notes

1. Detail and description of tarragon chicken taken from Myrtle Allen's 'Cookery: recipes for broiler chicken', *Irish Farmers Journal,* 19 February, 1966, p. 43.
2. The decision to use Myrtle's first name throughout this paper is a deliberate and considered choice of the author and the Allen family. It reflects the affection with which Myrtle Allen is held in Irish food and culinary communities, where she is widely known simply as Myrtle.
3. McKenna, J. and S., (@MMcKennasGuides, 13 June, 2018, 10:39 a.m.,). Tweet.
4. Allen, M., 'Notes on tastes and flavours in practical cookery', *p. 17* in *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery 1987, Taste*. Prospect Books, London, 1988, pp. 17-24.
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