

Malden Observer

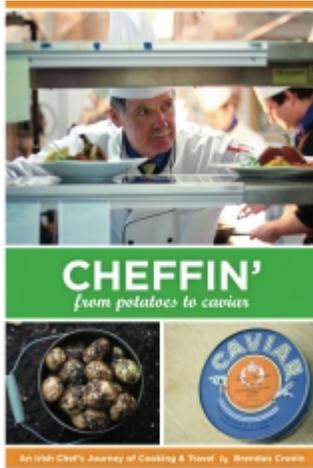
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KITCHEN CALL: Irish chef's life a recipe for memoir

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Wicked Local North of Boston

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North of Boston — A little over a year ago, Brendan Cronin was walking on the beach with his brother, Louis. The beach was on the west coast of Ireland where the Cronin boys were born.

Louis, speaking for himself and two more brothers, John and Fred, suddenly asked, “So Brendan, when are you goin’ to write that book?”

It was more of a challenge than a question. A book had always been in the brothers’ plan. It was, he decided, time to write.

Wearing a moss green turtleneck and tweed jacket, Cronin sat in the window of a waterfront restaurant on the North Shore of Boston last week. The Swiss Master Chef who teaches hospitality management at Endicott College worked every weekend for a year on this memoir with recipes about how he got from the west coast of Ireland to Massachusetts, “the first place where the natives understood about Ireland and about me.”

He held a proof copy of his book, turning it slowly as he recalled the search for a title.

When he left his parents’ dairy farm for his internship, the laborers there asked what he was going to do in the city. He replied he would work in a kitchen.

“Yes, but what will you be doing? A taxi driver drives, a painter paints. Will you be cheffin?” He’d had his title all along.

“Cheffin’ from potatoes to caviar” brims with a cast of characters he’s met in and out of hotel kitchens around the world including an Irish priest, a drifter from Munich, a bikini-clad dancer from a casino and a succession of colorful European chefs with the vocabulary to match in several languages.

The page-turner captures the often hilarious, sometimes dangerous, always informative action in the kitchens and on the streets, through a wild swing around the world from Dublin to Switzerland to Singapore.

From bouts with boiling water to waiters catching fire, events are described in rich detail, like “blue-arsed fly” and lyrical descriptions of hotel dining rooms.

And there's no stinting on chef's secrets like holding a knife properly, with fingers turned inward, to avoid being cut, or streetwise safety tips on the advisability of packing a gun on a dangerous road trip: "We have the dog and beer, so do not worry about guns."

The action is so visual and so compelling that movie rights have already been mentioned.

Besides his brothers, his entire family was involved in the production. Inspiration from his mother who recognized his talent and sent him away from the farm to pursue his future; cover photography by his daughter Shannon, a professional photographer; bi-coastal conferences with his son, a California culinary intern; and his wife, Christine, who provided his favorite chapter, the story of their first meeting in Switzerland.

The following recipes are adapted from "Cheffin': from potatoes to caviar" by Brendan Cronin, available this week, in electronic and print editions on Amazon.com.

AGNES CRONIN'S BROWN SODA BREAD

Makes a 9-inch round loaf

Cronin's mother still makes this recipe from memory every time. It fell to her son, the chef, to put it on paper. Some of the measurements might seem a little unusual, but Cronin swears by the results and still considers it the best soda bread.

2 teaspoons baking soda

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons butter

1-3/5 cups buttermilk

8 ounces white bread flour

8 ounces whole wheat flour

4 ounces raisins or 1 teaspoon caraway seeds, optional

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Flour a work surface.

2. In a bowl combine baking soda, baking powder, and salt. Rub in the butter with the fingertips until mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs.

3. Stir in buttermilk to form a dough. Turn dough onto the work surface; knead very briefly until dough holds together but remains tender. Shape into a round flat loaf about 2-inches thick. Cut an "X" in the top with a sharp knife; sprinkle with a small amount of flour.

4. Flour a baking sheet lightly. Transfer the loaf to the baking sheet; bake, approximately 50 minutes. Pick up the loaf from the baking sheet and knock on the bottom with knuckles, as Mrs. Cronin does. If it sounds hollow, the bread is ready.

GRILLED THAI BEEF SALAD

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Linda Bassett is the author of "From Apple Pie to Pad Thai: Neighborhood Cooking North of Boston." Reach her by e-mail at KitchenCall@aol.com. Follow Linda on Twitter @ Kitchen Call for a daily kitchen hint, trick, shortcut or info.