Episode Book

EPISODE #6227

Cork Chippers, Rooster Potatoes, and the Double Fry

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SYNOPSIS

Jackie Lennox's closed on Bandon Road after 73 years, and Cork has opinions. Plumber and Cork native Roy joins the show to explain what actually makes a proper chipper chip — the right potato, the double fry, beef dripping versus vegetable oil, and why a paper bag beats a polystyrene box. Along the way: the Italian families who built the Irish chipper, the science of cold-storage sugar in potatoes, and whether Heston Blumenthal's three-fry method deserves the fuss.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Sunday the sixth of October, two thousand twenty-four. Somewhere on Bandon Road in Cork, the last basket of chips comes out of the fryer at Jackie Lennox's, and after seventy-three years the oil goes cold.



Herman

Which is where Daniel's prompt starts, really. What the Irish chipper is as an institution, and what actually makes a great Cork chipper's chips so good, because plenty of people in Cork will tell you it isn't a matter of opinion.



Corn

They will tell you at length. Herman, you came back from your last trip to Cork with a very specific look in your eye, and I assume it's connected to this.



Herman

It's connected to a man. Roy is a plumber from Cork and a friend of mine. We met on that trip, we bonded over pints of Murphy's, and I have been waiting for an excuse to put him in front of a microphone. Roy, are you there?

R

Roy

I'm here, Herman. Howya, Corn. He never said a word about the sloth. A donkey and a sloth. Sure I thought he was winding me up on the phone.



Corn

Nobody believes it until the second minute. Roy, Murphy's, not Guinness?

R

Roy

Guinness is grand if you're stuck in Dublin. I'm not saying it's bad. I'm saying I'd let a man go thirsty before I'd hand him one in Cork.



Herman

He was very clear about that on the night. And he was even clearer about Lennox's.

R

Roy

I was in bits when it shut, lads. I'm not ashamed to say it. My father brought me there on a Friday when I was a young lad and I brought my own young lad. Seventy-three years, and one Sunday it's gone.



Corn

Herman came home from that trip with a new accent for about a week. It was awful.



Herman

It was a tribute, Corn. Roy, give us the story of the place.

R

Roy

Ah, I only know what everyone knows. Yer man Jackie was an Englishman.



Herman

English-born, a footballer turned fryer. He opened in nineteen fifty-one, the year he married Eileen, and it's described as the first purpose-built fish and chip shop in the country. The origin is slightly contested, mind you. Another version has the family running a restaurant in Cleveleys, near Blackpool, then coming home to Cork, where Jackie's father opened a cakes and pastries shop first, and it was a grandmother who suggested a chip pan.

R

Roy

Cakes! I never heard the cakes. Whatever way it started, it's a long way from a chip pan in a pastry shop to the queue on a Friday night.



Corn

A grandmother with a chip pan. Every great business has one of those, and none of them makes it into the deck.



Herman

The closing was announced on Monday the thirtieth of September, with the last day the Sunday after. Brian and Frances Lennox put out the announcement and spoke about time passing, though one account puts it down to struggling to find staff.

R

Roy

Staff. Ye couldn't make it up. A chipper that was there before half the country had a fridge, and it goes for want of lads to stand at the fryer.



Corn

Seventy-three years, and in the end it was a recruitment problem.



Herman

There's a lovely detail from the tributes. Dino Cregan, a big name in Cork chippers himself, said Jackie Lennox helped him open his first shop in the early seventies. He called the family a breed apart.

R

Roy

Dino's right. They were up at the crack of dawn, the whole family, living over the shop. You'd see the light on upstairs.



Corn

Before we get to the chips, is the chipper even Irish? Herman has the look of a donkey with a list of surnames.



Herman

I do, I do. The Irish chipper was built in large part by Italians, and a huge share of them came from one place. Casalattico, in the province of Frosinone, not far from Monte Cassino. Families like Borza, Cafolla, Fusco and Mizzoni. A lot of them came by way of Scotland and Britain, where earlier Italian migrants had moved from peddling and street music into fried fish. After the war it was chain migration. A cousin writes home, a village sends a teenager, and children as young as twelve were working the counter, fourteen and fifteen hour days.

R

Roy

Every town in Ireland had one. When I was a lad a chipper meant an Italian family and a counter and a smell you could find with your eyes shut.



Herman

Rocco Macari came over at seventeen, worked in Borza shops, and opened his own in Tallaght Village in nineteen seventy-two.



Corn

So the chipper is Irish, run by Italians, and the best one in Cork was started by an Englishman.

R

Roy

That's Cork for you. We take the best of everything and say we invented it.



Corn

We did the three-in-one already, the licensing laws and the late-night takeaway, so I'll leave the Irish takeaway as a social institution there. I want the chips.

R

Roy

Right so. Now listen, because this is what Lennox's did and what every good chipper does. A proper chipper chip is fat. Cut rough, not a matchstick. Crisp on the edge, soft as mashed potato in the middle, and it has to taste of potato. If it tastes of nothing, it's a fry from a van.



Herman

This is the part I find thrilling, because the potato is half of it. Roy, what's the right one in your book?

R

Roy

Rooster. Red skin, floury, Irish. A good chipper uses a Rooster or something like it, and a lad who says anything else is selling something.



Herman

Rooster is a lovely potato, and I'll be diplomatic, because it has a quirk. Its sugar means it tends to brown before it crisps. The UK favourite, Maris Piper, holds up to longer cooking. Dry matter is the whole game, somewhere around twenty-two percent, and a shift of half a point is visible. Too high and the outside goes tough and leathery, too low and the chip is bland.

R

Roy

Half a point. It's like a boiler, you can tell it's wrong before you can say why.



Corn

A Rooster that browns before it crisps is a Rooster I'd be asking questions of.

R

Roy

A good chipper knows his spuds, Corn. He'll tell you the season, he'll change the batch. You wouldn't get that from a freezer.



Herman

The seasons matter because of cold storage. Below about eight degrees Celsius, a potato turns starch into sugar, and sugar in a fryer means dark chips with a bitter edge. A Michigan State study in twenty eleven found a single protein that, when suppressed, stopped the sugars building up in the cold. So there's a genetic fix on the way, and there's also the old fix, which is a chipper that buys good potatoes at the right time and keeps them somewhere sensible.

R

Roy

Burnt on the outside, raw in the middle. I've seen chips like that. Dark as a brown boot and a bite of nothing inside.



Corn

And now it is time for another of our regular segments. Roy, brace yourself, it's my Mum.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it is me, your mother, with Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

Now then. The word toast comes from the Latin torrere, and that means to scorch or to parch.

D

Dorothy

Torrere. So even the name is about being burnt, sweetheart. Nothing ever just warms up nicely, does it. Anyway, I have put the kettle on, so I will let you get back to it. Bye now.



Herman

Always a delight to hear from your mother, Corn. Roy, you were on the dark chips. Bitter, brown, and the sugar's the culprit, which is a potato problem before it's a fryer problem.

R

Roy

It is. And the next thing is the fry. The double fry. Anyone who tells you a chipper does it once is codding you.



Herman

The reason is lovely. The first fry is gentle, drives moisture out and cooks the inside through. The second is hotter and boils the surface water off and builds the crust. Typical numbers are around a hundred and thirty to a hundred and fifty degrees for the first stage, then a hundred and seventy-five to a hundred and ninety to finish. That's typical rather than something anyone has measured in a particular chipper.

R

Roy

Same as flushing a heating system. You don't blast it first go. You bring it up in stages.



Corn

Roy, I'm not sure that's the same thing at all.

R

Roy

It's the same principle, Corn. Gentle first. Then you open her up.



Herman

The recovery matters too. Drop a basket of cold chips into hot oil and the temperature falls off a cliff. A fryer with plenty of power gets back up fast.

R

Roy

Like a hot water cylinder. Tiny element, big tank, and you've nothing but lukewarm. A good chipper has the power to recover and he doesn't overload the basket.



Corn

Then there's Heston Blumenthal, who cooks them three times. Simmer, fry at a hundred and thirty, cool them, fry again at a hundred and eighty. Glassy crust, fluffy middle.

R

Roy

Three times! Boy, that's a lad with too much time on his hands. Nobody in Cork ever had three goes at a chip. You'd have a riot.



Herman

The origin is argued over, and the glassy crust is the selling point. Blumenthal gets the credit and has called it the first dish he ever created. But somebody on a food forum has Joël Robuchon popularising it earlier, and I can't confirm that either way. Corn, would you wait for a glassy chip?



Corn

I'd wait for anything. Slowness is my whole career.

R

Roy

A chip is not a dish. A chip is a chip. Salt, vinegar, paper bag. I'll die on that.



Herman

Let me defend the paper bag on the science, because it's better than it looks. Most of the oil in a chip isn't absorbed while it's frying. Something like ninety-five percent goes in after the chip comes out, as the inside cools and the steam stops pushing back. A paper bag breathes. A closed box traps the steam, and steam softens a crust that took two fries to build. Corn, you've held a chip in a polystyrene box. Have you ever trusted one?



Corn

Never. It's a chip in a sauna.

R

Roy

That's why I won't take a chip in a tray with a lid. It's a crime. And the salt goes on after, the vinegar goes on after, and ye eat it walking.



Herman

Roy, salt and vinegar, in that order, and how heavy?

R

Roy

Salt first, vinegar after, and not a drop more than the bag can take. Too much vinegar and ye have a wet chip, and a wet chip is the one thing I can't forgive. It's like a bad join, Herman. Everything runs out the bottom.



Corn

A man who forgives a burst pipe and not a wet chip.

R

Roy

The pipe wasn't my fault.



Herman

Now the dripping question. Roy, I know you have views.

R

Roy

Dripping. Beef dripping. The only thing. Vegetable oil is what everyone went to about thirty years ago, and it was a loss of flavour, plain and simple.



Herman

That's roughly what an Irish food guide says. Chippers went to vegetable oil, lost flavour, and dripping is coming back, with Jackie Lennox's named among the ones using it. I can't swear to what was in the fryer on any given Friday. One English chef reckons dripping keeps a chip crisp for about fifteen minutes, against about five for vegetable oil.

R

Roy

Fifteen minutes! Sure that's the walk home from Bandon Road.



Herman

The downside is that it's messier, harder to clean, and one shop reckoned it costs about two and a half times the price. And somebody online claims a product sold as pure beef dripping lists rapeseed oil on the back.



Corn

A product called pure dripping with a seed oil in it. Cork would riot.

R

Roy

Cork would. I'd be on the phone to someone. And the oil, mind. A chipper that never changes his oil is a heating system nobody has flushed in ten years. Black sludge, and it comes out the other end into your dinner.



Herman

Old oil does break down, and it darkens the chips and gives them a flat, stale taste. How often a good chipper turns it over is a matter of the chipper's pride more than a number I can give you.

R

Roy

Pride, Herman. That's the whole trade.



Herman

Corn, do you take a side? Dripping or oil?



Corn

Dripping. Though I'd say that about anything slower and older.



Herman

I knew you'd say that.



Corn

You always know. It's why I never bother.



Herman

There's one more claim I want to put to you, Roy. A poster online says chips from Irish chippers are often soft and soggy and greasy compared with the crisp ones in Northern Ireland, and blames the Italian-run style, or a different method.

R

Roy

Ye can have that for free, Herman, and I'll pay the postage. Soggy. From a Cork chipper? I'd like to meet that fella.



Corn

Herman, do you buy it?



Herman

I'd be inclined to say it depends on which chipper and which Friday. A chipper who's rushed, with a full queue and an overloaded basket, will do it to anyone.

R

Roy

Now I have to tell ye about the real row. Lennox's against KC's.



Herman

KC's in Douglas, three generations of one family. A regional roundup in twenty fourteen called it a near toss-up and picked KC's chicken creole for the queue. An Irish Examiner reader vote put Lennox's top the year before it closed, though I've only seen that reported in snippets.

R

Roy

Lennox's. Full stop. KC's is great, I'll say that, my cousin swears by it, but Lennox's was the chip. KC's is more of a full dinner.



Corn

A man defending chicken creole against a chip is a man in trouble.

R

Roy

That's what I said! The creole isn't the point.



Herman

I understand the building has since gone to a fish and chip chain, Catch of the Day. I've only seen that in a search snippet, so don't hold me to it.

R

Roy

I heard that too. It's not the same. A chain is a chain.



Corn

We have another voice joining us, and I'll say it plainly, once. It's Daniel, in his own voice, and the voice is an AI clone of it. Daniel, you've been listening to the chip talk.



Daniel

I have. I grew up on proper Irish chips, and I live in Jerusalem now, where the chips are terrible. Soggy. Limp. Sad little sticks. And I have a theory, which is that they fry them in oil that's far too hot.



Corn

Hot oil makes a crisp chip, in my experience.



Daniel

That's what everyone says. And then they eat them and go, oh, that's great. They've no idea what they're talking about. They've never had a real one.

R

Roy

Hold on now, Daniel. Hot oil is not what makes a chip limp. Cold oil. Too many chips in the basket, the oil drops, the chip sits in it and drinks it. Greasy and limp.



Herman

That's the standard explanation. Overload the basket, the temperature plunges, the chip soaks up oil and comes out pale and limp. For the other end, Irish food safety advice is to keep frying below about one hundred and seventy-five degrees or as near to it as possible. I think Irish law actually caps it there.



Daniel

But that's what I'm saying. Too hot is a thing. If the oil is too hot, the outside goes dark and hard quickly and the middle is raw. Then you put that raw middle in a closed box. It steams. It goes limp. So I'm right.



Herman

That one is real, Daniel. The outside hardens early and blocks the heat getting to the middle, so you get a dark chip with a raw centre. The hot-oil case isn't made up.

R

Roy

Fair enough, but that's a burnt chip, Daniel. A burnt chip is a different animal. A limp chip is a cold-oil chip.



Daniel

Not always. They use frozen chips a lot. Par-fried in a factory, frozen, then fried again here. That chip has been cooked before it ever sees the oil, and I'm telling you, at the temperature they run it, it comes out dark outside and soft in the middle.

R

Roy

Frozen! Well, there's your answer. It's not the oil, it's the freezer.



Daniel

It could be both. I'm saying it could be both.



Corn

Daniel gets a point for the frozen chips and a point for the closed box. Roy gets a point for the cold oil.



Herman

And in the lab work I know, higher frying temperature tends to mean lower oil uptake. A Polish study at a hundred and fifty, a hundred and sixty-five and a hundred and eighty found the cooler oil put more fat into the chip. So heat isn't the villain in every case.



Daniel

See, that's the bit nobody tells you. Hotter, less oily. I'm at least half right. And what gets me is the nodding. I explain all this to somebody there, they nod, they say, oh yeah, great, and then they order the chips again. Nobody has ever asked them to care about the crust.

R

Roy

Bring them to Cork, Daniel. Stand them in a KC's queue on a Friday and they'd never look at a limp chip again.



Corn

Daniel, when you say limp, is it limp on the day, or limp by the time it's home?



Daniel

Limp by the time it's in my hands. I've watched it come out of the basket.



Herman

Then it's upstream of the box. A chip that's dark outside and underdone can look crisp for thirty seconds and be gone by the time it's bagged. That fits your theory, and the cold-oil theory fits it too, which is why this argument will never end.

R

Roy

Now I'll give ye something, Daniel. If the fryer is small and the queue is long, a lad will crank the thermostat to make up for the drop when the basket goes in. So he's running hot and he's overloading.



Daniel

So the oil's too hot and too cold. That's exactly what I've been saying.



Corn

It isn't, but I'll let you have it.



Herman

A fryer with a weak element and a hot dial can do both in a single batch. It starts too hot, drops when the basket goes in, and then clings to the wrong temperature. I can't tell you what any particular fryer in Jerusalem is doing.

R

Roy

You're not wrong, Daniel, and I'm not wrong. We're both wrong. It's the potato.



Daniel

It's always the potato?

R

Roy

It's always the potato. Rooster, Maris Piper, whatever. If the spud is wrong and the sugar's up, the oil can be bang on a hundred and seventy-five and you'll still have a sad chip.



Corn

Which means Jerusalem might be doing both. Wrong oil and wrong spud.



Daniel

I'll take that. I'm going to go and be upset about it somewhere else. You carry on.

R

Roy

I have to go as well, lads. A boiler in Ballincollig, and I'm told it can't wait. Herman, the next time you're in Cork, the first pint is yours.



Herman

Done. Thank you, Roy.



Hilbert

Herman, how long can a chip sit between the first fry and the second? I'm blanching on Thursday and finishing on Saturday. Thirty-litre fryer, four hundred and twelve euros, from a man in Kildare called Padraig Nolan.



Herman

Cooling a par-fried chip between the two stages is normal. Blumenthal does it, and it's what gives that glassy crust. Two days is long, and the surface will dry and the starch will set, but it can work.



Hilbert

It's guidance, Herman. Not a cap on the oil. Mr Furlong had me read it twice. He runs the Fats Registry, and anything resting between fries counts as a lodging. Six euros fifty a night, and the form wants a name for the chips. I put Gerald.



Corn

Why Gerald?



Hilbert

Regulations. Saturday I fry him again. Mine will be matte, Herman, I know you like glassy. Two nights is thirteen euros, and Mr Furlong rounds up.



Herman

The gap between the two fries is the part I'd never thought to price. Resting the chip is what lets the crust build, and if the rest gets longer, the crust changes.



Corn

Which is a long way of saying the chip needs a nap. I approve.



Herman

So what makes the Cork chip? A floury potato that hasn't been left in the cold, a first fry that cooks the middle, a hotter second that builds the crust, oil that doesn't drop when the basket goes in. Dripping if you can get it, paper to breathe through.



Corn

And a family willing to stand over it every day for seventy-three years, which you can't buy. Whatever Gerald does on Saturday, it's the gap between the fries I'll be thinking about now. Six euros fifty a night is a lot for a rest.



Herman

Thank you to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, for everything he does behind the desk.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want more of us, you can find the whole archive at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you tomorrow.