

Bannocks – the crofters' daily bread

*"In Scotland, amongst the rural population generally, the girdle takes the place of the oven, the bannock of the loaf." F. Marian McNeill, **The Scots Kitchen***



The griddle or girdle, along with the large black pot, suspended over the peat fire, was the focus of food preparation in the croft house.

*The bannock, from the Gaelic **bonnach** - a cake or bannock, is a flat cake of beremeal, barley flour, oatmeal, rye or peasemeal, baked on the girdle.*

***Farl** is the shape of the triangle formed by cutting a round of bannock, oatcake or scone.*

***Bere, or six-row landrace barley**, has been grown in Orkney, Shetland and the north Highlands for thousands of years, both for human and animal food. In the old days, it was called Bygg, and this is still the name given to barley in Norway. Although we call the grain bere, the crop is usually called corn in Orkney. It has been the staff of life in Scotland, in the form of **beremeal bannocks** since time immemorial.*



This recipe is given to us by food writer and product consultant Liz Ashworth, and is based on recipes still in use in Orkney, where bere is milled at Barony Mills in Dounby. Plain wheat flour is added to make a bannock adapted to the contemporary palate. It can be made with 100% beremeal.

Beremeal bannocks

Ingredients:

400g beremeal (including freshly-ground if possible)

200g plain wheat flour

Pinch salt

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

Buttermilk or milk to make a soft dough (if milk is used instead of buttermilk, replace bicarbonate of soda by 3 teaspoons of baking powder)



Method:

- Mix dry ingredients together well
- Add enough milk or buttermilk to make a soft dough
- Knead gently and divide into fist-sized balls of dough
- Shape each piece by hand into a flat round, about 0.5cm thick
- Heat a griddle or thick bottomed omelette pan, greasing with a little oil if necessary
- Cook the bannocks on one side for 3-5 minutes
- After a few minutes cooking on first side, make cuts through to the middle of the bannock to make 4 or 6 even shaped farls as illustrated
- Turn and cook the other side, the bannock can now be split by hand into farls or served whole.

You will notice the bannock rising as it cooks. You can tell it is ready if it sounds hollow when tapped. Wrap in a cloth to keep warm and soft. Serve with butter and crowdie or jam. Rhubarb jam is the favourite in Orkney, where these bannocks are still much enjoyed as part of the traditional Orkney tea.



Aran Eòrna

This is the Gaelic name for barley bannocks from the Western Isles, which were still made regularly in living memory. There is a short history of Garrabost Mill in the Isle of Lewis in the link below. It includes interesting information on yield of meal from grains, the different stages in the milling process (with useful Gaelic vocabulary) and some technical data about the mill.

<http://www.pointonline.co.uk/documents/Garamealmill.pdf>

Shetland Bannocks

In Shetland, bannocks are still made on crofts using white flour and locally produced buttermilk from Shetland Dairies.

Floory Bannocks

Cook on a dry girdle or a thick bottomed frying pan over a medium heat.

Takes 10 minutes to mix and about the same to bake

Ingredients

500g plain flour

½ teaspoon salt

2 level teaspoons bicarbonate of soda

4 level teaspoons cream of tartar

Approx. 300mls (1/2pt) milk (if using buttermilk reduce cream of tartar to 2 teaspoons)

Method

- Put the girdle or frying pan to heat at medium.
- Sieve all the dry ingredients together, stir in enough milk to make a soft, elastic dough. Divide the dough into three pieces.
- Turn onto a floured board, dust with flour and roll out thinly into rounds. Cut each into four farls.
- Cook on the heated girdle allowing 3 to 4 minutes on each side.
- Cool wrapped in a tea towel on a wire rack and eat fresh and warm with butter, cheese or jam.

For more information on bannocks, see:

F. Marian MacNeill: ***The Scots Kitchen***, first published in 1929, celebrates old recipes and customs providing a social history of northern domestic life. The recent edition published in 2010 is edited by Catherin Brown who also wrote the forward.

Ruth B. Stout: ***Cookery for Northern Wives*** first published in 1925 by T. & J. Manson. The new edition published by SHETLAND Heritage Publications is a facsimile of the first edition; the only additions are a foreword by Stout family member Margaret Stuart and a preface by Scottish food historian Marion McNeill, which was included in a revised edition of the book titled *The Shetland Cookery Book*.

Catherine Brown: ***Broths to Bannocks: Cooking in Scotland 1690 to the Present Day*** charts the history of cooking and food in Scotland from the late 17th century to the present day.

Liz Ashworth: ***Teach the Bairns to Bake: Traditional Scottish Baking for Beginners*** first published in 1999 but currently out of print, available second hand. Suitable for age 9 and upwards. Also ***Orkney Spirit***, published 2010, provides stories of Orkney people and food.

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