

# The Spice Bag

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*This episode is about a dish that's become, in its own way, emblematic of at least one strand of Irish food: the spice bag. What is a spice bag?*

**John Mulcahy:** Well, a spice bag is, I suppose, a 21st century Irish dish which is made up of crispy chicken, onions or scallions — scallion, of course, is a spring onion, depending on where you reside in this world — red and green peppers, chilli peppers and chips, what we call chips in Ireland and what might be called French fries in the States.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, except they're nice and big. Slightly soggy.

**Jeremy:** So where do the spices fit in?

**John:** Well, the spices fit it in because it originated originally in a Chinese takeaway, what we call a Chinese takeaway. So this is a Chinese restaurant that do hot food to take home, and these days probably is delivered to you, and ... It actually came before that, because up to that point we've ... We love our chips, which we call a single. And you would go to a chipper and ask for a one and one. So a single, and a one and one is a fish and chips. In the early 2000, late 1990s, you'd also have a three in one, where somebody would go into a chipper and ask for chips and rice and curry sauce and have it all mixed up in the same bag, and you'd eat that on your way home or when you got home. So the three in one. Then what the Chinese restaurant did was, they took that idea of mixing rice, chips and curry and then, well, how can we innovate in that? Or how can we make that more? Or how can we make that more interesting? And the spice bag emerged out of that. So they put in their own spices. They put in maybe some vegetables that were cheap to get, like red peppers or green peppers and some meat to bulk it out. And you have a spice bag.

**Jeremy:** And can you trace that to a single Chinese restaurant that actually kind of invented the spice bag?

**John:** Well, this is not definitive because there's a lot ... Of course, everybody now that it is so well known, everybody wants to claim ownership of it. But our national radio channel here in Ireland, RTE, they did a radio programme and they did the research on it, and they interviewed people that were working in the Sunflower Chinese Restaurant in Templeogue in County Dublin. It's a suburb of south County Dublin. And they traced it back to 2008, 2009. And what it was was, they were they were working in the chipper all day. At the end of the day, they wanted something other than just fish and chips, because they'd been serving it all day, and they started playing around with stuff and they came up with this. And of course, then somebody liked it. And would you make one for me? And the usual story. It grew legs from there. So it seems to have come from around 2008, 2009. And this is based on a radio program which is still in the archives. People can go and listen to it.

**Jeremy:** How did it spread then? I mean, I've never had one. Let's go back. I've never had one. You have, I presume. Are they good?

**John:** Um, well, being a foodie, I suppose it's fast food. And, you know, the skin kind of crawls up the back of my neck about the idea of having fast food. But, you know, even if you're a little bit snobbish about food, I suppose you know this does taste nice, especially after you've been in the pub and had a few pints.

**Jeremy:** I was going to say, it sounds like the kind of thing on the way home from a night in the pub.

**John:** Oh, absolutely. And especially in a cold, dark October evening. You'd ... It is grist to the mill. Definitely. You'd enjoy it.

**Jeremy:** Okay. So how did it spread from the Sunflower restaurant. Do we know?

**John:** Well, we don't know, really. But, you know, in the whole fast food business or in takeaway business, they're always watching each other. And, of course, they're run by immigrant communities. So, you know, a lot of the Chinese know, know each other. Similarly with the Italians, they all know each other. The Italians in Ireland tend to run the chippers. And so, you know, if they see one is doing it, the other was going to do it. And next minute it goes from there. I mean, over the past two decades, it has grown, but then the variations have emerged as well.

**Jeremy:** So it's evolved?

**John:** Oh yeah, it's absolutely evolved. But it's gone regional. So for instance, you have Dublin chains of chippers or takeaways doing spice bags with Indian flavours. Down in County Waterford, which is very much a fish area, they do fish and chip shops where the dish comes with fried fish, not with fried chicken. Or you have fried chicken burgers with spice bag inspired flavourings in supermarkets. So it's ... Within Ireland, it has morphed and innovated and adjusted to wherever it finds itself, as food usually does.

**Jeremy:** But food also travels abroad. And there are big Irish communities abroad, not just in England, but ... So has the spice bag moved where the Irish are as well?

**John:** It has most definitely. There's one particular company, they've made such a hit with it, the Financial Times covered it about a year ago. I think it was. But a company called Emerald Eats went over, they were over there, and they were running a food stall, a food truck, and they were getting asked by Irish, young Irish people that are working in London, that they wanted a taste of Ireland, especially if they were out for a couple of pints or whatever. And this food truck started doing it and it has been a runaway success. And of course, it's linked with this whole idea that Guinness has become so iconic now in London as well, that it is a natural joining up, if you like.

**Jeremy:** But it's an interesting progression, that a food created by an immigrant community in Ireland then becomes so closely identified with Ireland that it travels with the Irish to London. And I heard from one of your colleagues, there's a company in New York doing spice bags now. The sort of assimilation and yet remaining ... It's a fascinating kind of microcosm, almost, of how food develops.

**John:** Absolutely I agree. And my background is in food tourism. And I think it's a fascinating flip on food tourism, where people travel to a country to eat the food of that country while they're there. In this case, the food has traveled to the source country, and you don't even have to leave the UK now, but you can go and get your spice bags. And you're quite correct. There's now spice bags available in LA, in Texas, in Chicago, in New York. I mean, this thing has really traveled exponentially. Really.

**Jeremy:** And how long before it's not even Irish anymore?

**John:** Well, I ... Somehow it's become Irish, and I'm not sure how, but it's maybe it's because of our drink culture that it's associated with that. But I think it's iconic of the way a cuisine can evolve. You know, Irish cuisine is no longer about Irish stew and Irish coffee and potatoes. It's a much wider thing. And what's happening is that the new Irish, all of the immigrants that are coming in now are taking it and are proudly, in their view, taking a dish that they see as Irish and then, if you like, naturalising it into, or giving it the flavour of something that they remember from their homeland. So it's a gorgeous joining of this. And there's a lovely example of this, of a very young immigrant, a young lady, 25 years old. She couldn't get Nigerian food anywhere in Ireland, in Dublin. And so she has done an Afro-fusion takeaway called Aduni in Crumlin, another suburb in Dublin. And it's a Nigerian inspired version with extra Nigerian spices. But it's made with three kinds of chips, not just potatoes. She uses plantain, yam and potatoes. She still uses a crispy chicken and onions and peppers. And of course the difference is the Nigerian spices and there are queues out the door.

**Jeremy:** One of the funny things is, if you if you go down in Dublin, if you go to Temple Bar, for example, like many, many cities, you'll see a group of food tourists going by and they're trying, you know, they're having a half a Guinness here and a boxty there and whatever it might be. Is anybody doing a tour of the ethnic spice bags of Dublin? I mean, you could do. As you said, you've got Indian, you've got Thai, you've got the original Chinese, you've got Nigerian. Now somebody must be putting together a food tour of spice bags.

**John:** Not that I'm aware of, Jeremy. It's a great question and I'd be surprised if it doesn't happen soon. But there ... I would imagine if there's an Irish person doing Irish tours, there's a cultural resistance to admitting that we have this fusion food, probably. And there seems, I as somebody that's been in food tourism, I would say there's probably a loyalty to present the food that the tourist expects rather than what is actually happening on the ground now. So I think there's always a delay. There's a lag time between ... It's like haute couture or fashion. It takes time for the innovative stuff to come off the street and into the showrooms. And I think this food is very similar to this. But one thing has happened, I think, that's going to drive this, is that the Oxford English Dictionary actually recognised spice bag as a word in in 2025, and they did a press release on it and so on. But somehow, in their ... If you look up the OED online, somehow they've brought

in, they say that it's an Irish creation inspired by Chinese cuisine with Mexican and Indian elements that all somehow work together to form a delicious whole: the spice bag. End of quote. Quite where they got the Mexican bit, I'm not sure. So it's growing legs.

**Jeremy:** It's growing legs and it's going places.

**John:** Yes. Very definitely. I mean, it's one of a number of what I would call young people's food. Gen-Xers food. So there's a chicken fillet roll. There's the spice bag, there's the three in one, and there's a number of these things that are out there bubbling away, and they're coming to the surface.

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