

 parents

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January Can Be A Bleak Month, So Our Family Threw A Party

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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January in Canada is cold and dark.

Like many (<https://www.gawker.com/news/january-and-february-need-decorations>), our family is always looking for an excuse to party in the winter.

Robert Burns Day, or "Robbie Burns Day" felt like a great opportunity for revelry.

The day is a celebration of the birth of the 18th century Scots poet and it happens every January 25. And this year I decided to prepare a traditional Burns supper to join in on the fun and celebrate our family's Scottish heritage.

Joseph Wilson likes to involve his kids in many ways. By having them help prepare dinner, he is teaching them that it doesn't just magically appear.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/let-kids-in-on-cooking-because-dinner-doesnt-just-magically-appear>)

Piping In The Guests

Usually when I call the kids for dinner, they tumble down the stairs like a mudslide. But this time I made them wait in the hallway until the bagpipes started. My wife is not what you might call a “fan” of bagpipes, but she stifled her giggles and joined the procession into the dining room.

After the bagpipes, I read the *Selkirk Grace*, something not written by Burns but purportedly read by him at a dinner hosted by the Earl of Selkirk. It reads:

*Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it,
But we hae meat and we can eat,
Sae let the Lord be Thankit!*

Everyone looked a little stunned. (Maybe it was my bad Scottish accent.)

So I laid it out more clearly. “We have meat and we can eat!” I said, pointing to the first course.

Smiles and nods all around.

Here is the night's menu:

Cock-A-Leekie Soup

Chicken soup is a safe bet for an opener. It's also a nice way to introduce the Scots language to the children, which I needed to translate to their mother tongue, French. “This one's called cock-a-leekie soup,” I said.

Giggles all around.

“What does ‘cock’ (*coq*) mean?” I asked.

“Chicken?” they offered.

“What does ‘cock’ (*coq*) mean?”

Technically it's rooster but I don't think there are any male birds in the soup so I didn't correct them.

“Exactly. And ‘leek?’”

Blank stares. My wife had to translate this (*poireau*), but by this point they were at the bottom of their bowls.

“That was good. What's next?” they asked with enthusiasm.

The next course would be a harder sell.

Haggis With Whisky Cream Sauce

“It's like a giant sausage,” I say by way of introduction.

They are pumped to see what they take to be a five-pound hot dog. The haggis is a mixture of “lamb offal” (that is to say, organs like kidney, heart and liver, but not lung, which is illegal to eat in Canada), oatmeal, onions and spices all stuffed into a sheep’s stomach.

The haggis is basically the guest of honour at a Burns Supper and as such is “piped in” just like the guests and takes up its position at the head of the table. Then I speak to it, reciting Burns’ famous *Address to a Haggis*.

*His knife see rustic Labour dight,
An’ cut you up wi’ ready sleight,
Trenching your gushing entrails bright,
Like onie ditch;
And then, O what a glorious sight,
Warm-reekin’, rich!*

I stabbed it with a kitchen knife and the innards oozed out.



The kids exclaimed, “Yum!”

Maria (5) and Elizabeth (8) didn’t like it (“too spicy”), but Sonia (10) went back for seconds and mixed it with her “neeps and tatties” (mashed turnips and potatoes) with gusto.

Sticky Toffee Pudding

Where this dessert was invented is one of the many things the Scottish and the English disagree on. But can we agree that it’s delicious? This was the biggest hit of the night with the kids.

“It’s really sweet,” says Elizabeth.

Usually dessert consists of a bowl of fruit, so this blew their minds.

Joseph Wilson doesn't just let his kids help in the kitchen. They also help with home renovation projects.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/drywall-projects-with-daughters>)

Scotch

This next course was for the adults.

The children wanted to smell it so we let them each take a whiff.

Elizabeth shrugged and said, “not bad.” Sonia, meanwhile, almost fell off her chair.

Maria's nose wrinkled and she said flatly: “it smells like a pharmacy.”

Sonia tried to sound out the label: “ow-shen-to-shan.”



“Close,” I said, explaining, in French, that some people in Scotland speak Scottish Gaelic (the label reads “Auchentoshan” which means “corner of the field”). I added that Burns wrote in Scots, which is similar to English but is often claimed to be a separate language. Really, she just wanted more pudding.

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I showed them on a map where the scotch was made (Clydebank, on the outskirts of Glasgow), just down the road from where my great-grandfather was born in 1867.

“Where’s our cottage?” asked Maria.



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Our cottage, for the record, was not that hard it is for a five-year-old. After the meal, it was time for bed. I put on some traditional Scottish bagpipes. They got a kick out of learning to play highland dancing when we were kids. We watched videos of the Sword Dance on YouTube where dancers leap around two crossed swords on the ground without touching them.



Sometimes I forget how pronounced kay-lee), so I took lessons in Scottish

Maria got a little scared, though. “Is she going to cut her feet?”

“No, they’re not real swords,” I explained. “And they’re flat on the ground,” I said, appealing to a butter knife lying on the table.

She still looked worried, so I took her to bed.

Later, I sneaked some sticks of dynamite under the door for the next day as a reminder of what they can do. I told her to tell their friends about the bagpipes, the poems, and the pudding. Of course — the glorious



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