

## Research Note

### The Liminalities of Scones: Comfort Food, the Pandemic, and Other Excuses for Indulgence

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**Abstract:** The authors explore their relationship to the scone, a ubiquitous baked good found in Ireland and the United Kingdom. By reflecting on times of being together in Ireland and the important role that scones have played during their times together, the authors consider the multi-layered liminality of consuming scones. They have played a role in culinary tourism, comfort foodways, formal teas and informal consumption in the home. They also consider how COVID-19 has impacted their perception of scones and the social contexts in which they are consumed.

**Keywords:** baking, comfort food, culinary tourism, foodways, Ireland

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of liminality—a “betwixt and between” time in which the future was uncertain and the usual rules for living were suspended (Turner 1967: 97).<sup>1</sup> Some of those rules were connected to food—what we ate, how much of it, when, and why. This meant that calories did not seem to matter, nor did “unhealthy” amounts of carbohydrates, sugar, salt, and fats—all characteristics of what has come to be called comfort food.

This category in the U.S is more than simply food that brings comfort (Jones 2017, Jones and Long 2017). It is a rhetorical strategy that can be used to justify consumption that would otherwise have moralities attached to it. This consumption is closely tied to feelings of shame—shame over the apparent lack of self-control and discipline in indulging in the “pleasures of the flesh.”<sup>2</sup> It is also liminal in that it is supposed to be temporary, occurring only in times of stress, emotional need, or depression, and is meant to aid a return to the assumed, albeit idealized, norm of cheerful, energetic, upbeat life (Long 2017, 2022, Long, et al. 2021).

It is possible, though, for a food to be consumed within a number of liminalities, not all of which are tied to the idea of shame. These layers add complexity to the idea of comfort food, drawing upon food’s potential to carry multiple meanings. We explore this idea here by considering our experiences of scones in Ireland as comfort food during the pandemic. We found that as the pandemic continued, other liminalities came into play—culinary tourism, family reunions, holiday celebrations—all of which gave permission to indulge in these sweet pastries that were slathered with butter, clotted cream, and jam. We present this as a reflection and photo essay, rather than a research article, and use our experiences to muse on the power of food to comfort in a multiplicity of ways.



Figure 1. Scones in a petrol station, Cork, Ireland, November 2022. Photograph by Lucy Long.

Scones in Ireland and the British Isles, where they originated, are similar in shape and texture to what Americans call biscuits. They are round, cut from rolled dough, then baked until they are lightly browned with a flaky texture. Basic ingredients are wheat flour, sugar, butter, eggs, and cream or milk, with baking powder as the rising agent.<sup>3</sup> White flour is standard, but whole wheat (called “whole meal” in Ireland) is also common. They might have sugar sprinkled on top or an egg wash, but not always. Varieties include “plain,” with no additions to the dough, while currant and fruit scones include dried currants or currants and other dried fruits (Raisins replace currants in the U.S.). Scones come in different sizes with smaller, daintier ones generally used for formal teas, but the size of scone one purchases is also personal preference.



Figure 2. Scone at “tea” in hotel restaurant, Limerick, Ireland, November 2022. Photograph by the authors.



Aside from the imagery of scones from literature and films, our actual relationship with them began years before the pandemic in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s when we lived in the town of Bangor in County Down for a year. Hannah was nine months old when we moved there and was the reason for attending “Mums and Tots” groups held weekly throughout the city. These were sponsored by different churches, and we did the rounds, attending Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Anglican ones, crisscrossing what the Northern Irish call sectarian divides. Tea and scones were the standard refreshment. The tea was always served with the milk poured in first, and digestive biscuits (similar to thick graham crackers) or other sweet choices were offered to the children.

This was Lucy’s introduction to scones, and they immediately became a comfort food, associated with respite and camaraderie. She also found it comforting to meet with friends at a bakery café for tea and scones, especially on rainy days, and visits in homes almost always included an offer of tea and scones. These were usually served for the mid-morning break, “elevenses,” as well as in the afternoon for “tea.”<sup>4</sup> These contexts left tasty and fond memories, so that she felt nostalgia through them for both the time and place.

When Hannah moved to Limerick in the Republic of Ireland in 2015 to attend graduate school, she did not have the same memories of scones, but had associations of them with proper British teas as described in Victorian literature or shown in television series like *Downton Abbey*. Also, as a student on a tight budget, she did not make them part of her experience there. Lucy visited her in 2018, and one of the first things we did was go out for tea and scones. This became a tradition. It would be a time for us to catch up as well as rest from the walk into town or to the university. It became an occasion, a ritual, set apart from the store-bought scones that we purchased to eat at home.



Figure 5. Bin of scones in supermarket, Westport, Ireland, November 2022. Photograph by Lucy Long.

The pandemic put a temporary stop to travel and to our scone tradition. As soon as we were able to, we resumed it. By the fall of 2022, the pandemic seemed to be receding, or at least under control with vaccines and scientifically established treatments. Travel was possible, but restrictions were still in place. In October of 2021, Lucy visited again for the first time since COVID restrictions were put in place. It had not really been that long since we had seen each other in early January of 2020, but the pandemic gave us a sense of both timelessness and urgency—everything had changed, but nothing had actually happened since people couldn't go anywhere. We bought scones at the local Dunne's supermarket, but also had tea and scones every chance we had. One of those was a bike ride along the greenway from Waterford to Dungarvan on the southern coast. The bike ride itself was a new experience as well as a special occasion, so it made sense to mark it with tea and scones at an outdoor café in the slightly chilly autumn weather.



*Figure 6. Scones, outdoor café, Waterford, Ireland, October 2021. Photograph by the authors.*

Another memorable occasion for scones during this visit was while touring Newgrange, a 5200-year-old burial site north of Dublin. We were all tourists in that space, voyeurs of another time. The excellent tea and scones served in the café of the visitor's center grounded us in their familiarity, but were also permitted as an indulgence by the liminality of being tourists. The pandemic was still very present, with social distance protocols and mask requirements in place, so this also felt like the beginning of a return to normalcy.



Figure 7. Scones and tea, Newgrange, Ireland, October 2021. Photograph by the authors.

In the spring of 2022, Lucy was able to return to Ireland with the excuse of attending two conferences on food studies, the first in Belfast, and the second in Dublin. Testing for COVID-19 was required for airline travel, and masks were required in most places, but there was a palpable feeling of relief from the pandemic. We celebrated the first visit by going for tea and scones at a local hotel restaurant. This was a fancier and more formal venue than usual, but it felt like a special occasion, both a reunion and a sense of safety in now eating in public spaces that was not there in the previous visit.

After that initial occasion, scones did not play as large a part in these visits, partly because of the need to focus on preparing for the conferences. Also, Lucy was involved in research on soda bread as culinary heritage, so that tended to be the emphasis of our forays in culinary tourism. We did, however, enjoy tea and scones on several other occasions when we had time to sit and relax, most notably, after touring the *Book of Kells* at Trinity College in Dublin, before Lucy went off to her conference and Hannah returned to Limerick. Somehow, scones and tea seemed like the appropriate response to this most Irish of exhibits, but it also framed the occasion as a farewell, bringing comfort in spite of the coming separation.

The most recent experience of scones occurred in November of 2022. A birthday and soda bread research was the excuse for the visit, but we also planned to attend a tea at a downtown restaurant. These teas require reservations and are quite expensive; definitely framed as special occasions. A tier of sandwiches, pastries, and finger foods are served. Scones were also served, but were smaller than usual. The sandwiches, similarly, were the small dainty kind, made of white bread with the crusts cut off that are known in the U.S. as “tea sandwiches.”



*Figure 8. Scones at “tea” in hotel restaurant in Limerick, Nov. 2022. Photograph by the authors.*

The occasion was both a celebration for Hannah and an exploration in culinary tourism to see what these highly advertised events actually were. We also were thinking of scones in terms of liminality for this essay, but were more aware of the consequences of indulging in these comfort foods. After Lucy’s last trip to Ireland, she had had to purchase clothes a size larger! We were very cognizant of that previous result of prior visits and did not purchase any scones to take home as we had in the past. Even so, we did take advantage of several more opportunities for enjoying them, all of which were special occasions. That included a visit to a new bakery-café in Limerick specializing in soda bread. Also, Lucy had tea and scones while visiting friends in Westport and Achill Island on the west coast of Ireland and popular tourist destinations.

Scones, during this most recent trip, did not seem as special as before. The occasions for consuming them still were, but the visit itself was less of a vacation—and therefore more liminal—than a research trip. Also, we were all working during the visit and could not take time off like we had done in the past. Ireland, itself, was starting to feel more familiar and less liminal to Lucy, while it was simply “home” for Hannah. Being there, then, was no longer an occasion—a justification—for eating something laden with calories. We also wondered if our tastes had changed, perhaps become more refined, since most of the scones we had seemed ordinary, unlike the delightful and somewhat novel indulgence of the past. They still provided comfort, but that comfort was more in the rituals around consuming them than in the pastry itself.



Figure 9. Scone, Sodalicious bakery-café, Limerick, Ireland, November 2022. Photograph by the authors.

This account of our experiences with scones suggests that a number of liminalities can intersect through one food. In this example, those include the COVID-19 pandemic, culinary tourism, visiting family, and even scholarly research. Scones were also the centerpiece of “going out for tea,” a ritual that in itself was a liminal break during normal routine activities. Our “journey” through the pandemic highlighted those different liminalities and added layers of meanings to them.

It also shifted our relationship with scones. They still potentially offered us comfort in the numerous memories they carry for us, but comfort itself no longer seems to be needed in the same way. People are still getting sick with COVID-19, but most cases seem to be mild. Life, for the most part, has returned to normal, and the liminality of the pandemic can no longer be justification for consuming too much of something that can have negative health impacts or for spending money unnecessarily for special occasions out.

This normalcy, however, feels different from the one before the pandemic. We see a continued sense of precarity, a recognition that we never really know what the future has in store and that all the planning we do for it can be erased by forces larger than ourselves. It makes sense, therefore, to emphasize living in the present, doing the things now that have been put off for the future, or pushed aside as impractical, too expensive, or inconvenient. We see this in the popularity of “revenge tourism,” of fulfilling one’s “bucket list,” of a renewed consumerism. After all, why save for tomorrow when tomorrow might never come?

Among these new rules seems to be ones around food and eating. Bread has returned to the American diet after being shunned for its carbohydrates prior to the pandemic (Long and Vaughan 2023). Dining out at restaurants also seems to have become extremely popular, as is culinary tourism and travel, in general. This new normalcy may also have changed the role of shame in comfort food, loosening the morality that was previously attached (Long 2022).

Did shame around eating return with the end of the liminality of the pandemic? For us, not really, but concern for health did. We (Lucy, in particular) had experienced the consequences previously of too many scones, but we also did not feel the need to

indulge. By the latest visit, the various liminalities represented in scones had all come to feel like everyday life. Although we recognize that frequent trips to Ireland would not be the norm for many Americans, adult children frequently move far away from parents. Scones still carry for us a treasure house of memories and meanings, but they had now shifted primarily to a treat for ritual eating marking special occasions, rather than comfort during pandemic times.



*Figure 10. Plain, fruit, and currant scones, bakery, Limerick, November 2022. Photograph by the authors.*

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of liminality originated with Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960) to describe the condition in a rite of passage between the old and new states of being.

<sup>2</sup> Shame is recognized by scholars as a culturally-constructed emotion linked to the socialization process, that it surrounds different things in different groups and that it is intentionally used to encourage conformity to that group's values. See Norbert Elias, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Recipes for scones are prolific on the Internet, and many of these differentiate between the cake-like American ones and the Irish-British ones. One that we like is from the Kerrygold butter company (<https://www.kerrygoldusa.com/recipes/irish-scones/>). Also see: <https://barefootcontessa.com/recipes/irish-scones>. Notice that both websites specify Irish scones. Some claim that they have less sugar than English ones.

<sup>4</sup> Coffee and muffins tended to be served in the morning for and muffins were being marketed as American and healthier than scones.)

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