

In Ireland, “from field to fork” means “field to butter knife”

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - July 2026

The American writer known as Mark Twain once famously said that he would “rather have one hundred enemies than one friend who would butter me up.”

Butter me up? Try to imagine explaining that idiom to someone just learning to speak English.

According to the erudite Dr. Google, the expression comes from an ancient practice in India of throwing butter balls at images of the gods to curry (pun intended) favour. We’re unsure as to how being pelted with butter would put a god in the mood to spread joy, despite Julia Child’s claim that “with enough butter, anything is good.”

Thinking about butter must inevitably recall the land of our ancestors. A wise man once said that, if butter had a citizenship, it would carry an Irish passport. Irish butter is generally considered to be the world’s best. Cows fed on grass produce a richer, creamier taste than grain-fed cows. The lush, green grass of Ireland – the first, striking sight of the country noticed by arriving air travellers – is the reason why butter is, by far, Ireland’s largest export. The country’s mild, often wet climate allows cows to graze outdoors for most of the year.

We love Irish butter, but don’t get us wrong. We are dedicated “Buy Canadian” advocates. CUSMA (Canada-US-Mexico Agreement) negotiations are underway, and the issue of Canada’s protective tariffs on American dairy products has long been a thorn in the side of American farmers. In the wake of America’s economic war on its long-time ally and northern neighbour, we’d view the purchase of American butter, even if less expensive, to be a form of treason.

For the past year, Canada’s reaction to America’s economic attack has been “Keep calm and Carney-on.” The PM has been busy opening new markets and finding new trading partners for Canada. Ireland currently enjoys a somewhat lopsided trade surplus with us, with imports of some \$900 million against nearly \$4 billion in exports. Pharmaceuticals make up roughly half of Irish exports to Canada.

Nowhere among those exports will you find even one brick of Kerrygold, the golden-coloured, beta-carotene-rich butter from County Cork. We’re hoping that will change. Some four and a half million Canadians claim Irish heritage, making us part of one of this country’s largest cultural groups. Why shouldn’t Canadians be able to pay a little more now and again to buy a brick of the world’s best butter? Its nutty, “more-buttery” taste disguises the fact that Irish butter is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin A and vitamin K2 (for bone, dental and cardiovascular health).

Kerrygold is exported to countries around the world, to the tune of \$2 billion annually. Great butter is so identified with Ireland that the country is the only one in the world with a butter museum. One notable exhibit is a container of medieval “bog butter”. It was preserved in a peat bog for a millennium. Archaeologists believe that burying butter to preserve and flavour it was common in the ancient world. Butter can be traced as far back as Mesopotamian and Sumerian times and has been churned in Ireland for at least 2000 years.

Ireland’s “Golden Glory” has been much celebrated in print.

The Country Cooking of Ireland (2009) had this to say:

“In a country whose traditional diet is bread and potatoes, butter isn’t just a nicety; it’s a condiment as essential as salt.”

British food historian C. Anne Wilson has written that the Irish were sometimes known to salt a brick of butter and dredge it in oatmeal, then roast it like meat, serving it sliced.

Clodagh McKenna, chef and author of Clodagh’s Happy Cooking, has this tip about preparing scrambled eggs: “Just before the eggs are fully cooked, pull them off the heat and stir in cold butter. It creates the creamiest, most luxurious scrambled eggs”.

Canadian, or hopefully someday, Irish butter will always be a part of our scrambled eggs.

American butter? Never.