

Ballymaloe Eggs Benedict

This recipe is a combination of two forgotten skills: poaching eggs and making Hollandaise sauce (which also involves eggs). It is the perfect breakfast for a lazy weekend.

Serves 4 (or 2 if very hungry)

Hollandaise Sauce (see recipe)

4 organic eggs

4 slices good sourdough bread or 2 English muffins or 2 bagels

butter

4 slices homecooked ham or 8 good bacon rashers, cooked

First, make the Hollandaise sauce (see below) and keep it warm.

Poach the eggs.

Bring a small saucepan of water to the boil. Reduce the heat, swirl the water, crack the egg into a tiny bowl or a cup, and slip the egg gently into the whirlpool in the centre. This avoids getting the tips of your fingers burned as you drop the egg into the water. The water should not boil again but bubble very gently just below boiling point. Cook for about 3-4 minutes, until the white is set and the yolk is still soft and runny.

Meanwhile, toast the bread, muffins or bagels. Slather a little butter on the hot bread and lay a slice of ham or freshly cooked crispy bacon on the base. Prop a beautifully poached egg on top and coat generously with the Hollandaise sauce.

Hollandaise Sauce

A classic Hollandaise is based on a reduction of dry white wine, vinegar and finely chopped shallots. In the version we make at the Cookery School we simply emulsify rich butter with egg yolks by whisking and then sharpen with a little lemon juice. Unless you have a heavy-based saucepan, don't attempt this recipe without a bain-marie. Even on the lowest heat, cooking a Hollandaise sauce in a pot that isn't heavy-based may scramble the eggs.

Once the sauce is made, it must be kept warm, though the temperature should not go above 80C (180F), or the sauce will curdle.

A thermos flask can provide a simple solution on a small scale; otherwise put the sauce into a Delft or Pyrex jug in a saucepan of hot, but not simmering, water. Hollandaise sauce cannot be reheated very successfully so it's best to make just the quantity you need. If, however you have a little left over, use it to enrich other sauces or mashed potatoes. When it solidifies, it makes a delicious Hollandaise butter to melt over fish.

Serves 4-6

2 organic egg yolks
125g (4 1/2oz) cold butter, cut into dice
1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice

Put the egg yolks in a heavy, stainless-steel saucepan on a low heat or in a bowl over hot water. Add 2 teaspoons water and whisk thoroughly. Add the butter bit by bit, whisking all the time. As soon as one piece melts, add the next piece. The mixture will gradually thicken, but if it shows signs of becoming too thick or slightly scrambling, remove from the heat immediately and add a little cold water to cool it quickly. Do not leave the pan or stop whisking until the sauce is made. Finally add the lemon juice to taste.

If the sauce is slow to thicken it may be because you are excessively cautious and the heat is too low. Increase the heat slightly and continue to whisk until the sauce thickens to coating consistency.

It is important to remember that if you are making Hollandaise sauce in a saucepan directly over the heat, it should be possible to put your hand on the side of the saucepan at any stage. If the saucepan feels too hot for your hand, then it is also too hot for the sauce.

Another good tip if you are making Hollandaise sauce for the first time is to keep a bowl of cold water close by so you can plunge the base of the saucepan into it if becomes too hot.

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