

Colonial Foods (Early)

The Puritans who arrived on these shores in the early seventeenth century had to bring virtually everything that was needed for life with them. Ships in those days were small and space on them was at a premium. In addition to human passengers and their belongings, cattle and other domestic animals had to be brought from the mother country. As might be expected, there was a very high mortality rate among the animals. For this reason beef and mutton could not be placed on menus for many long years until the stock numbers built up. Also horses and oxen, vitally important for the development of a nation being wrested from virgin forests, were in short supply.

This paper will deal with colonial foods in the early years and the difficult circumstances that faced the women, who were charged with feeding the growing multitudes. We begin with a list of supplies desired by a wife recently arrived in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1645. She sent this scrap of paper back to her sister in England. Miraculously, it survived the ravages of time.

1 brass kettle, 1 warming pan, 1 big iron pot, 6 pewter plates, 2 pewter platters, 3 pewter porringers, 1 small stew pan of copper, 1 drip pan, 1 skillet and a pestle & mortar.

In the absence of pewter, wooden bowls, trenchers and noggins were considered rather fine, while carefully dried gourds and deep, saucer-like shells of immense quahogs were also acceptable. [To those who may have seen quahog shells along our present-day New England shores, the ones living in these waters upon the arrival of the Europeans were literally as large as modern dinner plates. The reduced present day size is no doubt the result of over use of a resource].

Houses had deep cellars for storage of winter supplies and for the manufacturing and ripening of home-brewed beer, made from recipes brought from the home country. At first cider had no place in these cellars, but after orchards were grown, there was found room for the barrels of hard cider that eventually displaced the heavier and perhaps more wholesome, certainly less stimulating beer.

In these cellars were also kept, even from the first, the casks of metheglin, [a type of spiced mead, made by fermenting honey and water] made from the plentiful honey of wild bees, which in the autumn filled the cellar with the sound of its working reminiscent of the swarming of armies of bees – a sound that was said to be reproduced in the befuddled heads of those who were not extremely moderate in their draughts of this too potent liquor.

Drunkenness was frowned upon by the early society; what follows is one of the early laws:

An Act for the Punishment of Drunkenness. That if any person shall be found drunken, so that he be thereby bereaved and disabled in the use of his reason and understanding, appearing either in his speech, gesture or behavior; and be thereof convicted, he shall forfeit as a fine the sum of 8/ [eight shillings, about \$1.92] to the treasury of the town where the offence is committed, for the use of the poor therein, and for want of goods whereon to make distress, [in other words, if he couldn't pay] the offender or offenders shall be set in the stocks, there to remain not exceeding three hours, nor less than one hour.

Each farm produced or manufactured almost all the items needed in everyday use. Fowl and domestic meats that could not be economically disposed of while fresh were

preserved by drying, spicing, salting or smoking for winter use. Several weeks of steady labor were required each autumn to cure the scores of hams and sides of bacon, to prepare the miles of sausage links and try out and preserve the many stone jars full of lard so carefully that it would keep sweet for at least a year, and to prepare the pickled products as well as headcheese. As nothing was wasted, small scraps and pieces of chopped beef were rolled in tripe and smoked. When needed for the dinner table, the little rolls were boiled and served cold, or fried and eaten hot.

Besides all these, each in its proper season, were prepared stores of fish of various sorts, pickled, dried or spiced, and great quantities of winter vegetables as well as such fruits as could be kept for winter use by drying, or by preserving with sugar.

An Indian recipe called supawn, made from corn meal boiled in water, salted and stirred with a wooden spoon until smooth and thick, took the place of modern cereals, and was served at breakfast any time of year. It could be eaten with butter or molasses, or with milk. Dried fruits that had been soaked overnight could also be added to the supawn, giving it more flavor and nutrition.

Another Indian recipe that has come down to us is Indian (or Corn) bread. It consists of 2 pints of Indian meal, 1 pint flour, 2 pints sweet milk, 1 pint sour milk, ½ pint of sugar, 1 teaspoon of salt, 1 teaspoon soda. Mix and bake slowly in a Dutch oven for 1 ½ hours.

Candy was to be found at special events such as weddings. In addition to maple sugar was a confection called nut-sweet, made from maple sugar made soft with water, placed in a shallow iron pan over the coals, with a liberal amount of unsalted butter and slightly scorched. While scorching, the blanched meats of hickory nuts and butternuts were liberally added. When cooled, this became firm and was broken into chunks. It was universally proclaimed to be “equal to anything in England.”

During the Revolution, when many patriots were fighting in the army, the neighboring farm families saw to it that his crops were tended and harvesting their crops took precedence over those who remained at home.

Historic Bytes

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