

## Signs of a Food Culture More Than 20,000 Years Ago

### Crossroads of the Food Cultures of the World A Personal Record of American Food Culture (part 1)

When we think of American food, we tend to think in terms of hamburgers and other fast foods or giant steaks. However, as a nation founded by immigrants from around the world, the range and variety of American foods are as great as its ethnic diversity. Further, the world tends to think of the United States as a new country. Although it has been just two hundred twenty eight years since the United States established itself as a nation, we must not forget that people walked the land bridge from Asia during the period of 12,000—25,000B.C. These people, today known as Native Americans, had their own food culture based upon the knowledge and wisdom of a very long history. It is said that nearly sixty percent of the products grown in the United States today, agricultural giant that it is, were introduced to the original colonists by the Native Americans.

When the colonists first arrived in the New World, the knowledge of the land and resources learned from the Native Americans was indispensable to their survival. Thanksgiving, one of the most important holidays in the United States today, celebrates the assistance colonists received from the Native Americans. Just as the *sechiryori* dishes served at New Years in Japan are basically the same throughout the country, Thanksgiving dishes generally include turkey, cranberry sauce and succotash; all dishes that use ingredients indigenous to North America and introduced to the original colonists by



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the Native Americans. Although there are many theories regarding the origins of Thanksgiving, most widely believed among Americans is the account that the colonists held a huge banquet with foods grown, harvested and prepared in the manner learned from the Native Americans. The banquet, to which the Native Americans were also invited, was the colonists' way of giving thanks for all that they had learned and achieved in a land that was completely new to them.

The foods and methods of preparation that the colonists learned from the Native Americans are not limited to those dishes served at Thanksgiving. Among the foods introduced by the Native Americans were wild game such as turkey and buffalo, as well as fruits and vegetables including cranberries, huckleberries, cherries, peanuts, pecans, a wide variety of mushrooms, corn, squash, tomatoes, avocados, yams and potatoes. In this fertile New World, the foods and recipes learned from the Native Americans were combined with the recipes that came with later immigrants from Europe to produce what we know today as American food.

#### The Colonists' Diet

After Christopher Columbus 'discovered America' in 1492, Europeans began colonizing the New World at about the same time the Edo Era (1615—1868) was beginning in Japan. Colonization began with the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine in present day Florida in 1565, followed by the English settlement of Jamestown in what is now Virginia in 1607. One hundred and two Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower to establish the settlement of Plymouth in what is now Massachusetts in 1620. Further colonization by the English and the Anglo Saxon Puritans



The dinner table on Thanksgiving Day



Immigration to the new Land of Plenty began in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This picture portrays 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants arriving by ship.

led to development of the New England region in the northeast portion of what is today the United States. It is thought that the stoic and reserved lifestyle of the Puritans had a tremendous influence on the American food culture. The New England region was a new England in name only. With a climate and weather patterns completely different than what they were used to in their native England, the colonists were soon in danger of succumbing to starvation. With help from the Native Americans as well as their own innovations, the colonists gradually acclimated themselves to an appropriate lifestyle that could withstand the long and harsh winters until even their foods and diet became dependably fixed. With completion of the harvest in the fall, stocks of foodstuffs were put up for the winter. With the need to extend the stores so that they would last until spring, the colonists learned to be very economical. Winter meals primarily consisted of monotonous dishes made with salted pork and dried beans. Once spring arrived, cheese and butter production began and from summer until winter, meat was generally replaced by dairy products as the primary source of nutrition. The colonists of New England had no interest in making their dishes attractive. They felt satisfied with simply having enough food to sustain themselves. Following the Puritan faith, these colonists gladly gathered around the dinner table for even the simplest meal, and were grateful for the food provided by God regardless of any lack in variety. Luckily, however, the New England region was abundant in game, seafood, and fruits and vegetables. The ocean provided a bounty of lobster, clams and oysters while the forest offered blueberries, cranberries and the maple syrup that is a local specialty to this day. New England abounded with a wide variety of foods including turkey, deer, elk, rabbit and other wild game and fowl, as well as squash, yams, mushrooms and other native plants. The colonists used the native ingredients to prepare the familiar dishes of England. For example, corn, cream and eggs were used to create corn pudding, a local variation on the Yorkshire pudding traditionally served with roast beef. However, the roots of American cooking are not limited to New England. Further, not all of the colonists of the vast new world held the same belief in restraint that the Puritans did. In 1718, French colonists settled Nouvelle Orlean (New Orleans). These French colonists remained

in the South, under Spanish control for some time, for approximately fifty years until the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 when the United States purchased the region. Their influence on the local food culture was significant and lasting; evidenced by the Cajun and Creole dishes still popular today. Just as the Puritans used local ingredients to prepare traditional English dishes, the French colonists used local ingredients to prepare traditional French dishes. In addition to the French, the local Native Americans and slaves brought from Africa and the West Indies also contributed to the food culture of the South. Well-known and popular examples of Cajun and Creole dishes are crawfish or shrimp etouffe, gumbo with alligator meat and jambalaya.

The Puritans, however, were not the only colonists who practiced frugality and economy. The Pennsylvania Dutch, descendants of German Protestants who immigrated to the area between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, created dishes using meat scraps, as well as a variety of pickles that would have gained the respect of even the Puritans. A major difference between the Puritans and the Pennsylvania Dutch, however, was that the Pennsylvania Dutch were somewhat gluttonous in their eating habits, feeling it better to overeat than to waste food. The Pennsylvania Dutch also loved sweets, often eating pie three times a day, donuts with jam or syrup for breakfast, and snacking on powdered-sugar doughnuts during breaks at harvest time. It is not surprising to note that the ring doughnuts we see today are thought to have originated with the Pennsylvania Dutch.



Native Americans hope for freedom and independence with their signing of the Treaty of Greenville

A wealthy upper class developed early in the South with the establishment of plantations. These plantations produced tobacco, cotton and sugar, which were exported to Europe. Plantation owners were fond of inviting guests to dinner and did so on an almost daily basis. Guests who spent the night were warmly received and treated to luxurious meat and fruit dishes beginning with breakfast. Alcohol was always present, and the southern hospitality, for which the region is known, was born. As plantations required an extreme amount of labor, slavery was adopted in the early 1700s. The reputation of plantations known to serve especially delicious food increased, so African slaves who were also good cooks carried the double burden of working in the plantation kitchen. Foods familiar to the slaves such as okra, sesame seeds, peanuts and black-eyed peas became standard fare in the South. Pork was the favorite meat in the South. Virginia is still

famous for its smoked Smithfield ham made from hogs raised on peanuts. Smithfield ham is even known to have been given as a gift to Queen Victoria.

### The Revolutionary War and the Dining Table of the American President

In 1775, the descendents of the European colonists as well as new immigrants went to war against England in the American War for Independence, commonly known as the Revolutionary War (1775—1783). In an attempt to recover the huge debts acquired with The French and Indian War (1755—1763) and various wars with other foreign powers, England imposed oppressive taxes on the prosperous thirteen colonies. In response to an American tea boycott, England eliminated almost all taxes on British tea sold in the colonies in an attempt to create a monopoly and save the British East Indian Company from bankruptcy. Seeing this as another form of English tyranny, the American patriots responded with the Boston Tea Party, one of the major events leading up to The Revolutionary War. During the seven-year tea boycott that lasted through The Revolutionary War, Americans drank coffee or a type of herbal tea called Liberty Tea at the time. This may be an important reason that Americans to this day tend to prefer coffee to tea.



The Boston Tea Party of 1773

In 1776 the American patriots officially declared their independence from England. Continental Army commander, George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States of America in 1789. Let's take a look at the eating habits of the President of the United States at the time the nation was founded.

As a plantation owner George Washington enjoyed having guests for dinner, just as plantation owners all over the South did. Dinner at George Washington's home was usually served at 3:00pm and consisted of vegetables grown on the plantation, fish caught in the nearby Potomac River, pork fattened on chestnuts, wild game and fowl, Virginia ham and homemade apple or peach brandy. Artichokes, a favorite of Washington and very popular at the time, were often served in a salad. It is said that Washington also loved pineapple and Madeira wine. Today visitors can sample some of Washington's favorite dishes such as chicken biscuits with rice, New England clam chowder, and apple crumble with cream at New York's historic Fraunces Tavern.

Thomas Jefferson, signer of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States was known as a

gourmet. Another Virginia plantation owner, Jefferson is known as the first person to grow tomatoes in the U.S. In addition to Jefferson's knowledge and skill at agriculture, his broad education and talents included the fields of law, foreign languages, art and construction. At the time, tomatoes were thought to be poisonous. Jefferson proved that they weren't by eating them himself in front of wary guests.

The five years Jefferson spent in Paris as trade commissioner and minister is also thought to have raised his culinary expertise. A fan of French cuisine, Jefferson took several of his household slaves with him to France and had them trained by expert French chefs. Originally a lover of wines, Jefferson was passionate in his visits to the wineries of Europe. Jefferson detractors were fond of complaining that he was more devoted to wine than he was to diplomacy. Jefferson believed that an excellent wine served with a fine dinner was indispensable to diplomacy. It is said that the dinners and receptions Jefferson hosted as President were extravagant beyond the means of the Presidential salary and that these expenses were covered by Jefferson himself.

One of Jefferson's favorite dishes, macaroni and cheese, is said to be an invention of Jefferson himself after he brought a pasta maker and parmesan cheese home from Italy. Though considered far from fine dining, this dish remains tremendously popular with Americans even today. After mastering the method for making ice cream in France and introducing the method to enthusiastic Americans, Jefferson is also known for devising the ice cream machine that churns cream into ice cream using salt and ice.

### The Varieties of Dishes Expand in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America

Although the reputation of American food today is far from renowned, Brillat-Savarin (1775—1826) author of *The Physiology of Taste*, is one of those who bore witness to the fact that American food at the time the nation was founded was 'not bad'. A French gourmet who spent two years in exile in the United States during the French Revolution visited Connecticut in 1794. Records remain in which he applauds the corned beef, stewed goose, leg of lamb and wide variety of vegetables he ate there. He went on to praise highly the flavor of the turkey taken on a hunt in which he was invited to participate.

One form of evidence of the conditions of the eating habits of Americans at the time can be found in the changes to their physique. In general, the nutritional conditions of a country at a particular time are reflected in the adults two or three generations later. The early settlers of the New World at the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century were generally much shorter than their European counterparts. This is evidence of the poor diet of the settlers. However, by the time the United States of America was formed at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the average height of Americans had increased tremendously to approximately 5'6" (172.72cm), much the same as at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The American diet had evolved by leaps and bounds in just one hundred fifty years. In 1864 an Englishman visiting the United States wrote that Americans eat meat three times a day and that the quantity served for breakfast, lunch and dinner was considerable. He went on to

appreciate the fact that Americans had more than enough to eat despite the country being caught up in the Civil War.

The first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century also saw an increase in the diversity of the foods eaten in the colonies. Not only did meat and bread production increase, but so did vegetable production so that vegetables were available year round. In the North, potatoes were grown and in the South, sweet potatoes became very popular. Increases in both helped to relieve the monotony of meals and increased resistance to diseases related to vitamin deficiency such as scurvy.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, luxury ingredients such as the spices, sugar, tea and coffee previously limited to the upper class became common in every class of society. After 1800, coffee became more popular than tea and consumption increased five hundred percent in just forty years. With the Temperance movement that began in the 1820s, people were encouraged to drink water, coffee and tea rather than alcohol. With the rise in popularity of coffee and tea, consumption of sugar and corn syrup increased rapidly until households of the average laborer in 1833 are said to have spent more on sugar and tea than they did on meat.

The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw American dishes becoming more extravagant. With the French Revolution in 1789, many Paris chefs exiled to the United States brought with them the haute cuisine of Paris. In 1828 Delmonico's was not only the first French restaurant to open in New York, but was the first restaurant opened in the United States. The restaurant offered wealthy industrialists a plethora of meat and fish dishes, and stored over one hundred varieties of wine. By the 1820s, ice boxes had become somewhat common and the well-to-do were able to enjoy milk, butter and fresh meat and vegetables even in the hot summer months. On the other hand, the gap between rich and poor became larger. The main food of poor laborers and farmers was often limited to potatoes, which were less expensive than even bread; and slaves, who subsisted primarily on corn, very rarely had the opportunity to eat meat or even taste sugar.

As Americans became wealthier and foods became more extravagant, reformers began to appear to protest these changes. One of these was Sylvester Graham, namesake of the popular graham cracker. A Presbyterian minister, Graham claimed that the wealthy middle class was in a state of gluttony; that Americans ate too much meat and refined flour, and used too many spices and stimulants (coffee, tea, etc.). Graham claimed that all of these led initially to digestive problems and that these digestive problems advanced into depression and a general lack of spiritual well being. Graham had a group of devoted followers who gave up tea, coffee and meat. They were primarily vegetarians who drank water and ate only bread made from whole-wheat flour. Graham and his followers are seen as the forerunners of America's modern health food movement.

## Foods of the Western Frontier

The United States began expanding west as far as the Pacific Ocean in the 1830s. In 1848, gold was discovered in California and the Gold Rush was on. The era of the western frontier continued until the Bureau of the Census proclaimed in 1890 that there were no longer any unknown frontiers on the American continent. Settlers packed up all they owned to make the incredible journey west by covered wagon. They also carried stores of flour, bacon, coffee, sugar, dried beans, salt and pepper, potatoes, and canned or dried vegetables. Meals on their journey were very monotonous. Breakfast was generally bacon, crackers or biscuits and coffee. Lunch and dinner consisted of oatmeal, stew made from dried apples, bacon or hardtack. Pemmican, made from buffalo jerky and berries, was learned from the Native Americans and became a primary source of nutrition on the long journey. Meals were prepared in a single pot over an open fire. Dried pork and beans were boiled in large quantities that lasted for days.

Pork and beans reached their zenith during the period from the end of the Civil War until the middle of the 1880s and were the primary food of the original cowboys. These cowboys drove cattle the great distances from the major ranching centers such as Texas and Kansas to railroad stations for transport back East where beef consumption increased after the Civil War. These cattle drives included a covered wagon, or chuck wagon, for transporting food for everyone on the trail. A cook, often called "Cookie", also went along on cattle drives to prepare meals for the cowboys.

Though the foods that the pioneers and cowboys ate on their long journeys were extremely monotonous, they were simple to prepare, easy to eat, and provided the calories and nutrients necessary to sustain them. It seems likely that this type of food was the forerunner of present day American fast food and TV dinners.



Settlers packed up all their belongings to join the wagon trains heading west

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