PEASE PORRIDGE HOT

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

Were you as stuffed as the turkey this Thanksgiving? I was. My choice of words reveals something of my background. When, as a transplanted Midwesterner, I had my first Thanksgiving dinner with my central-Texas in-laws, I was disappointed to discover that turkey was accompanied by mushy cornbread dressing prepared in a skillet on the stovetop. They were equally baffled to learn that I made stuffing, generously seasoned with sage, celery, and onion, and baked it in the turkey.

At her first Thanksgiving dinner with her Irish in-laws, served on fine china by candlelight, my sister discovered that the vegetable on which she was ladling gravy was mashed turnips, not mashed potatoes. Over time I compromised by adding cornbread to my stuffing, but I never liked it. My sister did not find a use for turnips.

Our experiences demonstrate underlying traits that determined what early Americans ate. Each move, whether emigration from Europe to this continent or migration within, caused some alterations in food habits. The traits that determine food choices are taste preference, dislikes, preparation knowledge, available foodstuffs, physical environment, practicality, and adaptation.

TASTE PREFERENCE

First of all, I should point out that "taste" doesn't exactly fit with our modern understanding of "tasty." Our ancestors had boring taste preferences. They didn't like variety, they weren't adventuresome, and they often didn't seem to care how food tasted. For most of them, food was a necessary part of daily life—without it one could not labor—and pleasure from taste was not an important goal. They often ate the same food at breakfast, dinner, and supper.

However, they certainly had likes and dislikes. As is so amply demonstrated in the Thanksgiving foods mentioned above, taste preference is primarily determined by what we grew up with.

Colonial Americans had a definite sweet tooth. This was more easily indulged because the regular trade with the West Indies made sugar and molasses readily available. In colder colonies, maple trees provided syrup and sugar.

DISLIKES

We might find surprising some of what colonial Americans disliked. They weren't fond of drinking water. In some areas, where the water was stagnant or tainted, this was good, but even in areas of clear springs, it was not enjoyed. Milk as a beverage was more common in areas such New England and the middle colonies where cows were kept in barns and fenced fields than it was in the South, where livestock were more likely to roam free in the woods. Once fruit trees and orchards were established, cider became the most popular drink. A variety of alcoholic beverages were consumed—not always moderately, as both court records and church actions demonstrate.

Our early ancestors had much in common with small children—they didn't like vegetables, so they added them to stews or soups and cooked them until they were tasteless. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the idea of serving vegetables separately began to be accepted.

Our ancestors had an abundance of fish and seafood available to them, yet they did not consider this a blessing. Some of their reticence probably derived from correlating fish consumption and Catholicism, but some was a matter of taste. New England tour guides delight in telling of the indentured servants who complained of being made to eat lobster several times a week.

PREPARATION KNOWLEDGE

I can certainly attest to the fact that the cook relies most often on the cooking methods she learned "back home." This includes both utensils and preparation methods. Given the same set of ingredients, cooks in different regions, even different towns, would come up with highly varied dishes, but dishes that would be comfortably familiar to their families and neighbors.

AVAILABLE FOODSTUFFS

The landscape that the earliest settlers found in America was very different from what they knew in England, yet they attempted to replicate familiar farming styles, which in turn shaped the foods available to them. Our ancestors tried to transplant both crops and livestock each time they relocated, with varying degrees of success. The change of environment from Europe meant that many did not survive.

Within this continent, we find migration most prevalent within what gardeners call "temperature zones" and sociologists call "life zones," because that determines the success of preserving agricultural habits, hence food options.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Climate had an effect also, particularly in house construction. We think of New England as cold, but many of us are not aware that colonial immigrants found themselves in a climatological period known as a mini-Ice Age, averaging several degrees colder than today. Large fireplaces were the center of a home. More of the year was spent indoors, and the constant fire meant that foods requiring slow cooking and occasional brief attention were practical. Southern homes favored faster cooking methods and some outdoor cooking.

PRACTICALITY

Lifestyle was often a near-subsistence existence with fancy food preparation on the bottom of the priority list.

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This dictated food preparation with the convenience of the one-pot meal. Stew pots and Dutch ovens were ubiquitous.

Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold
Pease porridge in the pot nine days old
Some like it hot, some like it cold
Some like it in the pot, nine days old

The familiar nursery rhyme refers to a dish that was prevalent through-out New England, boiled beans or peas. The exact nature of both the legume and the seasoning—if any—varied from place to place. Once the initial pot was made, it could sit cozily on or near the fire, with repeated additions of water if it became too thick from one day to the next. When a friend's grade-school-age daughter explained this to me, she concluded by making a face and exclaiming "how gross!"

ADAPTATION

When their own food supplies were insufficient, colonists benefited from food obtained from the native Indians and from information about how to find or grow unfamiliar foods in the New World. That does not mean the colonists liked the new foods, but they did need them. Eventually, they developed ways of preparation of some that became a standard part of their diet.

Hogs were a convenient source of food, especially in areas in which they could be allowed to roam free, in forests away from fields. We find them more of a staple in early Southern diets. The fat content prompted the idea of fried foods—and the accompanying invention of the skillet—along with the popularity of smoking to preserve foods.

HOW DO YOU LEARN ABOUT YOUR ANCESTORS' FOOD?

To get even a relatively accurate reflection of what our ancestors ate and how they prepared it, we may need to back into it. Probate inventories usually enumerate every pot, utensil, and accessory to be found in the house and outbuildings. They occasionally list major foodstores. If the ancestral family you are investigating did not leave such an inventory, look for inventories of their closest neighbors and relatives, who are likely to possess similar household items.

Contemporary writing about recipes and food are usually available only for the upper class until relatively modern times. But there is one written source that can shed great insight—letters and journals written by travelers. Just as we do when on vacation, they often commented on the meals they were served. By the adjectives they used, we often get a good picture of regional differences—especially what they didn't like.

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