

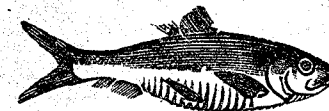


Interesting Facts

About

VIRGINIA FOODS

1607 — 1700



Virginia Dietetic Association

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT
"SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FOODS
IN VIRGINIA



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"HEAVEN AND EARTH NEVER AGREED BETTER TO FRAME A PLACE FOR MAN'S HABITATION",

Thus spoke Captain John Smith about Virginia and true it was, but first the settlers had to adjust to their new environment—an adjustment that was costly.

In the two years following the establishment of the Jamestown Colony in 1607, there was little production of foodstuffs. English grains were complete failures. As a result, the colonists were forced to subsist mainly on such corn and wild life as Captain Smith could obtain from the Indians.

"Beans, sodd wheate, venison and mulberries" are mentioned in one account of food provided by the Indians.

Another time, John Smith wrote "Only of sturgeon did we have great store, whereon our men would so greedily surfet as to cost many their lives".

But then, at a time when the settlers knew despair, disease and want, and they had not even the strength to hunt or fish, Smith wrote:

" it pleased God to move the Indians to bring us corn ere it was half ripe. The Indians brought us great store of corn and bread ready made. There also came such an abundance of fowls into the rivers that they greatly refreshed our weak condition. The Indians, thinking us nearly famished, with careless kindness offered us little pieces of bread and small handfuls of beans or wheat, in return for a hatchet or a piece of copper. With fish, oysters, bread and

deer, they kindly traded with me and my men".

But soon the Indians brought no more food, and the hardships, disease and death that followed almost destroyed the little colony.

Several historians have presented the following descriptions of these difficult years:

"In short, so extreme was the Famine and distress of that time, that it was, for many years, distinguished and remembered by the name of THE STARVING TIME there remained not more than 60 out of 500 and that these poor and miserable creatures preserved for the most part, by roots, herbs, Acorns, Walnuts, Berries, and now and then a little fish." (Stith-History of Virginia)

Dr. Wyndham Blanton, in his book "Medicine in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century" quotes the answer of the General Assembly in 1623/24 to Alderman Johnson's praise of Sir Thomas Smith's government as follows:

"In those 12 years the Colony was for the most part in great misery and want the allowance for a man in those times was only eight ounces of meal and ½ pint of pease a day, both the one and the other being full of maggots and cobwebs, loathsome to man that others had no allowance at all, and were forced to eat dogs, cats, toadstools, snakes, horsehides and what not that one man, out of misery he endured, killed his wife, and powdered her up to eat (for which he was burnt) that many others fed on the corpses of dead men". (Later the story about the man eating his wife was proved to be untrue).

Blanton also says "It is probably safe to say that prior

to 1612 food deficiency was the major cause of the high mortality", and Gondamor of Spain wrote in 1613 to Philip of Spain, thusly, "There are about 300 men more or less; and the majority sick or badly treated, because they have nothing to eat but bread of maize with fish, nor do they drink anything but water all of which is contrary to the nature of the English. . . ."

Another account says that in 1607 the causes of death were mere famine "our food was but a small can of barley sod(den) in water to five men a day. . . ."

As late as 1610, according to Dr. Blanton, the whole corn crop amounted to but seven acres, and it is stated that Lord Delaware's men had devoured the whole crop three days after they landed, so famished were they for fresh green vegetables. To quote again from his book:

"It is probable that famine and starvation were not real problems after these first few years. With the laying out of new plantations in 1611 (Bermuda Hundred and Henricopolis) the food problem ceased to be acute, and is not mentioned again until 1622, when the Indian massacre made frontier life hazardous".

A good description of scurvy and beri-beri are also mentioned by Dr. Blanton "which seemed to be rampant, even among the Indians. . . . Preventatives of the disease beri-beri as eggs, vegetables, and fruits, the colonists did not have".

It is known that Lord Delaware went to the West Indies in 1611 to find help "for my health and my sickness assuaged, by means of fresh dyet, and especially of Oranges and Lemonds, an undoubted remedy for the disease, which lastly, and so long, has afflicted me".

However, by this time, for those that survived, the worst was over. After this "Starving Time" their lot was gradually improved as they began to follow the practices of the Indians in obtaining and raising foodstuffs. Then did they truly begin to realize what one writer has stated this way:

"Few countries of the world have possessed so abundant supply of food as Virginia during the seventeenth century natural supplies were found in greater profusion at that period than at any other subsequent period, because the course of destruction had not been so prolonged. Beasts, birds, and fish were to be obtained in incredible quantities. There has never been a soil so adapted to every species than the soil of Virginia although little attention was paid to fruits in the seventeenth century, there was nevertheless an abundant supply so states Bruce in his "Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century".

The historian, Howe, in his "History of Virginia" described the blessings of early Virginia in these words: "The morasses were alive with waterfowl, the forests were nimble with game, the woods rustled with coveys of quail and wild turkeys, while they sung with the merry notes of singing birds, and hogs ran in large troops. . . ."

In fact, deer were so plentiful that the people soon tired of venison and viewed mutton as a delicacy.

The first cows were brought over in 1611. These, and other domestic animals such as hogs, chickens, and sheep soon became plentiful. It would seem logical to assume

that after this the "nutrition" of the population was much improved.

In the 1620's the Jamestown settlers were able to send food supplies to the Plymouth Colony, which was having difficulties, according to Dr. Samuel Eliot Morison, Professor of History at Harvard University.

By 1642, domestic animals served as "money" for a tax imposed for the benefit of Governor Berkely:

"the rate prescribed for geese and turkeys was five shillings apiece; for hens, twelve pence; for capons, one shilling and six-pence; for beef, three and a half pence a pound; for a roasting pig, three shillings; for butter and cheese, eight and six pence a pound."

The settlers soon discovered that numerous vegetables were growing or could be grown in the rich soil. One author states that carrots, parsnips, turnips, muskmelons, watermelons and cucumbers were grown as early as 1609, although this does not seem to jibe with the accounts of the starvation period. The same author states there were 10 varieties of peas, one of which, the black eye, became, at an early date, a common article of food. Other vegetable crops originating in Virginia were corn, beans, squash, gourds and pumpkins.

Plentiful pumpkins are listed by one writer as playing a great part in providing food supplies for the starving Virginians, and probably the first "stew" was one of Peas, corn, beans and pumpkin boiled together by the Indians.

It is interesting to note the importance corn has had in the history of Virginia foods and economics. Master George Percy, aboard Christopher Newport's ship, described their arrival at Jamestown on May 3, 1607. He said

that by the 15th of June, they had finished building their fort, and had "sowne" most of our Corne on two Mountaines. It sprang a man's height from the ground".

Smallzried says the "corne Percy referred to was probably wheat, since the English call wheat "corn". When the colonists became acquainted with Virginia's native grain, they called it "maize".

From corn came hominy, roasting ears, and the corn pone, foods entirely unknown in the old world. The name pone (also called hoecake and ashcake) is derived from the Indian name "oppono". Ponap was a sort of meal dumpling. Corn was also used for money and to even pay for weddings!

Fruits were mentioned fairly early, although one account says "they have no orchard fruits, only two kinds of plums, one a sweet and luscious plum long and thick in form and likeness of a nutt palme. The other resembling a medler, but somewhat sweeter yet not eatable till they be rotton as ours are (this was most likely a persimmon). Persimmons are mentioned in other early accounts.

The first mention of grape culture in Virginia is in Strachey's book. He says the Frenchmen who came with Lord Delaware were put to work to plant grape vines. William Byrd II mentioned six species of grapes.

Wine and beer were popular drinks, and later cider. An interesting sidelight on this was the aversion of the colonist to water. The assembly even went so far as to recommend that all newcomers should bring in a supply of malt to be used for beer and liquor until their bodies had become "hardened" to the land!

By the middle part of the century, fruits were plenti-

ful, for Bruce in his "Social History of Virginia" mentions apples, peaches and plums and figs as being more highly flavored than their English counterparts, owing to the greater heat of the sun in Virginia, and a longer season for ripening. Quinces are also mentioned. He also mentioned the extraordinary quantity of walnuts and chestnuts grown on every plantation, hazel and hickory nuts. Walnuts and hickory nuts were ground up by the Indians to make a drink called pawcohiccora, according to another writer, and bread was made of sunflower seeds and wild oats by the Indians.

Honey was obtainable in abundance both from domestic hives and hollow trees in the forest.

Various kinds of fish were plentiful. At first sturgeon is mentioned frequently, but afterwards, other writers mention perch, shad, bass, pike, herring and sheepshead. Oysters and shellfish could be scrapped up by the bushel from the bottom of the nearest inlet or tidal stream. One writer mentions oysters 13 inches long.

Among the imported articles of food during the latter part of the century were rice, pepper and cloves, mace and cinnamon, ginger and sugar.

Naturally enough with an abundant supply of food the dining room and kitchen became important areas in the colonial home. The former contained dining tables of various shapes, some so handsome that they became family heirlooms. Tablecloths were made of oznaburg, cotton, dowles, and damask, the damask cloth being of the finest texture. Napkins were plentiful in number, and needed, since there were few forks until the end of the century.

Utensils were generally made of pewter, including spoons, bowls, forks and plates, cups, flagons and beakers. In the kitchen could be found the often pictured iron pot for boiling, its heavy form hung on an iron rack firmly attached to the chimney piece. Other equipment was made of brass, tin, wood or clay, and each served a particular purpose in producing the delicious (and filling!) Virginia meals.

Briefly, then, in this the 350th year after the founding of Jamestown, have we delved into the foods of the seventeenth century. We can be proud of these early settlers, as they were an industrious inquisitive people. They had to be, for this land that gave much, required much, too.

EARLY RECIPES

The following recipe for cooking Virginia ham, always on the table as a "side dish" was written on the fly-leaf of the Bible owned by the first William Byrd of Westover, somewhere around the year 1674:

"To eat ye Ham in Perfection steep it in Half Milk and Half Water for 36 hours, and then having brought the water to a boil put ye Ham therein and let it simmer, not boil, for 4 to 5 hours according to Size of ye Ham—for simmering Brings ye salt out and boiling drives it in".

ASHCAKE

Add a teaspoon of salt to a quart of cornmeal. Make up with boiling water and knead well. Make into round flat cakes. Sweep a clean place on the hottest part of the hearth. Put the cake on it and cover with hot wood ashes. Wash and wipe it dry before eating it.

Sometimes a cabbage leaf is placed under it, and one

over it, before baking, in which case it need not be washed.

Williamsburg Cook Book

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