

A History of Food

By Bala Prasad

On July 4, 1776, our founding fathers were not celebrating independence by eating hamburgers and hot dogs. These staples in the American diet only became popular around the turn of the last century. Instead, a soldier's daily ration during the American Revolution included a pint of beans, a pint of milk, a pound of beef (or fish), and a pound of bread. The average soldier also consumed six ounces of butter a day. This amounted to 3000 to 4000 daily calories – more than many obese people consume today. In spite of this enormous daily calorie intake, obesity was not nearly as rampant as it is today. This is because daily life in those days was enormously active – people walked, rode horses, and generally expended a lot of calories in their every day jobs and chores. Today, by contrast, we live in an era of leisure, saturated with TV, video games, and a lot of doing nothing.

Back then, since the main purpose of eating was to get enough calories (as opposed to enjoying a good meal), people predominantly consumed meat, particularly pork, because pigs were cheap to feed and thus could be easily fattened for slaughter. Wild game was also popular because of its availability. Today, we would think nothing of eating lobster or crab – we can generally eat anything whenever we want. Availability is just not a concern for us today.

In the old days, meat would often be cooked together with vegetables in a big stew. The explanation for this popular one-dish meal was simple: people could not afford a lot of cookware, so making stew was a way to cook all the food in one dish. These stews were typically eaten around 1 or 2 in the afternoon, during a break from working in the fields. This was “dinner,” and “supper” was more or less a light, optional meal, eaten later in the evening. Today, of course, our eating habits are dramatically different. Multiple dishes (cooked from multiple pots and pans) are the staple for American families. And afternoon “lunch” is followed by evening “dinner.” I am really not sure what “supper” is anymore and who eats it.

As for vegetables, the common class generally consumed corn. Breakfast for a typical farm family was a porridge made from ground corn, salt, and water boiled over a fire. And the universal bread was cornbread. It is said that the upper classes, like Washington and Jefferson, would splurge on wheat products, if they could afford it. Can you imagine “splurging” on a loaf of bread today? I think not.

Interestingly, even though most farmers were relatively poor, people generally had plenty to eat because of the abundance of land available to them. Produce planted on farmland included beans and squash; root vegetables like potatoes and turnips, and leafy foods like cabbage and collards. Of course, the seasons were always an issue, which is why food preservation was essential for produce and for meats. Cows and pigs were often slaughtered in the fall and stored and eaten over the next 12 months. Pickling meats and vegetables (as well as drying) was another means of preserving food. For example, while corn on the cob may have been eaten all summer, dried ground corn would be used year-round to make cornbread, etc.

So it seems that practicality played a large part in the American diet in the old days. Today, this is not the case. We eat multiple food items at a typical meal, multiple times a day. And since our lives in general are not as active as the farmers and soldiers from the days of old, the result of this gluttonous consumption, is, unfortunately, rampant obesity. So, while we enjoy our meals this summer, let us at least try to stay active. And, let us also appreciate the fact that we don't face the same issues in food selection or food preparation that our forefathers did. And with that, bon appetite!

Sincerely,

Bala Prasad