

Lesson Plan: Colonial Cooking

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Grades: 10-11

Materials: Recipes, food, arrangement with home economics class

Introduction: What did the American Colonist eat? Surprisingly enough, many of their favorite dishes may be found on American tables today. Particularly in New England and Virginia. Preparation and ingredients are very different today—we have electricity and refrigeration.

The settlers who landed on New World shores were raised on the food of Old England, the mother country and of course brought these tastes with them. The English diet featured roasted meats and birds, pies and pottage, gravies and nips and peas, cheeses and other dairy products, apples, peaches, cherries, currants, gooseberries, pears, greengage and damson plums, quinces, breads, and ale or beer. Although the emigrants' ships carried seeds or cuttings of their English fruits and vegetables, and agricultural grains such as wheat, oats, rye, and barley, their harvests were a disaster, and the Colonists turned to the Indians for help in utilizing plants and animals native to America. From the Indian, they learned to cook, eat, and cultivate crops unknown in England—corn, native beans, squash—and how to seek out edible wild plants and game.

Wax, string, and lima beans, along with corn, squash, pumpkins, and sweet potatoes or yams, are all plants native to the Americas; the Indians had been cultivating them for centuries when the Colonists arrived. Some bean species had been introduced to Europe by early explorers, who brought them back as a valuable new source of food. Beets were beloved by the ancient Greeks, and cabbage has been around for at least four centuries. Parsnips and carrots have a long European history, and were eagerly adopted by the Indians when brought to these shores. Propagated all around the world, onions and mushrooms have been favorite standbys since B.C. Cucumbers came over with Columbus, and peas, the passion of the sixteenth century French aristocracy, were undoubtedly sown at Roanoke.

Roast beef, mutton, lamb, pork, turkey, veal, chicken and spicy home-cured ham were mainstays of the Colonial diet, just as they are of ours, except for mutton. The one big difference was that our ancestors would have termed the roasts we serve “baked meats,” where as we do our “roasting” in an oven. To them a roast was cooked on a spit, over or before a fire. Game abounded; venison, squirrel, and rabbit were staple diet, as were game birds of all kinds, served from the spit or encased in rich and luscious pies. When game and fresh meat were hard to come by, many a family made do with salt pork and cream gravy. There was also an abundance of fish and seafood.

The focus of this lesson is to have students experience what it was like to have to prepare and taste meals of colonial America. Students in the American History class will spend three days in the home economics classroom making a colonial meal. They will work in groups of four to six students. The first day will be preparing the food, the second day will be cooking the meal and the final day will be enjoying a typical colonial dinner.

Day One: Students had decided the menu for the dinner. Wash vegetables, prepare a soup, and prepare food for day two.

Pease Porridge

3 cups diced split peas	2 sprigs summer savory or thyme
Water	2 sprigs marjoram
1 ham bone or pork knuckle	1 tablespoon sea kelp, or salt to taste
1 onion, chopped	Water to cover
1 turnip, scraped and diced	
1 potato, peeled and diced	
2 stalks celery with leaves, diced	

Rinse and pick over peas. Cover with water and leave to soak overnight.

Day Two: Next morning, drain, add remaining ingredients, and bring to boil. Cover pot, simmer for about 2 hours, stirring occasionally. When peas are tender, remove ham bone or knuckle, cut meat from bone, and return to pot. Take out herb sprigs. Puree if desired, reheat, and serve in individual bowls, each topped with a small pat of butter. Serves 8.

Spoon Bread—Day One

¾ cup yellow cornmeal	1 cup milk
1 teaspoon salt	2 eggs, well beaten with
3 tablespoons melted butter	2 teaspoons baking powder
1 cup boiling water	

Combine ingredients in order given and pour into 10-inch buttered casserole dish and bake for 40 minutes at 350 degrees F. Serves 4.

Bean-Hole Beans—Day Two

Put dry beans in a large iron pot, cover with water, and hang over a fire; boil 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from fire, and add pork, molasses, mustard, and salt. Cover with closely fitting cast-iron cover. In dry ground, preferably gravel, dig a hole 2 feet deep and 2 feet across, and in it build a brisk hardwood fire. When the fire has burned to coals, take part of the coals out with a shovel; place iron pot in the hole and cover with the remaining coals. On top of the coals, place the gravel originally taken from the hole. Leave the pot in the hole all day.

Mashed Parsnips—Day Two

Scrape and dice 1 pound small parsnips. Boil in 1 ½ cups water with ½ teaspoon salt until soft. Drain, add 2 tablespoons butter and 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg, and mash well together. Serves 4-6.

Brunswick Stew—Day Two

Squirrel was used in the original version of this early Colonial recipe from Virginia. As wild game became scarcer, chicken was substituted.

3 slices bacon	2 teaspoons salt
1 chicken (5 pounds) cut up	1 teaspoon sugar
Corn kernels cut from cobs of 3 ears	Pepper to taste
2 cups fresh lima beans	Cold water
3 large, ripe tomatoes, skinned and cut	3 medium potatoes, peeled, cooked & mashed

Cut bacon in small pieces. Add chicken and cook lightly, but do not brown. Add rest of ingredients (except potatoes) and cold water to barely cover. Cover closely and cook slowly until chick is tender. Just before serving add potatoes, this serves as the only thickening.

Pheasants with Apricots—Day Two

4 tablespoons honey	1 pound fresh apricots halved and stoned
4 tablespoons butter	½ cup dry white wine
2 pheasants (2-3 pounds each)	

Combine honey and butter in saucepan and heat, stirring, until blended. Brush pheasants with mixture, place on rack in a roasting pan, and roast 10 minutes longer, or until apricots are very soft. Serve with apricots and juice spooned over birds. Serve 4.

Baked Indian Pudding—Day Two

1 quart milk	¾ teaspoon ginger
1/3 cup yellow cornmeal	¼ teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon salt	¼ teaspoon nutmeg
½ cup molasses	heavy cream

Scald milk in a double boiler, then add cornmeal and salt. Cook 25 minutes, stirring to prevent sticking. Add molasses and spices and mix well. Pour into greased 8 x 10 inch baking dish. Bake at 300 degrees F. for 2 hours. Pour cream over individual servings and serve hot. Serves 6-8.

Day Two: Students are broken into groups of four-six students. Each group is responsible for preparing their entire meal. They decided before if they were going to prepare the Pheasants with Apricots or the Brunswick Stew.

Day Three: Students enjoy the meal they prepared. Students also had the opportunity to make a colonial recipe at home and bring in samples to the class for extra credit.

