# Food in Colonial America

## Introduction

Colonists who decided to travel to the New World were in for an adventure. They had to learn to survive by adaptation to a new way of life. Not only did they have to adapt to a new environment, people, and shelter, but they had to adapt to the new ways of eating. A few historians have studied this topic specifically. This includes: how colonists survived; what they ate as well as how they acquired it; how their food was prepared; how their cooking environments were designed; and what daily life would have been like. I will also look at how this affected the people of this time. With each topic, we can potentially learn about the thought processes of the colonists. I believe that studying food subsistence patterns can give historians a deeper look into the lives of people that they study. This is important because it can give a more holistic view of the era being studied.

## Historians

Information on Mary Ellen Snodgrass, the author of *Encyclopedia of Kitchen History,* was hard to come by. The book is an encyclopedia of everything on kitchen history. However, it does not have an "About the Author" page. I could not find anything about her on the web. She does write in a factual sense under each subject.

David Freeman Hawke wrote *Everyday Life in Early America*. The tone of his book is negative. He states facts but usually adds an antidote of his own opinion in his work, which makes his wording biased. Looking at his booklist within *Everyday Life*, he has written at least four other books on this time period. This gives me the clue that he does know what he is writing about and he is knowledgeable.

Linda Civitello wrote her book *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People* with

what seems to me to be the voice of an anthropologist. She writes factually, but also adds emotion to the book. What I found about her was that she received her history MA at UCLA and teaches food history.

**Adaption/survival**

To survive in the New World, colonists had to adapt to the environment. They had to learn what was edible in the new environment that they lived in. It took some time to adapt to the New World. Severe food shortages were common during the first winters of new settlements. One such winter happened with the pilgrims from the Mayflower. The food that was brought along was inedible because it spoiled. This food included butter, cheese, meats (fish, beef, pork), and biscuits. We know this because of the log kept by Governor William Bradford.[1] John Smith wrote about the starvation time in Jamestown from 1609-1610. He had heard of how the colonists were trying to survive off of horsehide, acorns, berries, other nuts, with some even some resorting to cannibalism.[2]

**What they ate and how it was acquired**

The colonists ate seasonally with winters being leaner and summers abundant with berries - especially blueberries (known as “skycolored” berries), blackberries, strawberries, and huckleberries. These berries were eaten with milk, spices, and sugar. When fall came, apples and peaches were available.[3] The colonists hunted game. They ate elk, deer, turkey, rabbit, bear, squirrel, goose, boar, pigeon, and quail, amongst other animals. They also took advantage of the water sources they had by fishing for salmon and collecting oysters.[4] However, some sources state that salmon was not eaten, but the reasons for this is still not known. To sweeten their food, they used maple. When bees were imported post 1630s, they used honey.[5]  Maple syrup was introduced to the colonists by the natives because this was a staple condiment in their diet.[6]

Colonists had kitchen gardens that included carrots, parsnips, onions, turnips, hyssop, marjoram, parsley, and thyme.[7] They also grew a number of crops including cabbage, asparagus, grains, cauliflower, apples, peaches, and apricots that were introduced to the Native Americans. In return, the Natives introduced the colonists to hominy, Indian pudding, succotash, and popcorn.

The African slaves brought over tastes from their own land. Colonists were introduced to peanuts, black-eyed peas, and yams. Local crops that were new to the colonists included wild rice, sweet potatoes, cranberries, and hickory nut.[8] However, some colonists did not like the sweet potato and wouldn't eat it.[9] They also brought over watermelon, okra, and a taste for fried foods.[10] Colonists ate pumpkin that was hearty to last the winter.[11] Dessert were an everyday occurrence. This could include candied ginger, marzipan, rock candy, or preserves.

Holidays were a time when colonists were able to be a little more extravagant. They were able to have a variety of nuts such as walnuts, chestnuts, and hickory nuts. They made special breads and cakes such as Sally Lunn bread. Even ice cream was available after 1775.[12] The English became a little more creative to make food that was familiar to them. They would create dough by souring milk and reserve a little bit of dough to create a starter. They would make sourdough pancakes by the liquid from flowers and leaves from hops had been soaked overnight. For baking liquid, they would reserve the potato water.[13] One recipe in particular found in the *Encyclopedia of Kitchen History* calls for fermented flour, boiled potatoes, and hop blends that were made into buckwheat cakes (151).

Each settlement would have different types of food ate depending on their location. For example, the Quebec colonists relied on high-gluten wheat because it makes chewy bread. Bread was a staple of their diet. These grains were either the garnet variety or marquis. If these grains were not available, they would make bread from rye, barley, buckwheat, oats, and vetch or pea

flour.[14] With each new country starting colonies across the world, new flavors came to the Americas. The Dutch brought lentils, rye bread, coleslaw, sausage, and cabbage. Chowder was introduced by the French. The Minorcans from Florida brought wine, olive oil, herbs, goat, vinegar, Mediterranean style bread, and seafood. [15] German introduced waffles and sauerkraut.[16]

Liquid however was harder to deal with. Colonists distrusted water. They did not have access to tea, coffee, or chocolate in early America (the author did not state any time frame for this claim). They had to learn how to grow the crops to make beer and wine. The north colonies drank milk, but the southern colonies did not because the milk couldn't last in the heat. But with the lack of hydrating liquid, the colonists had to result to water. They also drank peach brandy and hard cider.[17] The wealthy were able to import and make alcohol such as beer, wine, brandies, and rum.[18]

**Different cooking techniques and equipment**

Colonists became resourceful in how they prepared their food. They used spouted clay pots for batter and jars for multipurpose use including soaking plants overnight. To keep food preserved, colonists dried food out by hanging it from the rafters of their storage houses. These foods included peppers, acorn squash, sausage, bacon, and smoked beef.[19] When the colonists originally arrived, they cooked over an open hearth fire. They usually used ironware such as frying pans. They also may have had plates, bowls, knives, forks, and spoons made from pewter, kettles, a coffeepot, and canisters for spices. If the colonists were wealthy, they had brass and pewter utensils, tankards with lids, chocolate sets, candlesticks, snuffers, flatware, and tea sets.[20] Everything was stored in the kitchen either on tables or on pegs. The favorite of the colonists was a large cast-iron kettle.[21] This can help cook large quantities for one pot meal.

Other items used were long handled ladles, warming pans, skillets, cutting boards, bread knives, jars, basins, and drinking glasses.[22]

**Storage and Kitchen Design**

The colonists in Quebec were resourceful in the sense that they built storage for their grain to protect it.[23] Other essential areas for the safekeeping of food were garrets, cellars, and pantries. The garret and cellar were where the storage places for fruits and vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, apples, parsnips, beets, and turnips. These items were kept in cases with slots to allow air to circulate. This prevented the food from molding. Other items were used for storage such as kegs for butter, lard, pigs' feet, and louse. Tubs stored brined hams, eels, salt mackerel, and shad (which is a type of fish). Salt pork and corned beef were stored in hogsheads. They stored spiced apples, pickled beef, pears, and head cheese in tumblers. They kept drinks such as beer, cider, madeira, and rum in barrels.[24]

The kitchen was added when the homes were able to be built to accommodate one. They were simple. Shelving was placed on the wall to keep containers of salt and cornmeal in plain view and accessible. White salt was kept there whereas the impure salt was kept in the barn. A rock was kept inside the cornmeal container (which was in the kitchen) to keep it cool and clump free. The walls had pegs and hooks from which to hang food bags and kitchen implements for easy reach. Workspaces included a stone sink, a table and sometimes a hinged shelf that could fold up and down for reserving space. Water buckets were constantly being used. Milk rooms, pantries, lean-tos, and the attic were all used for different purposes when space was available for them. The milk room was kept cool to store milk, cheese, butter, and equipment to make such things. The pantry held everyday foods such as herbs, vinegar, cider, molasses, wine, and sap. Lean-tos were just outside the kitchen door. They housed wood, onions, dried apples, and beans.

If there wasn't enough space in the storehouse outside, the attic was used for drying foods as well.[25]

**Daily Life in the Kitchen**

Women were the ones mostly in charge of preparing the food. This job would be a full day's work. This included collecting enough firewood for use throughout the day, gather herbs and vegetables from the garden, meats from the smokehouse, fruits and root vegetables from the cellar, and drinking liquid from storage. They would have specific days for baking called baking day. On this day, more fires would be made so all the baking could happen at once. The day before Sabbath, the food would be prepared and ready to be rewarmed the next day.[26] The day would start out early with breakfast, lunch was served somewhere between noon and 3pm. This was the main meal of the day. Using the favorite equipment mentioned earlier, the main meal was a portage or stew. The variety of this meal went along with the seasonal foods.[27] They would create portages and stews with what they had on hand.

**Conclusion**

Colonists needed to be resourceful to survive in the New World. They had to use what they knew and apply it to feed themselves.  This includes hunting, fishing, gathering familiar plants, and preparing food. They also had to become familiar with the food resources that were available to them. Colonists had to set up cooking stations which eventually turned into kitchens as houses built. Colonists learned how to be resourceful after failing by falling short on food shortages during harsh winters. All of these lessons taught them to survive.

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[1] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[2] Civitello, Linda. *Cuisine and culture : a history of food & people*. Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2004. 127.
[3] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 74-75.

[4] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 152.
[5] Hawke, David. *Everyday Life in Early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 74.
[6] Civitello, Linda. *Cuisine and culture : a history of food & people*. Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2004. 132-133.
[7] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 75.
[8] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 152.
[9] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 75.
[10] Civitello, Linda. *Cuisine and culture : a history of food & people*. Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2004. 129.
[11] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[12] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 154.
[13] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[14] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[15] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004.152.
[16] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 75.
[17] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 78-79.
[18] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 79.
[19] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[20] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 152.
[21] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 153.
[22] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 153.
[23] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[24] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[25] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 152.
[26] Snodgrass, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Kitchen history*. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 151.
[27] Hawke, David. *Everyday life in early America*. New York: Harper & Row, 2003. 75.