Colonial Food

- Food in colonial America depended upon the resources the settlers found in the New World. Influenced by their European heritage as well as the Native Americans, colonists consumed a variety of foods.
- All food was eaten salted, fresh, smoked, or dried. To keep dairy items fresh, Northerners used blocks of ice cut from frozen lakes in winter, while Southerners built stone springhouses over running springwater.
- They learned to grow corn, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, squash, peanuts, beans and wild rice from various Indian tribes.
- They also captured and bred wild turkeys and tapped maple trees for sap to boil down into syrup.
- They gathered berries, honey, and wild fruits. They picked apples and peaches from their orchards to make cider, pies, jams, and dried fruit.
- Colonists hunted game including venison, and fished the waters of their colonies. Pork was one of the most popular meats.
- Cooking was typically done over an open fire. A large cast iron pot was hung over the hot flames.
- Simple corn meal mush was known in early colonial times as “Indian Pudding” or “Hasty Pudding.” In fact, corn was typically the main dish. Breakfast was often corn meal mush sweetened with molasses. Apple pie was often made with a corn dough crust!
- Popcorn was a popular treat.
- Fresh meats were often roasted on a spit before the open fire, while salted meats were boiled in kettles with pot hooks hung from the swinging crane inside the deep cooking hearth. Late in the fall, they slaughtered hogs, hung the hams in the smokehouses, and made sausage and lard.
- Soups and stews with vegetables and meat was popular.
- Fireplaces with brick wall ovens were used for baking. Baked foods were put in “slow” to “quick” or “hot” ovens “until done,” “until tender,” or “until enough.” The method of measuring oven heat was simple but effective – if your hand was scorched, the heat was too high!
- Vegetables were usually served cooked. Tomatoes were avoided as they were thought to be poisonous. Vegetable gardens were popular and canning was an annual task.
- They dug pits to store potatoes, turnips and carrots for the winter.
- Flour was produced locally and farmyards produced eggs in abundance.
- Sugar was purchased in large, round-topped loaves called “loaf sugar”. A chunk, as needed, was then sifted and passed through a sieve before it was ready for use in cooking or baking.
- The most popular desserts were tarts, puddings, and custards. Dessert jellies were popular and the earliest congealing agent used in the colonies was gelatin made by boiling down calves’ feet.
- During the Revolution in the 1770’s, salt was scarce and it was polite if you were invited for dinner to bring your own saltcellar. Salt was a necessity for preserving meat as well as cooking and was produced by evaporating it from seawater.

Drink

During colonial times, it was common to start the day with rum or a glass of cider. Water was considered not to be healthy. Everyone drank beer, wine, cider, or rum. A mixture of rum and cider, called “flip”, was a popular drink, even for children. At the end of a meal, there was sometimes a cup of coffee, tea, or hot chocolate.