

Chapter 46

Foods of the United States and Canada

Early American Kitchens

Directions: Read the following selection. Then answer the questions under *Thinking Critically*, and complete the activities as directed by your teacher.

The kitchens in colonial homes were very different from modern kitchens. Most of the cooking utensils, plates, and bowls were made of heavy iron. There were no counters, cabinets, sinks, appliances, ovens, stovetops, or other conveniences to make cooking easier. There was no plumbing or running water. All water used for cooking, drinking, and washing had to be hauled in buckets from a nearby stream or hand-dug water well. A simple cupboard, a table, and an open hearth fireplace were all that the early colonists had in their kitchen. All the cooking was done in the fireplace.

Meats were roasted on spits over the open fire. By turning the spit, the meat could be browned on all sides while the dripping fat sizzled in the flames. The fireplace had a swinging hook for hanging kettles over the flame. The arm could be swung away from the fire for stirring and then back over the fire to cook. The swinging arm also enabled food to be cooked at different temperatures. Food was cooked at a boil directly over the fire, at a simmer a little farther away, and heated gently at a greater distance.

Some foods, such as cornbread, were cooked on hot coals scraped from the fire onto the hearth. The pot was placed directly on the hot coals.

The cooking methods of the colonists determined the kinds of dishes they ate. Aside from roasted meats, staples of the colonial eating plan included seafood chowders, stews, soups, baked beans, and puddings. One-pot meals were common, such as the famous New England boiled dinner in which corned beef or brisket, cabbage, potatoes, and carrots are boiled together, exchanging flavors while becoming tender and juicy.

In the Old World, only the very rich could afford to eat meat. In North America, however, the forests and plains were full of edible animals. Meat formed a major part of the eating plan of early settlers. It has

even been suggested that the energy and ambition of the American colonists derived in part from the large quantities of meat protein in their eating plan.

As you read in your textbook, Native Americans introduced settlers to a wide variety of new foods, including potatoes, maize, squash, and pumpkins. Settlers also learned new cooking techniques, such as the clambake. A pit was dug and lined with flat stones on which a fire was built. When the stones became white-hot, the ashes were removed, and a layer of seaweed was placed on the stones. Layers of clams, ears of corn, and more seaweed were placed on top of the stones. When the pit was full, it was covered with wet cloth or hide, which was kept moist while the buried ingredients cooked. After about an hour, the pit was uncovered, and its ingredients were removed—tender, moist, and delicious. Clams, incidentally, were plentiful, as were lobsters and oysters. Some early recipes called for as many as four hundred oysters!

It wasn't until the 1800s that the American kitchen took its first steps toward modernization. After 1827, the root cellar—often a mere pit on the north side of the house where food could be kept cold—began to be replaced by the icebox. The first functional refrigerator for home use wasn't invented until 1913. Wood- and coal-burning stoves gradually took the place of the fireplace. The gas range appeared around 1850, but because of fears about its potential dangers, the range didn't become common until the 1920s. The first electric range amazed visitors at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893.

Today, much has changed in the American kitchen. There is a vast array of devices available to make meal preparation easy. What remains unchanged is the plentiful variety of foods available with which to create nutritious and appealing meals.

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Thinking Critically

1. Which innovation do you think had the greatest impact on American cooking: the wood stove, the refrigerator, or hot and cold running water? Why?

2. What factors do you think encouraged early settlers to try new foods and new cooking techniques?

3. What method of heat transfer did the preparation methods for clambake and cornbread have in common? Explain.

For Further Study

- ◆ Choose a region of the United States, and research the traditional cooking techniques of Native Americans in that region. Compare and contrast these techniques with those of early settlers. In what ways did the cooking techniques of Native Americans impact the cooking methods of settlers with whom they came in contact? Summarize your findings in a brief report to share with the class.
- ◆ Interview an older adult that you know about the changes in the American kitchen over the last 50 years. How has food preparation changed? What appliances have become common in the kitchen? Write a summary about your interview and submit it to your teacher.