

What America Ate (Even Before It Could Spell, Punctuate or Conjugate)

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Just like a novel, reading cookbooks has been a lifelong love of mine. While my cookbook collection has diminished over the years, thanks in part to both the internet and a need to downsize, it is still fascinating to learn about different cultures and different foods while recognizing that cooks have found comfort in the art of creating meals throughout the ages.

Family recipes and cookbooks handed down from previous generations are a source of constant delight and amazement as to how meal preparation has changed, and yet how much remains the same. Inventions such as the electric oven, microwave, induction cooking and air fryer have changed how we cook, and some might argue not necessarily for the better.

The first recorded cookbook is said to be four clay tablets from 1700 BCE from ancient Mesopotamia. By 1300 CE, cookbooks were the norm for kings and queens, with the "Forme of Cury" ("The Rules of Cookery") published for King Richard II. Once the printing press evolved, cookbooks became less bourgeois and more available to everyone.

The first known cookbook by an American is believed to be "American Cooke" by Amelia Simmons, published in 1796. Its full title is "American Cooke, Or The Art of Dressing Viands, Fish, Poultry and Vegetables and the Best Modes of Making Pastes, Puffs, Pies, Tarts, Puddings, Custards and Preserves, and All Kinds of Cakes, From the Imperial Plumb to Plain Cake." To read this cookbook is to take a peek back at what began to shape American cooking and baking as we now know it.

Little is known about Simmons other than she was an orphan, apparently born in Albany, New York. She spent her early years under the care of several guardians, and it was said this shaped her character of opinion and determination. She earned her living as a maid and was a young woman of modest means. She eventually married and had six children. She is quoted as saying she "lacked an education sufficient to prepare for the work of the press." Clearly, this did not prevent her from undertaking what amounted to her life's work.

Simmons included her recipes for New England specialties such as Indian Pudding, johnnycake (formerly "Journey Cake"), and what is now known as pumpkin pie.



She also introduced pearl ash, a forerunner of baking soda, which revolutionized the baking of cakes. She also invented the cupcake, recommending using "small pans to bake cakes."

While "American Cooke" featured recipes for preparing all manner of vegetables and meats such as stuffed goose, stuffed leg of veal, roast lamb and stews, the cake recipes contained within its pages epitomize what baking meant to this country in its very early days.

After a nod to England, the "Queen's Cake" and its concoction of cream, sugar, flour, 10 eggs, a glass of wine (!), rosewater and spices, along with "Plumb Cake" and its 21 eggs, expensive fruits and nuts, wine and cream, Simmons turned her focus to recipes with ingredients more common in everyday kitchens. Simple things such as cornmeal (a New World staple of the early American diet), milk, flour, eggs and bacon grease were plain but bountiful building blocks for early American cooks and a turn away from English recipes that had been the standard of early colonial days.

"American Cooke" (now known as "American Cookery") was printed and reprinted for over 30 years until it began to fall out of favor. However, the post-World War II era brought a resurgence of interest in this American classic and it is widely available once again. There are sections on how to select the best bean, as well as what to look for when choosing meat, poultry, butter, cheese, eggs and vegetables. It is a peek into how our ancestors made do with what was available to them, and how creatively they cooked.

Below are two recipes lifted from this incredible cookbook quoted in the vernacular of its time.

Christmas Cookey

To three pounds flour, sprinkle a tea cup of fine powdered coriander seed, rub in one pound butter, and one and a half pound sugar, dissolve three tea spoonfuls of pearl ash (note: this is what we now know as baking soda) in a tea cup of milk, kneed all together well, roll three quarters of an inch thick, and cut or stamp into

shape and size you please, bake slowly fifteen or twenty minutes; tho' hard and dry at first, if put into an earthen pot, and dry cellar, or damp room, they will be finer, softer and better when six months old. (Note: while an interesting take on cookie baking back then, I wouldn't recommend storing cookies for six months before consuming them.)

To Stuff and Roast a Turkey, or Fowl

One pound soft wheat bread, 3 ounces beef suet, 3 eggs, a little sweet thyme, sweet marjoram, pepper and salt, some add a gill (note: 1/4 pint) of wine; fill the bird there-

with and sew up, hang down to a steady solid fire, basting frequently with salt and water, and roast until steam emits from the breast, put one-third of a pound of butter into the gravy, dust flour over the bird and baste with the gravy, serve up with boiled onions and cranberry sauce, mangoes, pickles or celery.

This cookbook is a treasure trove of American cooking history, complete with units of measure no longer used, as well as differences in spelling and punctuation, all written by a young woman who left her mark in the culinary world while helping shape our unique American identity through the universal language of food. ■

