

Fast Food in Colonial America

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The desire for what we today term “fast food” exists not only in our time, but, on the contrary, it likely existed as far back as culinary history can be traced. Meals that could be prepared quickly, inexpensively, and eaten conveniently over-the-road were just as popular in the past as they are today. And just as our fast food establishments and cooks realize the appeal of convenience foods, so, too, did the colonists and early Americans, and subsequently developed their own particular varieties. From being a cheap solution to a hungry stomach, a quickly-prepared meal for a busy colonial woman, or a practical provision for a traveler, fast food served a number of purposes in colonial America.

One particularly American characteristic that developed along with the fledgling nation, allowing for its increasing desire for fast, convenience foods, was a tendency to eat quickly, particularly among the working classes.¹ Numerous reports of travelers in America noted the American desire to finish meals hastily. Henry Wansey, an Englishman visiting a Boston tavern in 1794, attested that the Americans were fond of friendly conversation while eating, but that as soon as they were finished, they left to return to their work, “for the Americans know the value of time too well to waste it at the table.”² This characteristic, in turn, probably stems from the prevalent Protestant work ethic in the colonies, an attribute that would come to define the American people.

Faced with the pressure to get the food on the table quickly, colonial cooks had little time to carefully weigh their ingredients on scales, as had been done in Europe. Scales were time-consuming and costly, so they were abandoned in favor of measuring with cups, glasses and spoons.³ Though the busiest of colonial and early American women were undoubtedly of the working class, wealthier women also desired more speed and convenience in food preparation. Mary Randolph, a tavern-keeper of the gentry class (a singular occurrence in itself), published a particularly popular cookbook in 1824 entitled *The Virginia Housewife*. Even her more elegant recipes, when compared to the earlier cookbooks she was referencing, are shortened and simplified and utilize cup- and spoon-measurements, rather than weights.⁴

A tremendous timesaver to colonial bakers was the chemical leaven, first referenced in Amelia Simmons' 1796 cookbook, *Art of Cookery*.⁵ Pearlsh, the particular type of chemical leaven used during this period, is simply the alkaline substance potassium carbonate. When mixed with an acidic ingredient, such as lemon, sour milk or molasses, it creates gas bubbles that raise the baked product, typically some sort of cake or biscuit. The addition of chemical leaven to baking recipes sped up the process immensely, as it eliminated the need to wait for yeast to rise in the dough. Before chemical leaven, cooks needed to raise cakes with either yeast or beaten egg whites, a process that would take a frustrating amount of time, and one that would be repeated multiple times a week, if not every day. In a society where baked goods were an important and commonplace component of practically every meal, the subtraction of this rising time significantly expedited the baking process.

The American desire for speediness in food preparation and consumption was pioneered by the cooks behind every fast-food meal. These were predominately the widowed keepers of urban taverns and inns and the busy housewives of rural farms. Widows in early America were left with

¹ Oliver 27

² Wansey 46

³ Oliver 26

⁴ Harbury 29, Carson xxi

⁵ Oliver 1-2, Simmons 35

very few options for their livelihood, outside of resorting to “public relief.” Society expected that a woman’s sphere was in the domestic arts alone; consequently, the jobs outside the home that were available were very few, limited to such occupations as seamstress, governess, needlework-instructor, milliner, cook and, of course, tavern-keeper.⁶ Taverns of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries served as purveyors of food, drink and lodging for travelers and locals alike. Widowed tavern-keepers, without the additional salary of a spouse, struggled to make ends meet and prepared meals that were, for the most part, far from extravagant. The British comedian, John Bernard, traveling in the Carolinas at the end of the eighteenth century, described the food and service he received at one such tavern: “As to edibles, whether you called for breakfast, dinner or supper the reply was one, eggs and bacon; but the meal brought not a gratification but a task. . . . Ten to one you had to cook the meal yourself, while the landlady was searching for a trencher; and when it was before you, you were sure of only one thing—to pay for it.”⁷ Bacon and other pork products were commonplace, inexpensive fare in American taverns, due to their abundance and the long preservation life of salted meat. Hot biscuits and butter, too, were a quick meal that could easily be put together with relatively few ingredients.⁸ Cooks, such as Randolph, probably took the concept of quick biscuits and rolls one step further into the convenient fast food fare known as sandwiches. Although its history can be traced back to the eastern Mediterranean’s filled pita breads and canapés, the sandwich is officially attributed to the British statesman, John Montagu, fourth earl of Sandwich. According to the story, during a 24-hour gambling streak in 1762, Montagu asked his cook to prepare a meal that could be eaten with only one hand, so that he could continue his game; the result was the “sandwich.” Though the first American literary reference to the actual word “sandwich” does not appear until Eliza Leslie’s *Directions for Cookery* in 1837,⁹ we can assume that this absence stems from the Americans’ reluctance during the time of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 to blatantly imitate anything popular in England. This does not mean, however, that Americans were not, in fact, making sandwiches, as evidenced by Mary Randolph’s recipe for Oyster Loaves, probably an early forerunner of the po’boy:

To Make Oyster Loaves

Take little round loaves, cut off the top, scrape out all the crumbs, then out the oysters into a stew pan with the crumbs that came out of the loaves, a little water, and a good lump of butter; stew them together ten or fifteen minutes, then put in a spoonful of good cream, fill your loaves, lay the bit of crust carefully on again, set them in the oven to crisp. Three are enough for a side dish.¹⁰

Although beef was the preferred sandwich meat in Britain, Americans tended to use more ham because it kept better in the warmer climate of most of the colonies. For the frugal tavern-keeper, the sandwich was a perfect fast food solution in both its ease and cost-effectiveness.

Just as the tavern-keeping widows of early America found creative solutions for quick, economically-efficient meals, backcountry housewives, too, had to prepare cost-effective meals for their families in the little time they had outside of their other duties. In addition to cooking, the average housewife was responsible for numerous other tasks related just to the sustenance of her family. These included maintaining the vegetable garden; harvesting in the field with the men and children; preparing remedies and special foods for the sick; brewing beer; assisting with butchering and performing secondary butchering, the process of turning large cuts of meat into cuts small enough for the table; milking cows and making butter and cheese; and preserving food and monitoring when it

⁶ Harbury 22

⁷ Bernard 43

⁸ Randolph 78

⁹ Mariani 283

¹⁰ Randolph 78

should be used.¹¹ These tasks were not only extremely important, but also extremely time-consuming. Failure to carry out her food preservation responsibilities, in particular, could be disastrous, if another source of food could not be found, or the money to buy it. In order to ensure that there would be a constant supply of food even in the long winter months, various methods of food preservation were utilized. One enormously popular way in which meat and poultry were preserved and prepared in advance was potting. It basically involved boiling or baking meat until it was tender, then pounding it into a paste with a mortar and pestle, stirring in spices and butter or animal fat, packing it into earthenware jars and sealing them with a layer of melted butter or animal fat poured over the top. The same was done for fish, called “caveaching,” except the fish was fried in oil, stored in a vinegar pickle, and sealed with a top layer of oil.¹² Mary Randolph described her recipe for caveaching fish as “a very convenient article, as it makes an excellent and ready addition to a dinner or supper.”¹³ If it was kept cold, the potted meat would stay preserved for quite a while, and could then later be used as a quick spread on bread or as a ready-made filling for pies. Preparing a large amount of potted meat in advance would save tremendous amounts of time in the future when a quick meal was desirable. The most popular pies were mincemeat, which combined meat, fruit and brandy or cider. Often the pies were baked in advance, using melted butter over the top to seal out the air. They could then be stored away and reheated later when needed.¹⁴ Such pies were commonly served as fast food in the European Middle Ages and both practicality and taste insured their popularity in the colonies as well. The pie would be baked and served in a crust of rye or wheat flour, but the hard, coarse crust was not intended to be eaten. Poorer families, however, could not afford to throw anything away, and the crust would have been eaten along with the filling.¹⁵

Not only did the rural housewife need to preserve, pre-prepare and cook foods, but her meals also needed to be frugal, so that she could ensure the survival of her family. The level of poverty that existed in early rural America was often found particularly in the Irish and Scotch backcountry settlements of the Carolinas and in the settlements that extended ever further into the west. The Reverend Charles Woodmason, an itinerant Anglican minister who traveled around Camden, South Carolina in 1767 and 1768 noted that the Irish poor there had only Indian cornbread and water and “live wholly on Butter, Milk, Clabber.”¹⁶ Clabber, “bonny clabber” or clabbered milk was a traditional Scotch-Irish dish that often constituted a substantial part of the backcountry settler’s diet. It is formed when milk naturally sours in warm weather and forms curds, similar to the yogurt we eat today. Other commonplace food items included variations of milk and corn dishes; sometimes with the addition of meat or eggs. One such dish was “mush,” a recipe for which Hannah Glasse included in her 1747 *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*.

To make mush

Boil a pot of water, according to the quantity you wish to make, and then stir in the meal till it becomes quite thick, stirring all the time to keep out the lumps, season with salt, and eat it with milk or molasses.¹⁷

Mush would be generally be eaten for breakfast and supper¹⁸, usually the smallest meals of the day, but would also serve for the midday meal, when nothing else could be had.

¹¹ Oliver 123

¹² Oliver 117, Kidder 13

¹³ Randolph 103-4

¹⁴ Oliver 117

¹⁵ Oliver 153

¹⁶ Woodmason 36

¹⁷ Glasse 137

¹⁸ Oliver 187

As the backcountry settlers were well aware, survival in the new world was not always a simple task. Unlike the colonies and early America, the Old World the colonists had left behind was vastly more populated, a circumstance that allowed for a variety of urban-based food services, such as restaurants and eateries that sold fast, prepared foods.¹⁹ Early American taverns continued in this tradition, but were few and far-between in most parts of the sparsely-populated nation. Therefore, outside of what taverns could provide, much of the preparation of convenience foods fell to the average housewife. In making fast food, early American women used whatever cooking knowledge they had at their disposal, some of which was the culinary tradition they had brought with them from Europe. The rest of their knowledge came from what they learned from other cultures they were now exposed to, in particular that of the native Americans. One fast-food dish that settlers learned from them was a filling meal for a traveler on the road, recorded by John Bartram during his travels in Pennsylvania and Canada in 1751.

They take the corn and parch it in hot ashes, til it becomes brown, then clean it, pound it in a mortar and sift it, this powder is mixed with sugar. About 1 quarter of a pint, diluted in a pint of water, is a hearty traveling dinner.²⁰

Most dishes that can be identified as “early American” are characterized by European methods of cooking, utilizing native American ingredients.²¹ Although wheat was preferred by Europeans to other grains, they had a difficult time cultivating it in some of the colonies. Corn, on the other hand, grew well almost everywhere. Because of its similarity to wheat- or oatmeal when ground, the early Americans used their cooking knowledge for wheat and oats in order to utilize cornmeal.²² One food that made a successful transition from wheat and oats to corn was the pudding. Long a favorite dish of the Europeans, particularly the British, an American cookbook of 1724 described it as “cheap and very acceptable.”²³ Not only were puddings cheap, but they were also a hearty, filling dish. This thick, hearty quality is attested to in the well-known Revolutionary War tune, “Yankee Doodle.” “And there we saw the men and boys—As thick as hasty pudding.”²⁴ Hasty pudding, in particular, was appealing to the harried cook because of its swiftness in cooking, making it a popular fast food option. It did not need to be wrapped in a cloth like other puddings, but simply boiled quickly in a pan. In 1793, the Connecticut poet, John Barlow, described the various types of haste needed in preparing and consuming a hasty pudding in his mock-epic of the same name.

In haste the boiling caldron, o'er the blaze,
Receives and cooks the ready powder'd-maize;
In haste 'tis served, and then in equal haste,
With cooling milk, we make the sweet repast.²⁵

William Penn's wife, Gulielma, included a recipe for hasty pudding in her family's cookbook in 1702 before Penn's first journey across the Atlantic.²⁶ Upon settling in the colony, she, as other colonial women, would have substituted cornmeal in the recipe, when wheat or oats could not be had.

Another native American dish similar to the hasty pudding in ingredients, but consistently made with cornmeal, was the johnnycake. Basically a dense cornmeal batter, shaped into a flat cake and baked or fried on a griddle, the johnnycake was known by numerous other names, such as “ashcake,”

¹⁹ Harbury 47

²⁰ Bartram 71

²¹ Oliver 20

²² Oliver 22

²³ Several hands, *Collection*, 2:24

²⁴ “Yankee Doodle,” lyrics attributed to Dr. Richard Shuckburgh, a British army surgeon

²⁵ Barlow Canto I, Lines 95-98

²⁶ Penn 85

“hoecake” and “Shawnee cake.” It was also often known as “journeycake,” and was probably so named because it was easily prepared and carried by travelers on long trips.²⁷ The Iroquois used it for a similar purpose and taught this useful fast food to the colonists that settled there.²⁸

Whether the methods or ingredients were European or native American, early American women consistently found ways to provide quick, frugal meals for travelers and their families alike. Their creations allowed tavern-keeping widows to earn a modest living, travelers to purchase convenient over-the-road fare, and backcountry housewives to lighten their workload and expenses. The chemical leaven, the use of measuring cups and spoons, and the cultural amalgamations we know and love today as “American” dishes are just some of the additions these women have made to American culture and its place in the history of fast food.

²⁷ “Johnnycake,” *Food Reference Website* & “Johnnycake,” *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

Rhode Island experts on the johnnycake, particularly the members of the “Propagation of the Jonnycake Tradition” society, assert that the origin of the word “jonnycake” is from “journey cake,” because it was carried on trips. Incidentally, the word “journey” is often pronounced “jonny” in that part of New England (Mariani 172).

²⁸ Waugh 80-3

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