

Thanksgiving 1621

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Our modern holiday fare bears little resemblance to the food eaten at the three-day 1621 harvest celebration at Plymouth Colony, the event now recalled as The First Thanksgiving. The Wampanoag and Plymouth colonists often ate wild turkey, however it was not specifically mentioned in connection with that 1621 harvest celebration. Edward Winslow said only that four men went hunting and brought back large amounts of fowl, more likely from the scenario, to be seasonal waterfowl such as ducks and geese. And what about the stuffing? Yes, the Wampanoag and English did occasionally stuff the birds and fish, typically with herbs, onions or oats (English only). If cranberries were served at the harvest celebration, they appeared in Wampanoag dishes, or possibly to add tartness to an English sauce.

It would be 50 years before an Englishman mentioned boiling this New England berry with sugar for a sauce to eat with meat. In 1621 England, sugar was expensive; in 1621 New Plymouth, there may not have been any of this imported spice at all. Potatoes, which had originated in South America, had not yet made their way into the diet of the Wampanoag in 1621 (though the Wampanoag did eat other local varieties of tubers). By 1621, potatoes, both sweet and white, had traveled across the Atlantic to Europe but they had not been generally adopted into the English diet. The sweet potato, originating in the Caribbean, was cultivated in Spain and imported into England. It was a rare dainty available to the wealthy, who believed it to be a potent aphrodisiac. The white potato was virtually unknown by the average early 17th-century Englishman. Only a few gentlemen botanists and gardeners were trying to grow this colonial oddity.

But surely there was pumpkin pie to celebrate the harvest? Pumpkin -- probably yes, but pie, probably not..

The typical menu of Thanksgiving dinner is actually more than 200 years younger than that 1621 celebration and reflects both the holiday New England roots and a Victorian nostalgia for an imaginary time when hearth and home, family and community, were valued over progress and change. But while we have been able to work out which modern dishes were not available in 1621, just what was served is a tougher nut to crack.

The only contemporary description of the event by Edward Winslow tells us that they had seasonal wild fowl and the venison brought by the Wampanoag and presented to key Englishmen. The same writer is eloquent about the bounty of his new home.

“Our bay is full of lobsters all the summer and affordeth variety of other fish; in September we can take a hogshead of eels in a night, with small labor, and can dig them out of their beds all the winter. We have mussels ... at our doors. Oysters we have none near, but we can have them brought by the Indians when we will; all the spring-time the earth sendeth forth naturally very good sallet herbs. Here are grapes, white and red, and very sweet and strong also. Strawberries, gooseberries, raspas, etc. Plums of tree sorts, with black and red, being almost as good as a damson; abundance of roses, white, red, and damask; single, but very sweet indeed. These things I thought good to let you understand, being the truth of things as near as I could experimentally take knowledge of, and that you might on our behalf give God thanks who hath dealt so favorably with us.”

Another source describing the colonial diet that autumn said, “Besides waterfowl, there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had since harvest, Indian corn. Though not specifically mentioned as a food on the menu, corn was certainly part of the feasts. Remember that the harvest being celebrated was that of the colorful hard flint corn that the English often referred to as Indian corn. This corn was a staple for the Wampanoag and soon became a fixture in the cooking pots of New Plymouth. The English had acquired their first seed corn by helping themselves to a cache of corn from a Native storage pit on one of their initial explorations of Cape Cod. (They later paid the owners for this “borrowed”

corn.) It is intriguing to imagine how the English colonists processed and prepared the novel corn for the first time in the fall of 1621. One colonist gave a hint of how his countrymen sought to describe and prepare a new grain in familiar, comforting terms: "Our Indian corn, even the coarsest, maketh as pleasant a meat as rice. In other words, traditional English dishes of porridge and pancakes (and later bread) were adapted to be used with native corn.

In September and October, a variety of both dried and fresh vegetables were available. The produce from the gardens of New Plymouth is likely to have included what were then called, "herbs" ...parsnips, collards, carrots, parsley, turnips, spinach, cabbages, sage, thyme, marjoram and onions. Dried cultivated beans and dried wild blueberries may have been available as well as native cranberries, pumpkins, grapes and nuts. While many elements of the modern holiday menu are very different from the foods eaten in 1621, the bounty of the New England autumn was clearly the basis for both."

"Partakers of Plenty"- Kathleen A. Curtin, Plimoth Plantation

"Giving Thanks: Thanksgiving Recipes and History, from Pilgrims to Pumpkin Pie, Kathleen Curtin, Sandra L. Oliver and Plimoth Plantation [Clarkson Potter:New York] 2005. Your local public librarian can help you get a copy.]