

OUR FOOD. OUR HISTORY



The holidays are a time for gathering, for visiting with friends and family, and, of course, for sitting down to spectacular holiday meals. If you are like me you are already, in that scratchpad in your head, sketching out what your holiday dinner might look like: turkey or roast beef? Appetizers? Perhaps a few interesting cocktails to start? Nothing a few choice search terms and a visit to Pinterest won't solve, right?

In the past few years we have had the experience of being exquisitely aware of supply chains and foodways thanks to the Coronavirus pandemic. At the time, it meant waiting longer for something to arrive, having to pay more when it got here or just having to do without. It made many of us realize just how much we took for granted in regard to our food. We are in a time where we can literally randomly shout out to a device in our home, "Remind me to buy lychee!", and it will - if not just go ahead and order it right then and there.



For Thanksgiving I cooked all day long after strenuously ordering everything I needed from Instacart. I took maybe fifteen minutes to pull a rough menu together in my head. But as I thumbed through my Colonial Williamsburg cookbook, I got to thinking about how the same meal that I had just so casually given a few minutes to creating would have been assembled by our ancestors in the early days of colonization; the aristocracy, farmers and tradesmen, indigenous Americans, or by those enslaved by early settlers - what would a "Holiday Feast" look like and what would it take to produce?

Serving turkey? You had better know how and where to hunt or at least know someone who does. And, goodness, if you want roast beef? I hope you started raising that cow a good while ago and tended it well, kept it safe from predators and disease, and then, of course, I hope you or someone around there is a proficient butcher. Veggies for sides? Again, hopefully you planned ahead and have preserved your summer harvest (without a freezer, mind you) and/or thought ahead to have your winter crops well on the way. And don't even get me started on spicing up everything. I hope you know when the next shipment of pepper, nutmeg, and cinnamon is coming from India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka (respectively) and where the Dutch East India company will be putting it to market.

Of course, once you manage to gather your supplies, be sure that you also know how to regulate an open flame to cook and, in these days before widespread publications, make



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sure you know how to create everything from scratch, most often from memory, and be ready to improvise based on the quality and quantity of the supplies you are able to procure. If you are enslaved, needless to say, everything just got 1000% (understatement) more difficult. In the best case scenario, you are lucky enough to get the cast offs to do with what you can.

I write all this not so that you can lecture people in the grocery store spice aisle who willy-nilly chuck plastic containers of cinnamon into their carts, or so that you think deeply before putting each bite of food in your mouth, or even so that you find a deeper appreciation of your local farmers and makers (although that last one you should do anyway). But more so that you can be aware of the vast amount we can learn about who we are and where we came from by studying these foods and foodways.

There are stories - myriad stories - connected to each of the foods that we eat. Those stories, and the objects of them, become even more complex and fascinating as you trace their discovery, origins, 'migrations,' as you begin to combine them into recipes, refine them with technique, and tweak them with cultural preferences, individual influences, societal mores and events. An example: as an enslaved American, those cast offs you were given to work with and those seeds you were somehow able to carry with you from your home country became the basis for our "American" way of cooking and is touted most often as the Southern Cuisine and Soul Food we all know and love today. So many paths to follow, with so much history waiting to be told...

The depth of our predecessors' fortitude and resourcefulness, the folly of their whims, and the boundlessness of their creativity shine through readily when you take a moment to peek beneath the surface - and we can't wait to explore it all.

So for this holiday season, Bon Appetit! And I look forward to seeing you in the spice aisle.



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