

## Food in Colonial Virginia

The small farmer was always able to feed his family in this land of plenty, but there was little variety in flavoring these one-dish meals, cooked in the stew pot that was constantly simmering on the fire. The landed gentry enjoyed and could afford a greater variety in their diets. To supplement the ordinary bill of fare, they were able to afford imported luxuries such as spices, fruits, and wines.

In eighteenth-century Virginia, most people began the day with breakfast, served between 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning. The small farmer's breakfast usually consisted of a large bowl of porridge and a cup of cider or of bread and milk. It was the landed gentry who would have a variety of hot breads and cold sliced meat and either milk, coffee, chocolate, or tea. The menu sometimes included fruit or eggs, but these were rarities.

The main meal of the day was called dinner. People who lived in cities like Williamsburg usually ate dinner early in the afternoon, at 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. People who lived on small farms ate dinner later in the day. For the small farmer's dinner, a stew was ladled from the kettle into wooden plates called trenchers. Poor families and slaves ate simpler foods such as hominy, a hot cereal of ground corn. Beans might be cooked with the hominy, and a little meat might be added occasionally. In landed gentry families, they ate an elaborate two-course meal. The first course was soup (in cold weather), Virginia ham, roast meat, seafood, vegetables, salad (but only when in season), bread and a variety of beverages. The second course was made up of desserts, such as, puddings, pastries, jellies, and sweetmeats. The middling sort (people in between the small farmer and the landed gentry) ate fewer meats and probably more vegetables and bread than wealthy Virginians did. They also enjoyed less variety.

Supper was served around 8:00 p.m., and was a light meal of leftovers from dinner, served with bread and butter, fruit and beverages. Some families eliminated the supper meal entirely and existed only on an early morning breakfast and a mid-afternoon dinner.

Much of what colonial Virginians ate depended on the season of the year. Fresh fruits and vegetables ripened in the summer and early fall. In the winter Virginians depended on root vegetables like carrots, potatoes, and turnips that could be stored for a long time, and on foods that had been pickled, dried, preserved, salted, or smoked. Imported sugar, tea, coffee, lemons, and other food items were available at stores and were frequently shipped directly to plantations.

Keeping food from spoiling was a big problem. Butter or cheese could be cooled in a well or spring, but fresh meat had to be eaten quickly. Most meat was salted, pickled, or potted for later use.

Meals had to be prepared daily in every colonial Virginia household. Preparing a full meal took a long time. For families who could afford it, they would have servants or slaves to do the cooking. The lady of the house usually supervised these workers and often did some of the cooking herself.

In the southern colonies, kitchens were usually separate buildings behind the main houses. It is

very hot in the south in the summer, so having the kitchen in a separate building helped the family escape from the heat and odors of cooking. It also separated the slaves, who were doing the cooking, from the rest of the household.

The fireplace was the center of cooking activities, and took up most of one wall in the kitchen. The cook or her helpers hung large pots and kettles from a pole stretched across the chimney several feet above the hearth. Most baking was done in heavy iron kettles called Dutch ovens, which had flat, tight-fitting lids. A bed of coals beneath the Dutch oven, and hot embers piled on top and around it supplied the heat. The simplest method of baking, however, was to sweep a clean spot on the hearth and cook pieces of dough right on the hot bricks. Fireplace cooking was hard, hot work.

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