

Celebrating Food in History
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At this time of year, we all celebrate some sort of food feasts to commemorate the past. These are not just meals, but are nostalgia for the past, a gift to our own families and friends.

For me, as an unapologetic historian (which includes food history), this is an opportunity to feast with respect for foods that have played a much longer role than just our families in what makes us human and civilized.

First, we are the only creatures who cook our food, a skill early in our development, that no doubt gave us longevity. I recall a children's book that recounts the history of the Chinese discovering cooked pig: an accidental fire that roasted a boar and those inveterate cooks, the Chinese, discovered how delicious cooked meat was.

Through the long history of our development as societies, from the advent of agriculture through city states, kingdoms, and empires, food has played an enormous role. We first learned to grow grain, then fruits and nuts, then ventured into the sea to catch the great schools of cod, a fish that takes well to salting and drying for storage. This discovery soon led to seagoing trade, with preserved food (cod, dates, figs) in exchange for the wonderful spices of Asia.

Food became a huge part of the growth of wealth, and also had an unfortunate underbelly: the rich feasted and the poor starved. One just needs to watch some of the documentaries about Christmas in the great English baronial houses to see food preparations that were works of art, as well as great gastronomy. Mince pie was once really minced-meat, dried fruit, and brandy, cooked into a pie, a treasure served one day a year to the workers and poor who served their feudal lords.

I have made traditions for my family and friends that celebrate and honor the foods in history. As they ruefully note, I am always the professor, but they love the foods nonetheless. My point is that we should remember the importance of these foods, not just eat them mindlessly.

Thanksgiving is a tribute at our table to offer only the foods that originated in the Western Hemisphere, the products of the Native Americans. The conquest of the New World quickly became a food revolution: the final combining of the foods of Eurasia (from China, Persia, across Europe to the Atlantic) and the foods of North and South America. Our Thanksgiving table honors Turkey, cranberries, pecans, corn, wild rice, potatoes, avocados, papayas, pineapple, tomatoes, all beans, pumpkins and all the squash family, New England lobsters and California Dungeness Crab, and CHOCOLATE. We have plenty of choices, all Native American.

For Christmas, we celebrate an Italian feast: the Feast of the Seven Fishes. In Italy, Christmas Eve is a fasting day, no meat until after midnight and the Midnight Mass. We celebrate the tradition, not the piety. The feast this year included salmon roe (the fish of tomorrow), anchovy, smoked oyster pate, sprats (a Scandinavian variety of sardine), pickled herring, clams in broth, and shrimp. Count them: seven. We are pretend Italian for that night.

For New Year's Day, the celebration is the great foods of Eurasia, before the discovery of the New World. The Chinese, Persians, and all Europeans learned how to preserve food so that they were not starving in the winter. Those preserved foods are wonderful and inventive. Our feast includes: wine (preserved grapes), cheese, sausages such as Coppa, Prosciutto and figs, caviar (salted roe), olives, pickled herring, beets (root vegetables), barley (grains), and preserved fruits in syrup (stem chestnuts). The meal goes from soup to nuts, all preserved by canning, drying, and pickling.

For the rest of the year, there are other national festivals to celebrate: Chinese New Year, Persian New Year, Easter and Passover, Fourth of July, and Fall harvests.

These are traditions that give us all the perspective of history, the mindful taste of these wonderful ingredients, and the salute to cooks: the great chefs and the equally talented women who cook for us every day of the year. My gift to you.

Happy New Year.

685 words

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