



What's for Dinner? A Brief History of Traditional Thanksgiving Foods

It's #FactFriday! Thanksgiving is one of the oldest holidays in America, which means it comes with traditions that have been around for hundreds of years, mostly centered around food. Today, we may not eat exactly what was likely consumed during the first colonial thanksgiving meals, like venison & wild fowl, but we still enjoy some of the tastiest Western foods around. And yes, there was more than one colonial meal where colonists, sometimes with their Native neighbors, gathered in thanksgiving for a bountiful crop, or in gratitude of a safe arrival.

An example is found in our own New Mexican history. Known as the "Other First Thanksgiving," a feast held in gratitude occurred on April 20, 1598 in the area of present day El Paso, Texas, led by Juan de Oñate during his expedition north from San Gerónimo, Mexico on his way to colonize New Mexico. After three months of extremely difficult travel over desert landscape with weeks of limited rations, finally, after days without supplies, the group reached the Rio Grande River. Finding abundant water, game, fish & waterfowl, on April 20, 1598 Oñate led the members of his expedition in a thanksgiving feast to give praise for finding the life-saving river. This event predated the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving in New England by 23 years.

Now back to food. Before digging into your delicious plate of food, wouldn't it be fun to know the backstory? Here's a look at the history of the most popular Thanksgiving foods out there!

Mashed Potatoes

The humble potato was domesticated in the South American Andes some 8,000 years ago & taken to Europe in the mid-1500s, where it spread. Sir Walter Raleigh introduced potatoes to Ireland in 1589 & the potato has been linked to Irish history ever since. Mashed potatoes, the most common way to enjoy potatoes at Thanksgiving, became an American staple in the 1700s. As far back as 1747, Americans were mashing up potatoes with butter, milk, salt, & cream.

Red Chile

Ah, New Mexico's favorite vegetable & cultural icon, the majestic chile. Domesticated about 6,000 years ago in Mexico, the chile has been enjoyed world-wide ever since. European traders first took it to Asia during the 15th century, where it immediately became popular. Today, chile is synonymous with New Mexican cuisine & culture, is a delicious, spicy addition to nearly any food, savory OR sweet, & is even used as decoration when made into a beautiful ristra. And let's face it, red chile is really the



only gravy a New Mexican needs on their mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving.

Sweet Potato Casserole (Pie)

Sweet potato casserole, or sweet potatoes baked with toasted marshmallows & brown sugar, is a Thanksgiving favorite (how could it not be?). The sweet potato itself has been around for centuries in the West & was shared with Europe after the 15th century when the Spanish began to trade in Western foods. As for sweet potatoes topped with marshmallows? That didn't become a popular recipe until the Prohibition Era, when it was created by a company called Angelus Marshmallows (the original maker of Cracker Jacks). They were trying to make marshmallows popular, so they put out a cookbook in 1917 that included sweet potatoes topped with them, & it stuck! (Literally).

Cornbread

Corn, another centuries-old Western food, was abundant, hearty, & basically everywhere; & it's no surprise that cornbread originated with Native cultures, though it likely didn't taste as great as it does now. The original cornbread was simply cornmeal, water, & perhaps a little salt baked over an open fire (later, in an horno). Cornbread became tastier & fluffier when things like buttermilk & eggs became more common ingredients.

Pumpkin Pie

Before we slice into the pie, let's talk for a moment about how amazing the pumpkin is. Did you know that though they originate in the Americas, pumpkins can now grow anywhere on the planet (except Antarctica), that they are low in calories, fat & sodium, but are high in fiber, vitamin A & B, potassium, protein & iron, & finally, that every part of the pumpkin is edible?! You can consume the skin, leaves, flowers, pulp, seeds, even the stem! Pretty neat, but I think I'll stick to the delicious pulp, from which we get pie! Pumpkin pie can be traced back to the 1600s, when European settlers were first introduced to pumpkins in America & brought them back to England. Back then, there were several different ways to make pumpkin pie, like an early New England recipe that included hollowing out a pumpkin & filling it with spices, sweetened milk, then cooking it directly in a fire. It's evolved since then, but no doubt EVERY version of pumpkin pie was delicious.

Cranberry Sauce

Cranberries are one of the only fruits native to America & were known to be regularly consumed by Native Americans. Native to the eastern United States, cranberries have been eaten & used as natural dyes for cloth by native people for centuries. Though first mentioned by Europeans in the 1550s as a staple of American diets, the sweet cranberry sauce we know and love today probably didn't materialize until the late 17th century, when Native American recipes of cranberries made with sugar & water were uncovered.



Turkey

Turkeys are one of the few domesticated Western animals, along with dogs, llamas, & guinea pigs, & were particularly prominent in the Southwest, likely first being domesticated here, before spreading throughout Mesoamerica. Historic sources indicate that pens of 100s of turkeys were discovered among Pueblo communities during the 16th century.

"The turkey was also used for its feathers, which were used in making blankets. It's interesting to note that there is no indication that turkeys were eaten. Archeological records indicate that turkeys often lived into old age or had injuries that had clearly been cared for. Although Spanish colonists strongly favored their own domesticates, such as chickens, turkeys were eventually added to the Spanish Colonial diet. Today, turkeys are not raised in any kind of scale in New Mexico; ironic, since it appears this is the place of their 1st domestication. So, when you are giving thanks this holiday season, be sure to include a shout-out to the ancestral Puebloans for making turkey a Thanksgiving centerpiece!"

- Courtesy of my co-worker, Amanda Mather, Curator of Collections

Well, there you have it, a little bit about the histories of the delicious staples of an American Thanksgiving, comprised of these amazing Western foods. Wishing everyone a safe & blessed holiday!

- Laura Gonzales, Education & Volunteer Manager