

COOKING

Items Used:

- Mortar and pestle (reproduction)
- S-hook (reproduction)
- Sugar nippers (reproduction)
- Images of cooking tools in the DAR Museum collection (laminated)
- Cooking Receipts to try (on disk)
- Book: *American Cookery*
- Book: *The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy*

Activity Suggestions:

1. Try the Cooking Tools Challenge! Print 1 copy of the file “Cooking Tools Challenge” for each participant (individuals or groups). Place the laminated images of cooking tools, numbered 1-10, on a table. Allow participants to look at the images and try to identify the tools. Answers are on the back of each image. *Optional idea:* Offer prizes to the winner!
2. Examine the reproduction cooking tools (mortar and pestle, S-hook, sugar nippers). Discussion questions:
 - a. Do you have anything like these in your kitchen?
 - b. What is the one item in your kitchen you can't do without?
 - c. What modern kitchen tool do you think a cook from the 1700s would be most fascinated by?
3. Pass around the two cookbooks and read a few selections aloud. Discussion questions:
 - a. How do these recipes compare to the ones you are familiar with?
 - b. Would you want to try any of these?
 - c. Would you have trouble finding any of these ingredients?
 - d. What surprises you the most?
4. Print out the Cooking Receipts (an older word for “recipes”) and pass out to anyone who is interested in trying an 18th century recipe. *Optional idea:* Do this beforehand, and bring the results to try!



Information:

"Arose this morning nearly, with the Sun... heat'd our oven this morning for the first time – baked, Bread, Pies, rice pudden & custards..."

Elizabeth Drinker, July 29, 1794

Cooking was an essential skill in the 18th century. Most women in America cooked for their families, but some wealthy households employed or had enslaved cooks, both men and women. Even in a family with a cook, the female head of the household had to supervise the cooking and kitchen management.

Cookbooks

Martha Washington, one of the wealthiest women in her day, owned a copy of Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*. This was one of the most popular cookbooks at the time, and the author published several editions throughout the later 1700s into the 1800s. Her 1805 edition is particularly interesting because it includes "several new receipts adapted to the American mode of cooking" (page 137). All cookbooks in America came from European writers until Amelia Simmons published *American Cookery* at the end of the 18th century. Still, many families kept handwritten receipt¹ books, some of which were subsequently published or are available in various archives.

Food Seasonality and Preservation

One thing a colonial cook had to keep in mind, which is not nearly as much of a problem now, was the season. Most foods were only available in certain seasons, as can be seen in the "Bill of Fare" supplied in most 18th century cookbooks. There, the author suggested which courses could be cooked in each month, keeping in mind what would be available.

¹ Receipt is the 18th century term for recipe.

A colonial cook could prolong a food's seasonal availability by preserving it. Indeed, in the days before canning, refrigeration, or next-day air shipments, food preservation was vital. The majority of Americans were farmers (even if they also had some other trade or profession), and households needed to preserve their produce if they wanted to have food available during the winter and early spring.

Preservation could be done a number of ways:

- Drying (meats, vegetables, grains, nuts)
- Salting (meats, vegetables, dairy products)
- Pickling (meats, vegetables, fruits, nuts)
- Preserving with sugar (fruits)
- Keeping cool in an ice house or natural spring (dairy products, others)

The Myth of the Spices

Some of the receipts still seem familiar to us today, such as apple pie and mashed potatoes. Others may seem strange – eel pie, for instance, or pickled melons. (Both of which are delicious – we've tried them!) Often the spice combinations are not what we would choose today. There is a myth that people used lots of spices to cover up the taste of spoiled meat. This has been disproved by a number of food historians.

"The only people who could afford most spices were the ones least likely to have bad meat, and anyway spices were too valuable to be used as a mask. . . people used them carefully and sparingly, and not as a sort of flavorsome cover-up." (Bill Bryson, *At Home*)

"...in general, the meat in those days was far fresher than ours... meat and spice were two of the most expensive foods available, and because of that, the wealthy often combined them as a way of showing off." (Frank Clark, supervisor of Historic Foodways at Colonial Williamsburg, as quoted in *History Myths Debunked* <https://historymyths.wordpress.com/?s=spices>)

Cookery and household management books of the time often included instructions on how to choose meat when shopping, and how to tell if it had gone bad (so you could avoid it!).



The Myth of Burning to Death

There is a pervasive myth that one of the most common ways women died in the days of hearth cooking was catching their clothing on fire. While there were a few cases of this happening, we actually have death records of the period, which confirm that the most common cause of death in the 1700s for both men and women was *disease*. Yes, occasionally someone's clothes would catch fire (women, men, and children alike). Sometimes the burn was superficial but the victim later died of infection. And, a few horror stories may have made the danger seem greater. But, fire-related deaths were not the major killer that exaggerated stories would have you believe.

A comparison is the data from the United States in 2010, when the most common cause of death was also disease... as were the next three top causes. (Heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases, and stroke, if you're curious.) Accidental death was only number five on the list, and includes all forms of unintentional injuries. So you see, the causes of death in the 1700s were generally the same as they are today!

Sources:

Crane, Elaine Forman. *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994.

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Noel Hume, Audrey. *Food*. Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1978.

Simmons, Amelia. *American Cookery*. Second edition, 1796.

Theobald, Mary Miley. *Death By Petticoat: American History Myths Debunked*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2012.

Theobald, Mary Miley, "Revisited Myth # 31: Spices were used to mask the flavor and odors of rotting food," *History Myths Debunked*,
<https://historymyths.wordpress.com/?s=spices>



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