

NUTRITION

Thanksgiving Today

American in food and spirit: modern preservation techniques have not changed the bill of fare since the Pilgrims. Housewives can still provide an all-American menu.

By HOWARD SIMONS

► WE ARE eating Thanksgiving dinners basically the same as those served by the Pilgrims centuries ago. Only the methods used by the family in gathering the dinner items have changed markedly.

The early settlers, together with their Indian neighbors, had to spend weeks of hunting, picking and digging to reap the foods we now associate with this day of thanks.

The modern American housewife can now harvest an entire Thanksgiving dinner in a matter of minutes from her frozen food locker and pantry shelf.

However, the introduction of the most scientific means of food preservation known to man has not altered the fact that the average household eats a Thanksgiving dinner of predominantly American origin and production.

Not even the prospect of dishes from all over the world that are available packaged, canned, dehydrated, powdered, bottled, frozen or even kept fresh by atomic radiation has caused the American family to forsake the all-American Thanksgiving dinner menu.

Turkey, cranberries, both white and sweet potatoes, many kinds of beans, squash, pumpkin, tapioca, corn, sweet corn and popcorn, peppers, avocado, cocoa and chocolate, oysters, pineapple, chestnuts, peanuts, Brazil nuts and cashew nuts are strictly American in origin.

Tastes Have Changed

It is doubtful, however, if a Pilgrim or Indian invited to taste many of these foods today would be able to identify them as the same kinds of foods that he served in the 17th century.

They are, of course, the same types of foods, but cross-breeding and improvements made over the centuries by scientists and agriculturalists have changed them, like the Beltsville white turkey and hybrid corn, to such a degree that they no longer taste much like the original foods.

Paradoxically, many of these same foods that are American in origin, were reintroduced into America under the guise of other names, such as the Hawaiian pineapple, the Irish potato and the Turkish cucumber, which is the American pumpkin.

The turkey, traditional symbol for Thanksgiving and the usual main dinner course, has a dual claim to its 100% citizenship, being both native born and naturalized.

This puzzling situation arises from the fact that our domestic turkeys are not the descendants, but cousins of the wild turkeys that the Pilgrims hunted and ate. The wild turkeys, some of which still survive in a few of our wooded regions, are somewhat smaller than the domesticated bird.

The domestic fowl that finds its way into the Thanksgiving roasting oven is descended from the Mexican species that the Aztecs tamed and which their Spanish conquerors carried back home with them.

Then, it was reintroduced from Europe and has become well-established in the United States. From this re-imported turkey, hybrid birds are now bred here. It is this improved turkey that the American housewife buys, already trimmed, in cans, or fresh or frozen.

Cranberries, on the other hand, have remained as American as the native-born wild turkey. Cranberries are found only on the

American continent, where they thrive in the low, wet lands of northeastern United States.

Contrary to its popular name, the Irish potato is not at all Irish in origin, but Peruvian.

The white potato was called Irish because it was widely cultivated on the Emerald Isle, and Irish immigrants who came to the United States in the 1700's brought large quantities of the white potato with them.

However, long before these immigrants carried the potato across the Atlantic from the Old World to the New, it had found its way across the Atlantic and back again by a different route.

Shortly after Columbus, the potato was shipped from its original home in Peru to Spain. After years of cultivation in Spain, it found its way to other European countries, including the British Isles.

The British sent the potato homeward again by shipping it off to Bermuda. From Bermuda, it was introduced into the young Virginia Colony.

"Fixin's" are indispensable to the Thanksgiving dinner and sweet potatoes, known as "taters" in the South, are indispensable



MODERN THANKSGIVING—Although the Thanksgiving menu has not changed very much since the Pilgrims, the method of harvest has. The modern American housewife can gather the necessary bill of fare in a matter of minutes from the frozen food locker and pantry shelf, as Anna Karavangelos of the college of home economics and Richard McKee of the college of physical education at the University of Maryland have done for this photograph.

to the "fixin's." And like the cranberries and wild turkey, sweet potatoes are American-born and bred.

If the turkey symbolizes Thanksgiving itself, corn symbolizes the warmth and good feeling of Thanksgiving, for it was the gift of corn from the Indians to the Pilgrims and thence to the rest of the world that remains as America's greatest agricultural gift.

And, whether the corn you use for the Thanksgiving corn bread is frozen, canned or packaged, its true American ancestry remains hidden in its ancient use and the changes that it has undergone through long centuries of cultivation. Even if the wild parent has managed to survive somewhere in the Americas, it would be difficult to recognize it as such.

Travels of Pumpkin

The pumpkin, which delights children in October windows and makes them even happier on a pie plate in November, has a tale of travel that is more than equal to the turkey and the potato.

Fifty years after Columbus, the American pumpkin had become so popular in Europe that it had lost its American identity and had become known as the Turkish cucumber. Its popularity and seeds spread the world over and the modern varieties have become mixed with foreign stocks from Africa and Asia. However, the yellow pumpkin that fills our Thanksgiving pies is still of straight American ancestry.

Even without trimming the meal with such American foods as tomatoes, many kinds of beans, squash, avocados or peppers for vegetables and salads, or tapioca and pineapple for dessert, or cocoa and chocolate for a beverage, the usual Thanksgiving bill of fare with roast turkey, cranberry sauce, potatoes, white and sweet, corn bread and pumpkin pie is American enough.

Natural Containers

Of course the many nuts like cashew, Brazil and peanuts were American in origin, but the American chestnut has been virtually wiped out by a blight and the chestnuts in the turkey stuffing will be of eastern Asiatic origin.

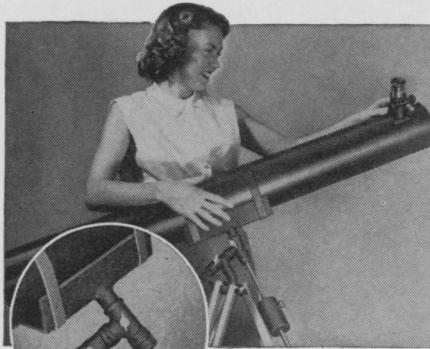
Curiously enough in this modern world, the nuts are the only item on the menu which have remained in their natural containers, preserved and secure.

The Thanksgiving items, whether wrapped, trimmed, pre-cooked, frozen, just-add-water items or enveloped in tin, provide a purely American feast.

Like the people these foods represent, the foods have traveled to many lands, and in each they have brought nourishment and symbolized hope where there was darkness and hunger. They have gone from and returned to the place of their origin and, like the land and its people of their origin, the foods have provided a melting pot of good-will.

Science News Letter, November 20, 1954

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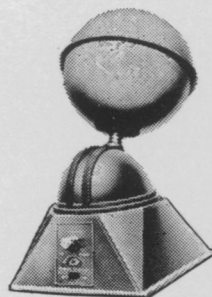
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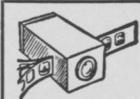
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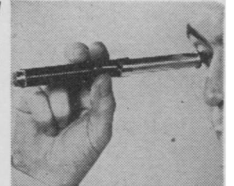
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