

Raising Children in the Early 17th Century: Diet

Diet in England

Diet in the 17th century was controlled by the seasons in a way that is hard to imagine today. Crops were planted in the spring when the weather was warm enough. Livestock gave birth then as well, with cows and goats providing milk which could be made into butter and cheese. Surplus calves, kids, lambs and pigs which were not going to be raised to adulthood also provided fresh meat. There were also fresh greens as plants began to grow, providing a welcome change from the preserved foods of winter. As the year progressed, some plants could be harvested and fruit gathered. Towards the end of summer and early fall, the crops were harvested. A good harvest meant food for the ensuing year, while a poor crop could mean economic hardship for the farmer and scarcity and high prices for the consumer. In November, the livestock which was not going to be wintered over would be slaughtered or sold at the market. Some of the meat would be eaten fresh while much would be preserved for the coming months.

The average family of the “middling sort” ate a diet based largely on meat, fish and bread. Vegetables were not as prominent a part of the diet as today. Meat, poultry and fish were prepared in a variety of ways: roasted, fried, boiled or baked in pies. Fruits were cooked both separately and with meats. Most of the milk was processed into butter and cheese. Fresh milk was not commonly drunk, even by young children. They, like the adults, drank beer and ale. Babies were nursed by their mothers until they were weaned at about one year. They were then fed thin gruels made with either water, beer or broth until they had enough teeth to eat small pieces of food.

The availability of almost all foods, until recently, was controlled by the seasons in way which is difficult to fathom. In today’s global economy, fresh foods are imported to the United States from all over the world, ensuring a virtually year-round supply. In the 17th century, unless preserved in some way, foods were only available in season. The rest of the year people did without.

Foods which had to be imported were best bought seasonally. People who could afford to do so would go to yearly fairs, and buy a year’s worth for their households, thereby getting the best price. Others would buy in smaller quantities from shops or peddlers on an at-need basis, at a higher price per unit. Once purchased, the foods would be the responsibility of the housewife.

Many people imagine the past to be a time when households were primarily self-sufficient, with housewives brewing and baking, making cheese, butter, candles and soap, spinning and weaving the cloth for the family’s clothes, etc. While the larger English households did perform many of these tasks, although the housewife had many servants to do much of the work under her direction, this was not the case for many English. Housewives purchased most of the items needed. Rather than bake her own bread and pies, she might bring them to a local baker to be cooked in his large oven. A woman who had dairy cows, made cheese and butter and sold much of it at local markets to help support her family.



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Diet in New England

The diet of the Plymouth colonists was also seasonal, but there were important differences. Their major crop was Indian corn, a new crop for them which required different care from the familiar English grains of wheat, rye, barley and oats. After the ears of corn were picked, they had to be husked and dried. The corn grown in this area was Northern flint, a very hard corn which had to be ground before cooking. Since there was no mill in Plymouth in the first years, the corn had to be pounded with a mortar and pestle until it was broken small enough for the intended use. It is likely that older children and servants did much of this processing.

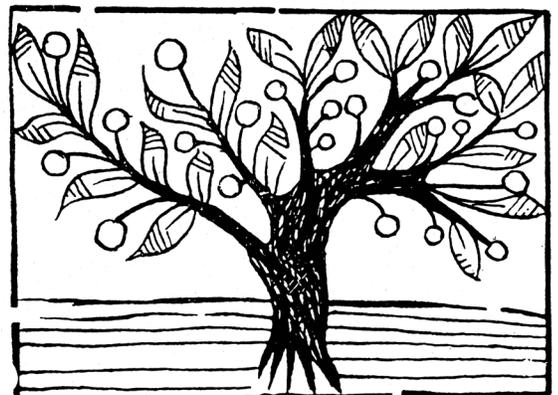
The colony received livestock from England, pigs, goats and chickens in the first years, a few cattle in 1624 and 1625, and sheep sometime before 1627. The first horses came some time after that. Most of these animals would have been kept for breeding, and only some slaughtered for meat, mostly surplus males and unproductive females. Pigs have more offspring than the larger animals and pork was most likely the most common domestic meat for years. Some milk would have been available from the cows and goats, which was probably turned into soft cheese. The livestock population increased over the next few years, and Plymouth colonists were able to make a large profit selling livestock to newcomers until 1640, when the rate of immigration slowed drastically.

Fresh meat was available, however, from the deer, rabbits, turkeys, ducks, geese and other local game. The deer were hunted year-round, the waterfowl were seasonal and were killed during their migrations. The colonial men had not been brought up as hunters, but even the first summer in the colony they were able to successfully hunt deer and kill many ducks and geese that fall. They also got “a great store of wild turkeys.”

Fish and shellfish also provided much of their diet. Eels and herring were available in the rivers. Bass, cod and bluefish were caught with nets and lines. Clams were dug at the shoreline and mussels gathered from the rocks. Lobsters also were prevalent in the shallow waters of the bay.

There were many wild plants which could be eaten as well. Early explorers mentioned strawberries, blueberries, plums, raspberries and grapes which all grew wild. There were walnuts, chestnuts and hickory nuts. There were greens which could be gathered – sorrel, cress, wild onions and many others. Groundnuts, an edible tuber, were dug.

While hunting, butchering and fishing were beyond the strength of small children, they were most likely involved with gathering wild plants and berries. Children could go to the shore for clams and mussels. Closer to home, they might gather eggs, herd the pigs and goats, or pick roots and herbs from the garden. Older children could help prepare meals and tend pots over the fires. They also could gather much of the wood used for the daily fires.



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