

A Beefy Proposition

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In the England that Maryland colonists left, meat was commonly believed to be the most nourishing food. Many found raw vegetables and fruit suspect but flora appear regularly in cook books. Oatmeal, barley, and rice; dairy products; and nuts were also staples. While popular perception dictated desires for certain foods, circumstances dictated what foods were available.

At the end of the 16th century, Raphael Holinshed's writings pointed out how class and income differentiated the diets of the high and low. "The more wealthy do feed upon the flesh of . . . cattle . . . all sorts of fish taken upon our coasts and in our fresh rivers, and . . . (a) diversity of wild and tame fowls. The kind of meat which is obtained with most difficulty and costs, is commonly taken for the most delicate." Hare, mutton, lamb, deer, beef, pig, chicken, pheasant, woodcock, lark, and sparrow appear roasted or boiled in recipes of the day. Holinshed adds, "It is lawful for every man to feed upon whatsoever he is able to purchase." The urban craftsman could spend his wages and enjoy "such meat as the butcher selleth, beside sows, brawn, bacon . . .," but Holinshed adds, "White meats, milk, butter, and cheese . . . are now reputed as food appertinent only to the inferior sort."

A lucky servant would have access to leftovers from their master's boards in addition to whatever ordinary fare they received. The custom of giving regular rations of meat to most workers and apprentices had died out at the end of the 1500s but the famous Yeoman Warders, guards for the Tower of London and crown jewels since the 15th century ate well. The Warders are more commonly known as Beefeaters, an epithet that may have come from jealous peasants mocking the coddled guards who regularly ate beef while they had none.



Through the Middle Ages, the diet of the common folk was enhanced by access to forests and commons. Rural dwellers could release their livestock into forests to forage or graze, hunt rabbits, catch fish, gather greens, mushrooms, or honey, and collect nonconsumables for fuel, building, and crafts. A complicated set of laws specified who had what rights to forest land and products. The King might retain the right to any deer in its bounds. The local lord might have rights to the soil within a where land was less attractive to nobles, the peasants suffered less.

"The enclosure movement was an important factor that made people willing to migrate to the Chesapeake," reports HSMC director of research Dr. Henry Miller. The chance for a better life, at least better foods, that the New World offered must have been especially appealing to commoners. Extensive forests meant swine and cattle could forage. An abundance of wild foods were accessible from the land and water. Archaeological research conducted by Miller suggests that those who

ventured to the Chesapeake colonies did enjoy their new found access to meat. "In the early years, a variety of wild species figured prominently. Raccoons, squirrels, and opossums were popular, and especially deer. Fish were easy to obtain at certain seasons of the year and usually required little effort and minimal equipment. People ate wildfowl and waterfowl, shellfish, and turtles. Archaeological evidence shows that the common box turtle, which could have easily been collected in the forests and along the streams of the Chesapeake region, was also consumed." Wild animals comprised up to 40% of the meat eaten.

Dr. Miller found that in the early years differences in the meat consumed by high and low status people remained. Evidence of beef-eating is found at all sites, but tenants ate proportionally more pork and the upper classes ate more beef and venison. Wealthy planters could hire hunters or purchase venison from Indians. While poorer planters could hunt, they may not have had the time or always owned a gun.

"One big surprise revealed by the archaeology is the role of pork," noted Dr. Miller. "Historians have long seen pork as the mainstay of the colonial diet. However, the actual bones recovered from sites show that beef was always the most important meat, with pork only making up from one sixth to one quarter of the total. The reason may be that beef was typically eaten fresh while pork was brined and barreled. When a probate inventory was taken of someone's estate, the hanging beef had little market value, but the barreled pork could be readily sold to other planters or passing ships. It is the pork that is consistently found in the written documents. Deciphering the archaeological record was essential before the actual nature of the colonial meat diet could be revealed."

As the colony developed, domestic animals became more common and colonists ate fewer wild animals. "Venison became less important for wealthy households," noted Dr. Miller. "Perhaps this reflected a depletion of deer populations." Sheep appeared more frequently on the scene and cattle ownership was almost universal. Planters increasingly owned dairying equipment. Consumption of domestic fowl stayed low throughout the 1600s. Pork also remained a constant part of the meat diet, averaging about 20% of the total. The amount of fish consumed stayed the same into the late 1600s. It then underwent a precipitous decline that remains unexplained. Trash deposits after 1700 have few fish in them, indicating seafood was far less important than it had been in the 1600s. "Late in the century, data suggest a remarkably uniform meat diet between independent planters high and low, with nearly two thirds of the total comprised of beef. The poorest households consumed beef, but lower quality cuts, and pork supplemented with a few small wild mammals, such as opossums."

Colonial people also had different views of what was edible. For example, calf heads and feet were highly regarded, and bone marrow was considered a delicacy. People consumed most parts of the cattle and swine, including brains, tongue, liver, heart, and even lungs. Most people, especially in rural areas, continued this practice well into the 20th century.

"The abundance of game, readily acquired seafood, and many domestic animals all imply that settlers obtained meat and consumed it in large quantities," observed Miller. "The colonists here probably ate more meat than did their relatives in Britain. Improved nutrition may explain why, by the mid-eighteenth century, colonial soldiers were significantly taller than the British and European troops."

While the masses considered when their next helping of beef would be served, an impressive array of intellectuals began promoting a vegetarian diet (although it wasn't called that for another 100 years). Health, compassion, ethics, solidarity with the meatless masses drove Descartes, Robert Norwood, Francis Bacon and others to renounce the flesh of animals. "The vegetarians had no influence on the colonial diet in America," Miller remarked. "Colonists continued the European assumption that the amount of meat you ate not only influenced your health but determined the status of your life."