

Dreisbach Family Association

September 2011 Newsletter

SETTLERS' FOODS AND COOKING

What did the Dreisbachs eat ca. 1750-1776?

Harvest time brings abundance as well as memories of Penna. Dutch comfort food. Some of these recipes are over 250 years old! Given such long held cooking traditions, can we use them to get a glimpse of the food our immigrant Dreisbach ancestors were eating and how it was prepared?



In 1750, Simon Dreisbach had been in Pennsylvania for 7 years. He and his family were living in a one storey log cabin near Indian Creek, not far from Blue Mountain, at the edge of the wilderness. By the summer of 1750 they will have cleared some land, planted crops and probably raised a few animals – maybe a pig, an ox, perhaps some sheep and some poultry.



Simon Sr's land. A branch of Indian Creek is in the foreground, Blue Mountain is seen in the distance.

What sort of foods did they have? Essentially all of it was what they could catch, kill or grow. Fish from the creek (including trout, crayfish) and shad from the Lehigh River, deer, rabbits, squirrel, pheasants, ground hogs and other game provided meat along with, perhaps the pigs and poultry that they raised. Meat comprised the largest portion of what they ate.

They did grow vegetables, largely those found in Germany – cabbage, turnips, beets, onions and carrots. Corn was the exception. Unknown in Germany, corn was the staple of life for settlers including Simon and his family. It stored well, could be ground for porridge and breads and all parts of the plant were used. To augment this diet, Simon's children gathered wild berries and nuts.



Zeisslof log cabin, ca. 1750. The dwelling of Simon Sr and his family would have been similar to this.

When enough land was cleared, Simon planted rye and spelt both for family use and to feed the animals. He would also have planted apple, pear, plum and cherry trees. Only sugar, salt, spices, tea and coffee would have been brought from Philadelphia and used sparingly.

What about that staple of Penna. Dutch cooking - potatoes? They were introduced to colonial America in the 1600s and planted in 1719 by Scotch-Irish

immigrants. Potatoes were unknown in Wittgenstein at the time Simon emigrated, but were being grown near Philadelphia in the 1740's. He probably tasted them for the first time not too long after he arrived. Easily raised, easily stored and with a myriad of uses – potatoes were part of the diet in south eastern Pennsylvania before they were generally accepted elsewhere in the colonies. It's reasonable to assume that Simon planted potatoes as one of his vegetables.

The Dreisbach's dinner table was made of long, narrow boards,ⁱ rarely more than 3 put together, that rested on saw horses. The family sat on benches made of split logs. Indeed, the phrase 'bed and board' comes from the use of planks to form a table. Often the boards were not nailed down so they could be set against the wall when not in use in order to make more floor space in the crowded log cabin. Everyday dishes and spoons were made of wood. If Simon's wife, Maria Katherina, brought any pewter from Germany, it would have been used only on special occasions.



Early 'board table'. Earthenware storage jugs from 1800's are upended on the table. Note the tree trunk legs of the table and the bench. Seen in basement of Schlegel House in 2008.

In the first log cabins, cooking was done over an open fire or sometimes in the coals. The most important utensil was the iron 3-legged cooking pot that held 5 to 10 gallons of liquid – or stew! Variety was not as important as quantity! Smaller pots were used to make "mush" – corn meal slowly cooked in broth and served with most meals. Later bread ovens were built, but initially bread was baked in cast iron pots with lids that were buried both in – and under – live coals.

William Woys Weaver has written probably the best and most historically accurate Penna. Dutch cookbook, called simply "Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking" and published by the Pennsylvania German Society as its 1993 Annual Publication, Vol. XXVII. Full of beautiful photographs, explanations, and authentic recipes – it is a book that merits a place on the bookshelves of everyone interested in the Pennsylvania Dutch.

Spelt – called *dinkel* in Penna. Dutch – was known as "German Wheat" because of its widespread use in breads and other dishes. Indeed, spelt and dried corn define the early Penna. Dutch cooking. Wild rice also was used extensively by the early settlers – and no doubt all three of these were very familiar to Simon and his family. Black mush would have been served for breakfast or supper – most often in winter.

Barley, oats, rye, spelt and millet were the grains eaten by Simon Dreisbach and the Penna. Dutch. Wheat was raised as a cash crop but only a small amount of wheat flour was used by the family for their cooking.

A very old recipe is potato soup with roasted spelt flour, Grumbieresupp mit G'brannte Dinkelmehl. Roasting (or parching) can be done to any flour and enhances the flavor. Put ½ cup of flour in a cast iron frying pan over med-high heat. Stir constantly with a wooden spatula. Flour will turn a nice mahogany brown color when it is done. The deeper the color the stronger the flavour.

POTATO SOUP WITH PARCHED SPELT FLOUR

6 to 8 cups peeled boiled and mashed potatoes
1 quart milk
4 Tbsp butter
2 Tbsp parched spelt flour
1 to 2 tsp good salt
Black or cayenne pepper to taste
Sharp cheese, grated

Heat milk and butter in large saucepan. Mix mashed potatoes into the hot milk. Add parched flour, salt and pepper. Reduce heat and simmer with stirring for 10 minutes or until thick. Serve with grated sharp cheese on top. Can sprinkle chopped hickory nuts or walnuts on top.

As Simon and his family settled into the new world, they must have become acquainted with many of the foods that grew wild. Most of us have lost this knowledge, but a few remember going out into spring fields to harvest young dandelion leaves – later made into a salad with hot bacon dressing and hard boiled eggs. Another of the first greens to appear after the snow melted was watercress, growing in ice cold streams. Both of these greens supplied much needed vitamin C and would have formed a part of the food for Simon and his family.



Purslane

However there are other 'weeds' that are good eating – ones that probably most of us have not tasted. Purslane and chickweed make good salads and often were used in an egg pie that resembles a quiche.

Wild plants had many uses – one of them was to make thirst quenching Blue Mountain Tea (Bloobarrier Tee). It uses the goldenrod plant that grows profusely in the fields and roadsides during August. The recipe is authentic and simple. Boil one quart of spring water. Add leaves of the goldenrod plant – about 4 big handfuls. Let steep 4 to 5 minutes and then add honey to taste. Serve cold.



Anise-scented, Sweet Goldenrod

We cannot know for sure if Maria Katherina made any of these recipes, but the odds are good that she made something close to these and that they were enjoyed by the Dreisbach family in the first years after they settled in Northampton County.

ⁱ Fletcher, S. W. *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life 1640-1840*, Penna. Hist. and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, 1950. pp 307 – 418.