

The first Thanksgiving menu ... maybe

By DANIEL NEMAN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Four hundred years ago this fall, 50 Pilgrims sat down to eat with 90 members of the native Wampanoag tribe to give thanks for their first harvest in the New World.

No one knows the exact dates of the feast, other than it was sometime between Sept. 21 and Nov. 9 of that year. The menu of what was served is likewise lost to history, but we have a few clues.

In a letter sent in December 1621, Edward Winslow wrote that four of the men successfully hunted for fowl, which very possibly could have been wild turkeys — but it also could have been ducks, geese or swans. The Indians brought five deer, which presumably were also served, but we don't know that for certain.

The most successful crop of that first harvest was corn, so we can extrapolate that it was on the menu. Pumpkins were plentiful, though the Pilgrims lacked the flour to make crusts for pie.

Because they were on the Atlantic Ocean, seafood was abundant. We know they often caught bass and cod, and lobster was also plentiful, at least in the summer. Eels, too, were readily available, and mussels were harvested simply by overturning rocks.

I should point out here that I am speaking of the First Thanksgiving of popular lore, the one held by the Pilgrims in 1621. There was an earlier Thanksgiving in December 1619, at the Berkeley Hundred in Virginia, at which the settlers gave prayerful thanks for their safe arrival.

It was a religious service, though, and food was not involved. The case for it being the true First Thanksgiving is pressed only by cantankerous Virginians and sticklers for accuracy.

With an eye toward history, I decided to make my own version of the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving meal, or at least part of it. Because we don't know what the actual meal was, my version is more of an exercise in what could have been served, based on our knowledge of what was available and their recipes from the time.

But first, a couple of



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"Seethed" mussels with parsley and vinegar.

caveats. I did not make venison because I do not have access to it. And a couple of the recipes use sugar, which the Pilgrims did bring with them from Holland but which they had run out of, or nearly had, by the time of their harvest feast.

On the other hand, if they didn't save a little for Thanksgiving, what did they use it for?

Assuming that pumpkins were probably served, I made stewed pumpkins. The recipe is an adaptation of a recipe published by John Josselyn, an Englishman who first visited New England in 1638 and again in 1663.

The original recipe calls for the pumpkin to be cut into pieces and simmered for several hours,

but I hadn't seen the original recipe when I made it and, knowing that Pilgrims sometimes cooked their pumpkins on hot coals, I began by roasting mine in the oven.

It didn't make a difference. Even roasted, the side dish came out smooth and robustly flavored. It's surprising how pumpkin can be improved with a splash of vinegar, a portion of ground ginger and a knob of butter.

If we are to stick strictly to what could have been served at the First Thanksgiving, then butter would not have been included. The Pilgrims did not have butter; their first cow did not come across the ocean until 1623.

But use the butter. It makes all the difference.

The recipe for stewed pumpkins is probably why they sent for those first cows, anyway.

My first entrée was steamed mussels — or as the original 1597 recipe put it, "To Seeth Muscles."

The dish could be served today to considerable acclaim, and no one would suspect it is nearly 425 years old. Some recipes are just classic. The mussels are steamed in a broth of water, butter, parsley, garlic (a modern addition) and vinegar instead of the wine that would usually be used today.

My assumption that wine was not used in steaming — or seething — mussels because the Pilgrims did not drink turned out to be incorrect. In fact, they did drink wine, beer and especially hard cider, but they took care not to drink to excess. But wine was expensive, and the cooks of the day preferred vinegar.

The second entrée is a stewed turkey that is based on an English recipe from 1615, and it, too, could easily find a place on a table in the 21st century.

The cooks of the time would have used a whole turkey, but wild turkeys are smaller than domesticated turkeys, and pots were bigger. So I used turkey thighs and legs, which were about one pound apiece, and cooked them in my largest Dutch oven.

I boiled the turkey, along with a heaping amount of onions, herbs, butter, sugar and more, because that is what the recipe I was following — published by the Plimoth Plantation, I should point out — told me to do. It was, unquestionably, delicious.

But it wasn't historically accurate. When I later looked up the original 1615 recipe, it is clear that the turkey was meant to be roasted by itself and the other ingredients boiled together for a sauce.

If you want to make it that way, well, don't let me stop you. But boiling the turkey makes it wonderfully tender and imparts even more flavor to the brothlike sauce.

For dessert, I turned to a dish that easily could have been served at the First Thanksgiving, a sweetened corn pudding.

The corn of the region was different from the corn we typically enjoy now; flint corn has a very hard outer layer that would have to be pounded to get to the more easily edible part inside. What results is a coarse cornmeal, so that is what I used for my corn pudding.

Basically, I made grits, which I softened with a bit of milk and sweetened with less sugar than you might think.

In this case, as in so many, less is more. It's a light and refreshing way to finish a Thanksgiving meal that, for once, is not too heavy.

STEWED PUMPKINS

Yield: 8 servings

4 cups cooked pumpkin, see note
4 tablespoons butter
1 to 2 tablespoons of cider vinegar
1 to 2 teaspoons of ground ginger (or any combination of nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon and pepper, to taste)
1 teaspoon salt

Note: Use pie pumpkins (or canned). Remove seeds and slimy strings from fresh pumpkins, and either cut into small pieces and boil until very tender or cut in half and roast at 375 degrees until very tender, 30 to 45 minutes. Scoop flesh from skin if skin is hard.

Place all ingredients in a saucepan over low heat. Mash together if pumpkin is fresh. Stir and heat until all of the ingredients are well-combined and hot. Adjust the seasonings to your liking and serve.

Per serving: 94 calories; 6 g fat; 4 g saturated fat; 15 mg cholesterol; 1 g protein; 10 g carbohydrate; 4 g sugar; 4 g fiber; 298 mg sodium; 34 mg calcium

— Adapted from a recipe in "New England's Rarities: Discovered in Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, and Plants of that Country," (John Josselyn, 1671), adapted by Kathleen Curtin, Sandra L. Oliver and Plimoth Plantation in "Giving Thanks: Thanksgiving Recipes and History, from Pilgrims to Pumpkin Pie"

'SEETHED' MUSSELS WITH PARSLEY AND VINEGAR

Yield: 8 servings

4 pounds of mussels
2 tablespoons butter
1/2 cup chopped parsley
1/2 cup red wine vinegar
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 garlic cloves, minced

1. Place mussels in cold water and scrub them clean. "Beard" them by taking off the tuft of fibers projecting from the shell (if there are any — many farm-raised mussels are "beardless"). Discard any mussels that are broken or do not close when touched.

2. Place 1 cup of water, butter, parsley, vinegar, salt, pepper and garlic into a large pot, cover, and bring to a boil over high heat. Add the mussels and reduce the heat so that the mussels cook at a simmer. Cover and cook, shaking the pot occasionally, for 10 minutes or until all of the mussels have opened fully. Keep an eye on the mussels — if cooked too long, they can be chewy.

3. To serve, pour the mussels and broth into bowls, setting another empty bowl on the table for discarded shells.

Per serving: 226 calories; 8 g fat; 3 g saturated fat; 71 mg cholesterol; 27 g protein; 9g carbohydrate; no sugar; 1 g fiber; 871 mg sodium; 68 mg calcium

— Adapted from "The Second Part of the Good Huswives" (Thomas Dawson, 1597), by Kathleen Curtin, Sandra L. Oliver and Plimoth Plantation in "Giving Thanks: Thanksgiving Recipes and History, From Pilgrims to Pumpkin Pie"

STEWED TURKEY WITH HERBS AND ONIONS

Yield: 6 servings
See, **Thanksgiving**/Page B2



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Stewed turkey with herbs and onions.

The banking corner of downtown La Grande

GINNY MAMMEN
OUT AND ABOUT

Moving on east on Adams Avenue in downtown La Grande, next to the Steward Building there came a big surprise. What was expected to be the final corner structure, there was instead a small one-story wooden grocery store belonging to Henry Wildey. Henry was one of the first grocers in old town and had moved to Adams Avenue in the mid 1880s when the railroad came. Henry, his wife Jennie and family left La Grande around 1903 with numerous buildings and pieces of land to sell.

The Sanborn Map of 1893 indicates there was a building labeled "bank" at the northwest corner of Adams and Fir and there was a vacant lot next to it. This is where Wildey's Gro-

cery had stood. It is hard to know exactly when Wildey's building was demolished, but it was sometime between 1887 and 1893. By 1903 there was a new two-story building between the bank and the Steward Building which housed a clothing and a dry good store on the street level and Anthony Hall on the second floor. In 1910 there was an insurance office and other offices located here. Here again lies a mystery as to the origin and demise of this building and also the origin and purpose of Anthony Hall.

We know that the La Grande National Bank was established on March 23, 1887, and it could be assumed that the building itself was constructed in the time period of 1886-1887. This was the bank on the northwest corner of Adams and Fir in the Sanborn Map. The handsome one-story brick building, with a large lobby service



Fred Hill Collection

Exterior of the 1887 La Grande National Bank building at the corner of Adams and Fir in downtown La Grande.

area, opened for business on April 5, 1887. Cashier J. M. Church and assistant cashier F. L. Meyers served the customers. The directors were J. M. Berry, Jay Brooks, J. M. Church, Chas. Goodnough, and Robert Smith. Officers were President Robert Smith and Vice President Jay Brooks. We met several

of these men in previous articles.

For nearly 20 years the bank served La Grande, but in 1906 the building was demolished and replaced by a new two-story brick and stone building which possibly incorporated the space of the mystery building. The first floor served as the bank with

George Palmer, of Palmer Lumber, acting as president and J. M. Berry as vice president. F. L. Meyers was cashier following the death of J. M. Church.

The upper floor was a popular home for offices for many doctors, lawyers, architects and civil engineers. There were other spaces which were perhaps short-term rentals such as the one which advertised the following in The Observer — "Wanted at once tie cutters to make 15,000 ties. Call at room 28 La Grande National Bank."

Over the years the building was altered by removing the second story and totally remodeling the ground floor. For 134 years this corner served as the location for numerous banks — La Grande National Bank, La Grande First National Bank of Oregon, Pioneer Federal Savings and Loan, Sterling Bank and Umpqua Bank which just vacated

the building in October of 2021.

Doing research for this article has intensified the sad realization that as each block loses one or more of its original buildings, La Grande loses pieces of important history.

Keep looking up! Enjoy!

Ginny Mammen has lived in La Grande for more than 50 years and enjoys sharing her interest in the history of people, places and buildings.

CORRECTION

In my column about the Steward Building I stated that the second floor housed the first La Grande Armory. This is not correct. La Grande had National Guard Company D as early as 1897 and in 1898 they had an armory hall in the Goodnough Building. Goodnough, a carpenter, was also a director of the La Grande National Bank. This now leads to a search for the location of the Goodnough Building.