

Flavor: Windows to the past -- Recipes show evidence of U.S. history

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One of my most prized possessions is my maternal grandmother's recipe file. Kept inside are not only the instructions for the dishes and treats of my childhood, but also the memories that accompany those foods. When I look closer, I also see evidence of the history taking place when many of the recipes were gathered by a young housewife learning to feed a husband and child as the United States transitioned from the Great Depression into World War II.

One recipe that caught my attention was my grandmother's Crazy Chocolate Cake. Eggs and milk were missing from the ingredients list. Instead, vinegar was listed, as well as baking soda in place of baking powder. I understood the chemical consequence of combining vinegar and baking soda, but why the change from the more traditional recipe?

Right now the Kansas Museum of History is featuring an exhibition called "What's Cooking, Uncle Sam?: The Government's Effect on the American Diet." Created by the National Archives and Records Administration, the exhibit details the government's impact on how we eat every day, from what is grown on farms to recipes, like my grandmother's, served on dinner tables across the country. It also explains how economic hardships, wars and other historical events impact our food choices.

The displays show how Americans grew to want their government to make sure our food is safe, cheap and abundant. There are interesting facts, such as how the government's first dietary guidelines came out in 1894 with the goal of getting people to eat the nutrients necessary to prevent diseases such as scurvy and rickets. Also included are some fun tidbits, such as Queen Elizabeth II's drop scones recipe she shared with President Eisenhower, and the story of how men went to prison for "crimes against butter."

A special event tied into the exhibit was a lecture by Lora Vogt, curator of education for the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City. Titled "War Fare: From the Homefront to the Front Lines," the presentation explained how the need for food impacted both the war and changed the way Americans thought about food at home.

Vogt said in the lecture, "Food defines us. It shapes us. It's the way we can connect. With family over dinner. With friends over coffee. It's also how we connect with history."

When the United States entered the war in 1917, the government moved to get citizens to look at food in terms of how it would help us win the war. "Meatless Mondays" and "Wheatless Wednesdays" were encouraged, with local volunteer groups giving out recipes and teaching people about cooking, gardening and food preservation. People were asked to cut back on their sugar and fat consumption as well. Casseroles and stews became popular, as did doughnuts.

No rationing took place as it did in the next World War. Instead, people were encouraged to voluntarily make sacrifices for the cause. As a result, domestic food consumption decreased by 15 percent even as food production was greatly increased and exports tripled. The food fed American and allied troops, plus it helped prevent famine in those European countries that had already been at war for the previous three years.

"Americans were told if you can change how you cook, you can support our boys fighting the war," Vogt said.

The day following Vogt's lecture, Hy-Vee dietician Amber Groeling taught a cooking class featuring old-time recipes from the book, "Eating with Uncle Sam: Recipes and Historical Bites from the National Archives," which was published to go along with the "What's Cooking, Uncle Sam?" exhibit. She pointed out a common problem with recipes from years past: Most aren't

complete or accurate. Many don't come with cooking times or oven temperatures listed, and some even lack familiar measurements, instead calling for a handful of this or a pinch of that.

One example was a recipe for Oatmeal Peanut Biscuits, which was created in 1918 for wheatless cooking during WWI. When Groeling followed the original recipe, the biscuits were inedible. Her updated version, which reintroduced wheat to the mix and upped the butter from one tablespoon to half a cup, was delicious and is now a part of my recipe file.

We also made an updated succotash. The recipe from the cookbook was from an 1879 Army cooking manual. Traditionally made with beans (usually lima) and corn, this old recipe called for the cooked vegetables to be made in a cream sauce. Groeling's version added many more vegetables, swapped the lima beans with shelled edamame and dressed it with fresh basil, olive oil and tarragon vinegar.

Oh, what was the story behind my grandmother's Crazy Chocolate Cake? From what I have read, this recipe (and many others similar to it) was developed during the Great Depression as a way to make a chocolate cake without expensive ingredients. What I like about the cake is you mix it together in the same pan in which you bake it. No mixer. No bowl. The cake is tasty without frosting — moist, rich and chocolaty. I just dust it with powdered sugar but feel free to top it with your favorite frosting.

You can check out The National WWI Museum and Memorial's online exhibit to War Fare: From the Homefront to the Frontlines at exhibitions.theworldwar.org/war-fare/.

CRAZY CHOCOLATE CAKE

2 1/4 cups flour
 1 1/2 teaspoons baking soda
 3/4 teaspoon salt
 8 tablespoons cocoa powder
 1 1/2 cups sugar
 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla
 1 1/2 teaspoons vinegar
 1/2 cup oil
 1 1/2 cups water

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Place the dry ingredients into a 12 x 7 1/2 x 2-inch baking pan and whisk together. Make 3 indentations in the dry ingredients. Into one, put the vanilla, into another put the vinegar, and into the third put the oil. Pour water over all and mix the batter well with a fork. (If using a glass pan, look through the bottom to make sure all of the dry ingredients are incorporated, especially in the corners.) Bake in the same pan for about 30 minutes or until a cake tester inserted in the center comes out clean. Once cooled, dust the top with powdered sugar or top with frosting.

OATMEAL PEANUT BISCUITS

Adapted by Hy-Vee dietician Amber Groeling from a recipe in "Eating with Uncle Same: Recipes and Historical Bites from the National Archives."

Makes about 23 biscuits

1/2 cup rye flour
 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 1 teaspoon baking soda
 1 teaspoon salt
 1/2 cup brown sugar
 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter
 1 1/4 cup quick-cooking oatmeal
 1 cup unsalted peanuts, crushed

3/4 to 1 cup milk

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Set aside.

In a large bowl, sift together the flours, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Add the brown sugar. Cut in the butter using a pastry cutter or your fingers until the mixture is like damp sand. Stir in the oatmeal and the peanuts. Stir in enough milk to bring the mixture together into a soft dough. Roll out onto a slightly floured surface to about 3/4-inch thick. Cut out the biscuits and place them on the baking sheet. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes.

FRESH VEGETABLE SUCCOTASH

Used with permission from Hy-Vee dietician Amber Groeling.

Serves 6

2 slices bacon

1 yellow onion, diced

3 ears of sweet corn, kernels removed (or a package of frozen corn, defrosted)

1 zucchini, diced

1 yellow squash, diced

2 cups frozen shelled edamame, defrosted

1 large tomato, diced

3 tablespoons tarragon vinegar

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Salt and pepper to taste

1/4 cup fresh basil, cut into thin ribbons.

In a large skillet, cook the bacon until crisp. Remove the bacon and set aside. Into the bacon grease, add the onion and cook until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add in the corn, zucchini and squash. Cook until tender, about 5 minutes. Add the edamame, cook until warmed through, about 2 to 3 minutes. Add the tomato, cook 1 to 2 minutes. Chop or crumble the crisp bacon and add to the mixture. Add the vinegar, oil, salt, pepper and basil. Adjust seasonings to taste. Serve immediately. Can be served warm or at room temperature. If taking to a potluck, serve room temperature and stir in the tomatoes just before serving.

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