


Cooking on an open fire

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A reenactor demonstrates eighteenth-century methods of cooking over a fire and talks about colonial foods and foodways. Filmed at Alamance Battleground Historic Site, October 2008.

Video:  Cooking on an open fire

Duration: 7:19

Transcript:

Video Transcript

Woman (00:01)

Most cooking was done inside the confines of your house, inside the fireplace. That was important, because you didn't have to worry about the smoke getting in your eyes — which it will out here, because the wind's going to carry it wherever it wants to — but also the heat is going to be confined to the cooking area, and that's where you need it. In class I'm sure at some point in your class work you have learned that heat rises, so this is important, if you put food in the way of heat, it's going to cook, if you leave it there long enough, if it's hot enough, it's going to cook. And you're not going to have a burning problem so much if you put it in a liquid. So the easiest way to fix a lot of food for a lot of people is to put it all in one big pan, put it in water, set it over a fire, and just stir it occasionally, and keep plenty of water in it.

(01:02)

I'm fixing pork and beans this morning. Maybe not the kind of pork and beans you're used to. These are kidney beans, one of the varieties of beans mentioned many times in writings from the eighteenth century. Girls were normally your cooks. Women — mama — and the girls. The girls attended the burn and learn school of cooking. You met in front of the fire place every morning, you learned to cook. And if you had to eat your mistakes, you learned quickly what *not* to do as well as what *to* do.

(01:31)

There are times when you did not have a pan — or maybe an appropriate pan — to prepare food in, so it is possible to cook without what we consider a cooking pan. And one way is just literally laying the food beside the fire. Not only does heat rise, it radiates. You should be feeling some of this heat now as I'm talking. My problem with these pieces — and this is an egg, and this is a sweet potato — is that I have to manually turn that, so that requires a little more closer attention than cooking in the pot like this.

(02:10)

You young men who are from the age of 16 to 60, you are going to be in the militia. It's not a volunteer organization, it's required by law. So when you're marching, with your group of militia men, you'd better know how to cook your own food. Mama's not going to be there to do it for you. Radiated heat, this is a popular camp method of cooking. It's called planking: tying a piece of meat or food onto a plank. Usually I soak this plank, but that wouldn't have been an issue with them, they probably wouldn't be reusing theirs like I reuse mine. The radiated heat cooks the meat from the front all the way to the back. I don't have to take it off and flip it over. It's thin piece of meat, it's not very dense flesh, all I have to do is prop it up close. Now I don't have things close as they would, because they would be in a hurry to eat, I'm going to be talking all day, I don't want it to get done before I get done.

(03:10)

This is a little fancier piece, thanks to the blacksmith here, I have this little rod that I can suspend my chicken from. And this is the poor man's rotisserie. This heat is radiating and cooking this chicken on all sides as it turns. She's going to stop, but she'll go in the other direction. This will continue until eventually she stops. That's when I go back over there and give her another swirl. This too requires a little more close, a little closer supervision than those. It cooks crispy on the outside, it traps the moisture on the inside, so this is a really delicious way, and this comes from a recipe from the 1700s, so this is not an unusual way to be cooking.

(04:03)

To bake, we like bread, and bread was a basic truly. Cornbread was probably their bread, because it was easy to that grow that corn, it was so easy to grow. But, there were people, including Mr. Allen here, who was also growing wheat, and wheat was made into bread. This is a small version of the really large bake kettles, or dutch ovens that these folks were living, using in this time period. This house does not have a built-in bake oven, so they used a bake kettle for their baking purposes. It is a simple oven. Fire shovel — not your hand, but a metal fire shovel — would take those red glowing coals, you see them down there, how their glowing under those logs? That is extremely hot. The inside, the floor of the fireplace,

made of stone. So I can take the fire shovel, put a pile of them on the stone floor of the fire place, put my food in here. The lid has a raised lip, not like our domed lid at home. Put that on top, set my food on that hearth area, put more coals on top, so I've got heat at the bottom, I've got heat at the top, and it's going to cook like your conventional oven today. I don't know if you've ever — probably not — looked inside your mother's oven. If you have her permission, look to see, you've got the element on the top, and the element on the bottom. So this is using the same principle of baking that you do at home.

(05:46)

This is a spider, it's a frying pan. Certainly you can fry in a pan like that if need be, and you were limited to the kind of cooking were going to make do, by the number of pots that you had. This is just one kind of cooking pot. It required that you — your close attention. The legs kept the pot off of the fire from getting so hot. Notice, too, it has a long handle. The cooking utensils, all my work pieces, have long handles. That's to keep my petticoat away from that fire. Always the danger of fire with an open flame. So this was something that you stayed right with the frying. Most people were not going to be devoting that much attention to frying. In the back country, very unlikely they'd have a separate pan for that.

(06:39)

They did have toasters, this is a poor man's toaster: It's a meat fork. Stick a piece of bread on the end of that, hold it near the flames of the fire, and it's going to toast that bread. But a rich man — or a more well-to-do man — could afford to buy a toaster such as this. Put your bread in here, set it near the flames, toast on that side, tap it with your toe, turn it to the other side, and do likewise. The recipe said to put your toast on a plate, put your stew on the top of it, and by the time you got to that, the toast was nice and soft, and ready to eat.

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