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Bring Home the Bacon

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WHAT IS BACON? It is memories of a pungent aroma awaking you on a winter morning. It is the essential ingredient in a “special” recipe for baked beans. And it is probably the only meat which has been preserved in the same way since prehistoric times.

Bacon is mentioned in the most ancient recipes available. In fact, the cured meat probably came about when some cave dweller accidently left a piece of his meat hanging over a fire overnight. Early man could kill his bison, remove the choice portions, and by placing them in the sun to dry or rubbing them with salt, preserve them till he made another kill.

American Indians contributed another form of cured meat. They cut long strips from the sides of the buffalo they killed and hung them in the sun to dry to a hard darkened piece of meat. This could be put in a pack and carried for days without fear of spoilage till another kill was made.

When they were ready to eat their dried meat, they simply pounded a strip to a fine powder and mixed it with dried fruits and vegetables and water to make “pemmican,” a standard dish in the Indian menu.

The name of this dried meat is “jerky.” Its origin was a poor translation of the sound of the Indian word for the meat; the Spanish called it “cherqui.” When that word moved into the English vocabulary, it became “jerky.”

Bacon was known in ancient European and Mediterranean civilizations, also. Apicius, a gourmet of Imperial Rome, wrote what may be the first cookbook, and in it, he mentioned the difficulty of preserving meat. For those who disliked the use of salt he suggested covering fresh meat with honey and suspending it in a vessel for use as needed. This however, was effective only a few days in the summer, so he next put forth a method of keeping cooked sides of pork.

“Place them in a pickle of mustard, vinegar, salt and honey, covering the meat entirely. And when ready to use you will be surprised.”

This is his version of a marinade, but more basically it is the “pickle” method of curing meat.

He also suggested mashed parsnips with spices, wine, and oil as an accompaniment to salt pork or bacon. This meat was cooked by covering with water seasoned with plenty of dill. Then it was sprinkled with a little oil and a trifle of salt.

Bacon continued to play an important role in the food of the world, popular to old and young, and readily produced where other foods were not available. The German settlers who came early to Pennsylvania brought with them foods from the Old Country, including a flair for using bacon. George Washington is said to have been delighted by a soup whose principal ingredients were hard-shelled crabs and bacon. He discovered it when he made his headquarters in a farm home at Valley Forge.

The Pennsylvania Germans are quite renowned for their cooking, and they use bacon to its best advantage. They include the meat or drippings in sweet-sour dishes, and use up to half a pound in a standard potato salad recipe.

In Miss Leslie’s Lady’s New Receipt Book, published in 1851, bacon seems to have fallen into disfavor. She never used bacon in her “receipts,” for, as everyone knew, bacon lent “a strong disagreeable flavor far inferior to that of lard or a milder fat.” However, she does suggest a pickling brine for ham or bacon. It is composed of today’s curing components: water, salt, saltpeter, sugar, with the addition of molasses for richer flavor.

The bacon we buy today is the same basic product that was on sale in Miss Leslie’s day; the only change is the cellophane package. It can be bought either thin-sliced or thick-sliced, with the rind still on, or without. Canadian bacon is cured pork made from the eye of the loin muscle. Beef bacon is also available; it is a cured and smoked beef loin product. So it is that bacon remains the world’s standard meat product since a hunter accidently left his kill hanging over a smoldering hickory fire thirty centuries ago.