

FOOD ROOTS

BY ELIZABETH DRIVER

HOT PUDDINGS FOR COLD DAYS



Photographs: Edwin Rowse

Ontario winters bring freezing temperatures, snow, shorter days and longer nights. As darkness falls and we scurry home from school or work, we look forward to a nourishing hot meal. A hearty main course may be the foundation of a winter menu. However, I'm sure I'm not the only one who also yearns for a hot, sweet pudding to finish: apple crisp, bread pudding, rice pudding, and carrot or plum pudding at Christmas all hit the

spot this time of year, when food is not just a fuel to keep us warm, but also an emotional comfort.

Imagine, then, families in Toronto and in what we now call the Golden Horseshoe living through the winter in houses without central heating or effective insulation. As late as the 1910s and '20s, many homes, particularly in rural areas, were still heated only by the wood- or coal-fired kitchen stove and

perhaps a parlour heating stove, whose tin chimney pipes dissipated warmth as they wound their way through rooms and floors on their way out the roof. And before about 1835, when the first cast iron cook stoves were made in Ontario, a wood fire set in an open hearth was the only source of heat for warmth and for cooking. Hot puddings of all kinds were much appreciated by diners in these chilly interiors!

But is there a common origin to many hot puddings and, if so, how far back do their roots go? Although cooking methods may differ (baked, steamed or boiled) and ingredients vary, their beginnings lie in the medieval practice of stuffing a savoury mixture such as liver, blood, breadcrumbs and seasonings into the intestines of sheep or pigs, then boiling the sausage-shaped “pudding” in an iron cauldron over the fire. The intestines were only available when animals were butchered (usually winter) and they were difficult to clean well and to fill without breaking.

By Elizabethan times, as a way to avoid using intestines, the pudding mixture might be baked on a platter or in a basin, sometimes lined or garnished around the edges with pastry. A new idea revolutionized pudding-making in the early seventeenth century and broke the connection with animal guts: The mixture was tied up and boiled in a cloth, which gave the pudding a cannonball shape, like the Christmas puddings seen in old engravings. The adoption of the washable, re-useable pudding cloth led to the invention of a host of new recipes, savoury and sweet, which often included dried fruit. Sometimes a suet crust was wrapped around the mixture and then boiled in the cloth.

By the nineteenth century, cooks had also learned to tie a cloth over the pudding in a bowl or basin, and to steam or boil the mixture in the cloth-covered container. Sweet dishes of milk thickened with egg and flour in a heated saucepan also came to be known as puddings, as did batter mixtures, such as Yorkshire pudding, which traditionally accompanies roast beef.

The great majority of Ontario’s early settlers were of British stock and they carried these pudding traditions with them to their new homes. All pudding types appear in Ontario’s nineteenth-century cookbooks. Over the past hundred years, however, the boiled-in-a-cloth version has nearly disappeared from Canada (except in Newfoundland), and the cloth-covered-bowl method (usually now foil-covered for steaming) has become limited to the Christmas feast. Hot baked sweet puddings predominate.

Good ingredients make good puddings! Early settlers found the greatest amount of prime land in all of Canada here in Southern Ontario, in the favoured Niagara Peninsula, which



provided ideal conditions for growing soft fruits such as peaches and grapes. Local foods – which they grew, bartered or bought – were the mainstay of their cooking, but they also prized imported foods such as refined cane sugar or molasses (over the poor man’s maple sugar), spices, lemons and oranges (often made into candied peel), Carolina rice, raisins and currants, and European wines and spirits. These imported items were essential for sweetening and flavouring puddings, or for creating a hot pudding sauce – typically brandy, sugar and melted butter, or a blend of cream, sugar and spices.

Many ingredients came from their own or neighbours’ farms: wheat flour and cornmeal, both stone-ground; rich milk, cream and butter; eggs; a wide variety of seasonal fruits and vegetables; pork, mutton and beef for meat puddings; and suet – the hard white fat from around beef kidneys which, after chopping or grating, was routinely used as the shortening in sweet pudding mixtures or in the surrounding pastry. Foraged wild fruits and game added to the kitchen larder.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the range of apple types alone was astonishing. In *The Female Emigrant’s Guide*, first published in Toronto in early 1855, Catharine Parr Traill named nine summer apples, fourteen autumn apples and fifteen winter apples. There were, she commented, “many other capital apples, but these are the most celebrated.” Today, as in the past, there is nothing more satisfying than a homemade pudding made from locally produced fresh, seasonal ingredients. In the winter months, it becomes a special treat to use preserved foods from Ontario’s last harvest, such as bottled fruits and jams, dried plums, or apples, pumpkins and squash brought up from storage in a cool cellar.

It is not surprising that the first cookbook compiled in Canada in English emerged from a town located in the rich agricultural area of the Niagara Peninsula: *The Frugal Housewife’s Manual* by “A.B. of Grimsby,” was printed in Toronto in 1840. The author, identified only by initials (but likely a woman), presented seventy-two recipes plus instructions for the “Cultivation of Vegetables.” Her preserved fruit recipes would have brightened the taste and colour of a winter pudding: red currant and apple jelly, quinces, peaches, plums, cherries and currants (red, white, or black) preserved in a brandied sugar syrup, and fruit stewed with sugar and then dried.

Regarding the choice of local versus imported ingredients,

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she noted in her recipe for preserved red, white or black currants: "If you have a supply of cherries and currants preserved, it will be less expensive to use them for mince pies than it is to buy raisins and [imported] currants. I have made good pies (without raisins, foreign currants, or sugar,) with good apples, pleasant cider, preserved cherries and currants, well spiced."

Her selection of hot puddings includes A Rich Baked Custard, A Floating Island (meringue shapes floating on custard), Snowballs (portions of rice boiled in a cloth, then turned out and served with sweet wine sauce), Rice Custard, Bird's Nest Pudding (the recipe for which is reproduced here), Any Kind of Jam Pudding (puff pastry spread with jam, rolled up, then boiled in a cloth), Apple Pudding ("Any common fruit can be made up in the same manner, and boiled according to the size."), Bread Pudding, Hasty Pudding (milk thickened in a saucepan with egg and flour), Boiled Indian Pudding (corn-meal spiced with ginger or allspice), Batter Pudding and Baked Indian Pudding.

A.B.'s pudding selection is limited because her overall text is short, but a more extensive range of hot puddings appears in another early local cookbook, *The Canadian Housewife's Manual of Cookery*, published in 1861 by Henry Ilett Richard of Hamilton, which I suspect was silently authored by his wife, Elizabeth.

In the nineteenth century, Ontario's home cooks graced their tables with delicious dishes made from locally produced foods. On the coldest, darkest evenings, hot puddings warmed bodies and souls. Making homemade puddings in your kitchen this winter – using the best local ingredients – guarantees the same comforting pleasure.



Note: The recipes accompanying this article are reprinted exactly as they were published in the 1800s. Each recipe is followed by my "Notes for the Modern Cook" – a guide to making the recipes in the twenty-first century.

CARROT PUDDING

One and a half cups flour, one cup sugar, one cup suet, one cup raisins, one cup currants, one cup potatoes grated, one cup carrots grated, one teaspoon soda; steam or boil three hours.

*This recipe is from **The Home Cook Book**, compiled from recipes contributed by ladies from Toronto and other cities and towns for the benefit of the Hospital for Sick Children (Toronto, 1877), p 197. Reproduced by Canadiana.org (CIHM 95365).*

NOTES FOR THE MODERN COOK

This is the first recipe published in a Canadian cookbook for carrot pudding, which would become the cheaper, lighter and favourite alternative to plum pudding in early-twentieth-century Ontario. At Christmastime there would have been plenty of carrots and potatoes in the root cellar.

Mrs. McMaster, who contributed the recipe, assumed the cook would add to taste her own ground spices: for example, 1 tsp cinnamon, 1/2 tsp ground nutmeg, and 1/4 tsp ground cloves. I suggest using brown sugar, adding an egg to help bind the mixture together, plus 1/4 cup candied peel, a common ingredient in later versions. Spoon the mixture into a pudding bowl or other heatproof container and cover with aluminum foil, waxed or parchment paper, or a cloth secured with string. Place the bowl on a trivet in a large covered saucepan (the ring from a preserving jar or 3 upside-down spoons will also keep the bowl from direct contact with the pan bottom); fill the pan with water to halfway up the side of the bowl. Boil for 3 hours.

Serve with a hot sauce: 1 cup brown sugar, 2 tbsp flour, a pinch of salt and 2 cups water, simmered together for 10 minutes. Stir in 4 tbsp butter, 4 tsp white vinegar, 1/4 tsp ground nutmeg, 1/4 tsp cinnamon, a pinch of ground cloves, 2 tsp vanilla.



BIRD'S NEST PUDDING

If you wish to make Bird's Nest Pudding, make very good custard ready for baking, take as many good apples as you have custard prepared for; pare them and take the cores out with a small knife that they may be whole; set them in a pudding dish, and pour your custard [the unbaked mixture for A Rich Baked Custard] over them, just so as to cover them; bake until the apples are done, and the custard settles down a little. Eat it while warm.

A RICH BAKED CUSTARD

Boil a pint [2 cups] of cream, and cool it so as not to scald the eggs; then take four well-beaten eggs, then add nutmeg and sugar to taste; mix them well, and bake it slowly until it rises; be sure not to let it stand in the oven after it is done.

*These recipes are from **The Frugal Housewife's Manual** (Toronto, 1840), pp 8, 11. Reproduced by Canadiana.org (CIHM 90013).*

NOTES FOR THE MODERN COOK

Bird's Nest Pudding is simply a sweetened and spiced custard mixture poured over peeled and cored apples, then baked. Choose small McIntosh apples or other small apples with a delicate flesh that will cook quickly in the custard. There is no need to boil or scald the cream first, but warming it will help to dissolve the sugar. If you don't have a casserole with edges as high as the apples are tall, then use a large pie plate and cut the apples in half horizontally. Cutting them in half also ensures that the apples cook by the time the custard has set, and if first peeled and halved, it's easier to remove the core without breaking the fruit. I used about 1/4 cup sugar to 2 cups whipping cream, 4 eggs and nutmeg, and found that this amount of custard and 4 or 5 halved apples filled a large pie plate (individual custard cups would work well, too). Bake at 325°F until the custard has set, about 25 to 30 minutes. A knife inserted into the custard should come out clean. □

*Liz Driver is the author of **Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825–1949** and the introductions for *Whitecap's "Classic Canadian Cookbooks Series."* She directs the historical foodways program at Montgomery's Inn Museum in Toronto, teaches Applied Food History at George Brown College, and serves as past president of the Culinary Historians of Ontario.*

*This is the first article Liz has written for her "Food Roots" column, which will appear in every issue of *Edible Toronto*.*