

AMERICA250: FROM OATHS TO TOASTS

An original program by Northern York County Historical and Preservation Society
at Dills Tavern, July 3, 2026



The recipes, or colonial “receipts”, for this meal were derived from several early American cookbooks. These cooking instructions are less precise than modern recipes, with directions like “a handful,” “a little salt,” “bake till done,” or “season to taste.” Oven temperatures and exact times were uncommon because cooks used open hearths, brick ovens, and experience to judge heat. Through study and experience, culinary historians have been able to adapt these “receipts” with modern terminology so they may be replicated. The menu items below are representative of ingredients available to 18th century cooks.

Beef Stew:

Colonial Americans would have used meat, vegetables, and herbs in their kitchens even in the middle and lower classes. They most often relied on seasonal ingredients that were readily available that they could grow themselves. Stew, in particular, was extremely common. It was easy to make on a hearth and it could be made with whatever ingredients were available in the kitchen as “pottage”. Kitchens would also have had broth and wine to make stews tasty.

“American Cookery” by Amelia Simmons, 1796

Bread:

Making bread was a regular household task, usually done by women. It was a basic food staple and provided calories and energy for families that did hard physical labor. Bread could be made from a variety of local grains (rye, corn, barley, oats) and appeared at nearly every meal. Bread crumbs were also used as a thickening agent to many other recipes.

“The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy.” By Hannah Glasse, 1747

Pounded Cheese:

Pounded cheese was an early version of cheese spread. Cooks would take leftover aged cheese and instead of letting it dry out, they mashed it with butter, cream, mustard, wine, or spices to repurpose it.

It was packed tightly into jars or pots and sealed with fat to keep it fresh. This dish came from English and French influence. It was popular in taverns and homes alike. You’d find it in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and even New York—anywhere people had access to good cheese and needed to store food without refrigeration.

“The Cook’s Own Book” by Mrs. N. K. M. Lee, 1832

Salad:

Early American colonists ate both cultivated garden greens and wild greens. Greens were often eaten fresh in spring and summer, cooked in soups or stews, or boiled with meat.

“The Accomplisht Cook” by Robert May, 1685

Nun’s Cake / Pound Cake:

The pound cake was the standard cake of the 18th century, calling for a pound of butter, a pound of eggs, a pound of sugar, and a pound of flour. In every kitchen, there were balance scales which allowed the cook to weigh the ingredients. To change the recipe, the cook needed only to adjust the ratio.

“The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy.” By Hannah Glasse, 1747

Indian Pudding:

This dish was baked low and slow, often for hours, making it thick, dark, and rich. The name “Indian” here refers to the cornmeal, not the origin of the dish.

“American Cookery” by Amelia Simmons, 1796

Beverages:

Madeira was the wine of choice, although after the blockades of the ports became more prevalent, it became difficult to acquire. Hard cider and ale, locally made by farmers, was more commonly enjoyed than water.