

What Did Pilgrims Eat?

Foods the Plymouth Pilgrims Ate on the Mayflower and in the New World

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Pilgrims ate whatever kind of food they could get their hands on because after the tiring months long journey across the Atlantic Ocean, they found themselves in the New World with very little food to eat. In addition, they landed at Plymouth in the midst of winter and had to wait three to four months for spring to set in before they could plant crops.

Once spring came, however, pilgrim farming left a lot for desiring. Pilgrims were used to farming in Europe where soil differed from American soil. For this reason, they were unable to get the most from their crops until Squanto, a native American Indian, taught them to use fish as fertilizer.

Speaking of fish—pilgrims did not know how to fish; and in fact, pilgrims did not have appetites for fish at that time because English people loathed the idea of eating animals from the sea. They even associated the bible's reference to "daily bread" to mean fleshy meats and grains, not fish.

Squanto, however, taught the pilgrims how to catch clams by scooping sand and mud at the shore. Thanks to Squanto, the pilgrims, while waiting for their crops to grow, were able to sustain themselves by living off clams and water, sometimes for days, after utilizing Squanto's technique.

Native Americans taught pilgrims how to catch shellfish such as mussels, oysters, and lobster as well. They also taught them how to catch herring, bass, cod, eel, and bluefish. Pilgrims rounded out their meat rations with chicken, turkey, venison, and goat.

Once they became adept at farming in America, pilgrims grew, harvested, and ate corn, as well as other grains. They used corn to make a variety of different dishes such as cornbread and corn pudding. They used another grain, barley, to make beer. Pilgrims drank whiskey, wine, brandy, and or beer everyday. They also ate wheat brought in from England.

As far as fowl goes, pilgrims ate duck, crane, geese, turkeys, and other birds. They got their fruit rations from grapes, cherries, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, and plums. Acorns, walnuts, chestnuts, groundnuts, and hickory nuts helped to round out their diets. In addition, for sweeteners they used honey and maple syrup.

In 1624, settlers arriving at Plymouth brought cows along which added beef, cow milk, cream, and butter to the pilgrim diet. Cows became the most important stock the pilgrims owned and in 1627, after they completed paying debts they owed to the men and companies who financed their Mayflower voyage, they divided the cows amongst the people. Each group of thirteen people shared one cow. At that time, there were twelve cows available. Whenever possible, the groups comprised of family members.

While aboard the Mayflower, pilgrims ate meats called salt-horse that consisted of salted beef and pork. Other foods pilgrims were believed to eat on the Mayflower included dried beans, dried peas, cheese, butter, and biscuits.

Pilgrim biscuits, called hardtack, were true to their name. They indeed were hard. Pilgrims made them from flour and water and may or may not have added sugar or salt. Since hardtack biscuits could truly be hard enough to break your teeth, the voyagers may have dipped them in water before biting them.