

Fruitcake, plum pudding, and mince pie outlawed

ROSEMONT, Ill. — Plum pudding, mince pie, and fruitcakes were outlawed from Christmas festivities in 1640. This was done under a Massachusetts statute which decreed that partying during Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide was illegal and punishable with a five-shilling fine.

These early New Englanders were Puritans, and they found merry-making to be too close to its pagan origins for their austere tastes.

The Christmas season coincided with the Ancient Anglo-Saxon winter solstice feast, in honor of both the Creation and the god Thor.

Missionaries who converted the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity were wise enough to leave their feasting alone, so the celebration became a holiday of the new religion with many of the ancient traditions.

Plum puddings and fruitcakes were a special

part of the party because sweets were rare in Merry Olde England. They were originally made with dried fruits native to the British Isles since fresh fruits were unavailable in the middle of winter.

As imported spices, dried citrus fruits and currants became more common

during the Renaissance due to expanded trade with the East, these ingredients were added. They were said to symbolize the gifts that the Eastern Wise Men brought to honor the Christ child.

Traditional plum pudding contained raisins, not plums. It got its name because in Renaissance England, raisins were called plums. For example, Jack Horner's plum was a raisin, and his pie was mincemeat.

While plum pudding was considered the perfect ending to a Christmas dinner, fruitcakes were most often part of the Twelfth Night celebration. In seventeenth-century England, Twelfth Night, the last day of the Christmas season before the beginning of Epiphany, was usually more festive than Christmas.

A cake containing spices and dried fruits, called twelfth-cake, was cut as part of the merriment. Hidden in it were a bean and a pea. The man whose slice contained the bean was declared king of the festivities; the queen was she who found the pea. The revelers dunked their slices in cups of wassail or "lamb's wool", a hot beverage made of ale, spices and roasted apples.

One traditional Anglo-Saxon holiday treat the Puritans failed to outlaw was frumenty or furnety, porridge made with milk and hulled wheat.

In Scandinavian countries, a similar dish, made with rice, milk, sugar and cinnamon still is served on Christmas Eve. It contains a hidden almond; the finder is blessed with luck.

Norwegians leave dishes of this rice pudding under the barns for the Nisser, little men who show their gratitude for the Christmas porridge by protecting the farm and animals during the next year.

Christmas and Twelfth Night feasting in New England never wholly recovered from the Puritan influence, although the making of plum pudding and fruitcake was later revived. In the American colonies other than New England, where Puritans had little to say about what people ate, the traditional baking was carried on.

Today, there probably are more Christmas fruitcakes baked in the U.S. than anywhere in the world. They are based on recipes passed on by colonial goodwives who were extremely proud of their products.

Making fruitcakes in the early days of America was hard work. Preparing the ingredients took days, and the whole family helped.

Sugar came in ten-pound, cone-shaped loaves. These were broken, pulverized and sifted. Flour was dried before the fireplace, butter washed to remove the salt, and spices pounded into powder. Currants had their stems and stones removed, raisins were seeded, and all the fruits were chopped by hand.

While baking fruit cakes and plum puddings today is much easier, the recipes and the rewards of the work, the traditional holiday joy the feasting brings, have remained the same through the centuries.

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