



Dressings and Dormice

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

Dressing, or stuffing as some call it, is one of America's favorite Thanksgiving dishes. It seems every family has their own recipe, or more than one, and memories of a beloved family member preparing it. My Mama usually made her dressing with light bread instead of cornbread because Daddy did not especially like cornbread dressing. Further, instead of the moist, delicious gloppyness that comes straight out of the bird, he preferred his dressing thinly pressed into a well-greased pan and baked until crisp, rather like pizza crust. It was a delicious late-night snack that could be eaten straight from the fridge or heated and dipped into leftover gravy.

When I decided to research the history of dressing (yes, even dressing has a history), I had no idea how very interesting it would be. Though there is no evidence that dressing was served at the first Thanksgiving, it's very likely that some form of it was placed on that first harvest table. During Colonial times it was quite common to stuff any type of meat with an array of vegetables, fruits, nuts and/or oysters, mixed with a starchy amalgam to hold it all together. Often, instead of baking it, the whole bundle of meat and filling was wrapped in a cloth and boiled.

If you have ever browsed through a genuine Colonial cookbook you probably did not come across many recipes for dressing. That's because prior to the early 1800s it was generally called "forcemeat," alluding to the manner of packing — or forcing — the filling into the cavity of the meat before cooking. Further back in the Middle Ages, dressing was known as "farce," a derivation of the French word, *facir*, meaning, "to stuff."

THIS NEXT BIT IS RIDICULOUS

Did you know that dressings and stuffings fall into a category known as "austerity cooking?" Yep, it's a thing. At least in the U.K. it is. A few years back, a couple of well-known chefs even had a bit of a row (rhymes with cow, and is how they refer to arguments in the U.K., or so I've read in Agatha Christie novels) over these so-called austerity recipes. Competitions were even held to determine which chef could cook up the most austere meal. Chef Jamie Oliver lost, in my opinion, as his plates cost a little more and were definitely more posh.

Color me crazy, but on this side of the pond we just call it good old home cooking. Oh, sometimes we might embellish a little by calling it soul food or comfort food, but austere food just doesn't have the same ring, does it? Feel free to slap me if I ever use the phrase "austerity cooking."

ROME, 1 A.D.

In the opening decades of the first century, A.D., Roman gastronomer Marcus Gavius Apicius began compiling what would become the oldest surviving recipe collection in existence today. A follower of Greek philosopher Epicurus, Apicius embraced the Epicurean movement, especially when it came to the pleasures of eating.

A first-century forerunner to Andrew Zimmern, Apicius made it a life goal to sample all things edible. Among his favorites were the tongues of nightingales, the heels of camels and the brains of flamingos. In Book VIII of Apicius' 10-volume culinary anthology, *De Re Coquinaria*, one of the world's oldest known recipes for dressing can be found. It's a filling for dormouse:

"Is stuffed with a forcemeat of pork and small trimmings of dormouse meat trimmings, all pounded with pepper, nuts, laser (a spiced wine), broth. Put the dormouse thus stuffed in an earthen casserole, roast it in the



Happy Thanksgiving wishes from the food writer.



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British celebrity Chef Jamie Oliver poses for photographers Oct. 19, 2009, at the Dussmann bookshop in Berlin.

oven or boil it in the stock pot."

In case you missed that day in science class, the dormouse is a rodent common to western Europe and Africa. There are 29 different species of dormice, from little fuzziballs akin to the gerbils ensconced in your second-grade class to the edible variety, known as *Glis glis*. The *Glis glis* is larger than its mousy cousins, with a fluffy, squirrel-like tail and eyes that will remind you of your favorite aunt's Chihuahua. It is still enjoyed today, dressing and all, in Slovenia.

GLOBAL APPEAL

All around the world, we humans just love our stuffing, but it wasn't until the Victorian era that the familiar Thanksgiving staple became known as "dressing." Among wealthy English citizens, foods were often presented in arrangements that mimicked famous paintings or fantastical beasts. Sometimes several things were stuffed into other things, ala turducken style. A sizable gathering might include a whole pig, deer or other large animal stuffed and presented to delighted guests.

On our side of the Atlantic, Colonial and Early American recipes for dressing were virtually the same as their English counterparts, sans the elaborate presentation. The biggest difference between the two, though, was the exchange of Native American style cornbread in place of some or all of the light bread in the colonies. This was and still is especially favored by southern cooks. Even today, the traditional dressing that we serve on our Thanksgiving tables is virtually unchanged from that which

would have appeared on the tables of the early settlers.

Godey's 1867 Ladies Handbook, popular among cooks in both England and in America, includes the following recipe for "Forcemeat":

"Half a pound of bread crumbs, a tablespoon of finely chopped parsley, a (teaspoon) of sweet herbs (equal amounts of fresh parsley, tarragon, chives and chervil, minced), a little grated nutmeg and lemon peel, seasoned with salt, pepper and Cayenne, two ounces of beef suet, finely chopped, and two eggs a little beaten. Mix well. The flavor of a little chopped lean ham is relished by some persons."

In India, gourds are stuffed with a mixture of spiced coconut and panir, a mild fresh cheese. The gourds are then deep fried and covered with spicy gravy. In Asia, pork, cabbage and bean thread noodles are blended with spices and packed into wonton or egg roll wrappers. It's not surprising; at one point or another we have each managed to make the most of whatever we could scrap together and turn it into a grand celebration.

THE RECIPES

Since many of us are already quite familiar with cornbread dressing, I've included here a trio of historic recipes that are suitable to serve alongside, or as an alternative to the southern dressing du jour.

This 17th century recipe is loaded with all of the holiday panache you'd expect from a traditional Thanksgiving celebration. Notice that it contains very little bread, leaving more room for the other ingredients. This is better if made a day ahead and



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A cute and cuddly baby dormouse nibbles on a chunk of pear.

refrigerated overnight.
½ cup dried apricots, diced
½ cup prunes, diced
1 cup cider
1 pound bulk breakfast sausage
1 large onion, chopped
2 stalks celery, chopped
2 cups stale breadcrumbs
1 cup chestnuts, coarsely chopped
3 apples, cored, peeled and diced
1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage (1 teaspoon dried)
½ cup chopped fresh parsley
¾ teaspoon salt, or to taste
¾ teaspoon pepper

Place the apricots and prunes in a bowl with the cider to soften up. Meantime, brown the sausage. Using a slotted spoon, remove the sausage and place it in a large bowl, leaving the grease in the pan. Sauté the onion and celery in the sausage grease until tender, then add them to the sausage in the bowl. Add the breadcrumbs, chestnuts, apples, spices and dried fruit and toss together well. Taste for seasoning and adjust if needed. For in-the-bird stuffing, it should be on the dry side, but if it seems too dry add a bit of the cider until it is only slightly moist (the turkey will add moisture to the dressing as it bakes.)

MRS. BEETON'S DRESSING

This recipe is classified as Victorian, but could well be older than that. It was printed in Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, published in 1861. I've taken the liberty of reformatting the instructions. This amount of dressing, Mrs. Beeton recommends, is enough for one goose or two ducks.
4 large onions, peeled and left whole
10 sage leaves
½ lb bread crumbs
1 ½ oz butter
Salt and pepper
1 egg yolk

Place the whole onions in boiling water and let them cook for five minutes or more, until softened. Just before removing them from the water, add the sage leaves and let them boil for a minute or two. Remove the onions and sage from the

water to cool until they can be easily chopped fine. Add the bread, salt and pepper and egg yolk, mixing with hands until well combined. (Mrs. Beeton stresses that the dressing be highly seasoned and that the sage should be very finely chopped. She also cautions against the temptation to simply chop the onions raw, emphasizing that this will give the dressing a strong flavor that some may object to.) If stuffing a goose, a portion of simmered and chopped liver may be added to the mixture.

TRADITIONAL TURKEY AND DRESSING

This is the real deal, no box involved. Crank up the telly, put on the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and loosen your belt for this old-time classic.

10 cups (1 lb) stale bread cubes
½ cup (1 stick) butter
2 onions, diced
2 stalks celery, diced
1 tablespoon poultry seasoning
1 teaspoon dried sage
1 teaspoon dried thyme
¾ teaspoon salt, or to taste
½ teaspoon fresh ground black pepper
Turkey giblets, boiled and chopped fine, optional
Up to 2 cups lower sodium chicken broth or stock

Melt the butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add the onions and celery and sauté until soft. In a large bowl, combine the bread cubes with the vegetables, including the butter, and all ingredients except the broth. Add the broth, a little at a time, until just moist if using to stuff the turkey. If baking separately, add all of the broth and mix lightly but thoroughly. To bake separately: Preheat oven to 350 degrees F; place dressing in a large, well-greased casserole dish. Cover and bake for 30 minutes, remove cover and bake 10 minutes more or until lightly browned. To bake in the turkey: Preheat oven to 325 degrees F; place the turkey in the roasting pan. Loosely stuff the bird with ½ — ¾ cup dressing per pound of turkey, then cover the turkey loosely with foil. Remove the foil for