‘Possum Toddy

And the American Persimmon

By Kevin Carter, Foodways Historian, Conner Prairie Museum

Figure 1: A dish of ripe persimmons. Photo by Kevin Carter.

A Vestige from my Childhood.

When I was young, my family would load up in the station wagon to visit my Grandma and Grandpa in Wheatland, Indiana. Wheatland was a “sleepy” southern-Indiana town. While their house lacked the familiar playtime amenities of home, there were always plenty of new adventures for a young boy. There were eggs to collect and goats to scratch behind the ears. I’d place pennies on the railroad tracks and then spend hours searching for their flattened remains among the ballast after the next freight train plowed through. It was a different time, a different place, and a different pace.

While my grandparents had the blessing of running water in the kitchen sink, that was the extent of their plumbing luxuries. The old handpump was still outback near the house, and after a rigorous priming, it still gurgled its sulfurous water. The outhouse was a two-seater – something to this day I can’t understand. It was always stocked with a half bag of quicklime and the remnants of an old Sears catalog hung on a nail– reading material, I figured.

My Grandpa was a hard man who had lived a hard life. Being a heavy smoker, drinker, and rabblerouser in his younger years, he later became an itinerate, tent-meeting, fire-and-brimstone preacher following a death-bed bargain with God.

My Grandma was a noble woman in her backwoods sort of way. She was the sweet to the bitter – a gentle spirit. She doted over us kids. She never made an appearance without an apron tied about her waist, unless, of course, she was at church. Her long grey hair was always pulled back facelift-tight into a proper little bun as neat and tidy as the little house she kept.

"Paul," she said to my father one day, "why don't you and the boys be useful by gathering some persimmons. You remember that old tree? I'll make some puddin' for supper."

I had not heard of persimmons before, but my grandma assured me they were delicious. So off we went on a new adventure with bucket in hand. I didn't understand why my father was picking up only the squishy "rotten" fruit from the ground, especially when there were plenty of firm bright orange ones still hanging on the tree within reach.

"That's a pretty one! Go ahead and take a bite," he said with what I now know was a sadistic grin.

That was my introduction to *Diospyros virginiana* – the American Persimmon.

The Tree

The persimmon belongs to the genus *Diospyros* – a Latin word that, loosely translated, means "food of the gods." The common name *persimmon* is believed to be an apocopated version of the Renape word *pasîmênan* meaning *dried fruit.*[1]

The three most common species of persimmons are *Diospyros virginiana* (common persimmon), *Diospyros texana* (Texas persimmon), and *Diospyros kaki* (Oriental persimmon). The native range for the common persimmon (the species on which this article focuses) is the southeastern quadrant of the 48 contiguous states.

Historical accounts report that during the mid-16th century, the Spanish colonizer, Hernado de Soto, was greeted by gift-bearing Native Americans along the Mississippi River. Their gifts consisted of fish and "loaves" made from dried persimmon fruit.[2]

The tree is a member of the Ebony family. Its wood is heavy, fine-grained, light in color, and very hard. Persimmon wood was historically used in the manufacture of carpenter plane stocks, gun stocks, shoe lasts, bed posts, plough beams, picture frames, canes, combs, and musical instruments such as fifes, flutes, flageolets.[3] Small spinning wheels used for flax and wool were occasionally made of persimmon wood as were the shuttles used in weaving.[4] In more recent history, because of its crush resistance, persimmon was the wood of choice for the heads of golf-club drivers.

The Bitter and the Sweet

In Thomas Anburey's 1789 journal, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, he writes:

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[1] American Anthropologist. United States: American Anthropological Association, 1907, 101.

[2] Bancroft, George. A History of the United States: History of the colonization of the United States. United States: Little, Brown, 1838, 52.

[3] FARMERS' REGISTER. N.p.: n.p., 1837, 596.

[4] Gibson, Henry H.. American Forest Trees: By Henry H. Gibson. United States: Hardwood record, 1913, 519.

"Many of us were deceived by this fruit, when ripe and hanging on the trees, it having the appearance of an Orlean plumb; but which we found possessed of such powerful astringent qualities, as to contract the mouth to such a degree that it was several hours before we regained the sense of taste."[5]

I'm comforted to know that my seven-year-old self was not alone in making this mistake.

Typical harvest occurs between September and November, and trust me, you don't want to bite into a wild persimmon before they are ripe! (If you're curious about what the experience is like, try eating an entire green banana peel.)

The unripe persimmon fruit (and other parts of the persimmon tree) is exceedingly astringent and styptic. Its puckering power comes from its proanthocyanidins (soluble tannin) content.[6] Historically, the inner bark was used medicinally to treat intermittent fever and diarrhea as well as a gargle for ulcerated sore throats. The unripe fruit was used to treat chronic dysentery and uterine hemorrhaging.[7] [8]

During the American Civil War, rations were often scarce. One story recalls a time when an officer scolded a soldier for eating an unripe persimmon because it wasn't good for him. The soldier replied, "I'm not eatin' it because it's good. I'm trying to pucker up my stomach so as to fit the rations uncle Billy Sherman's a-given us."[9]

Due to persimmon's high tannin content, the juice of unripe fruit was preferred over oak bark for tanning.[10]

While unripe persimmons are one of the most astringent of all native fruits, the *ripe* persimmon is one of the sweetest. Much like bananas, the persimmon fruit gives off ethylene gas as it ripens which dissipates its puckering soluble tannins. What's left is a fruit that is comprised of up to 34% sugar.[11]

The Useful

Science now tells us that persimmon fruit is a good source of antioxidants, carotenoids, and polyphenols. Studies have shown that these compounds have several health and medicinal benefits including reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases through the reduction of blood pressure. Other studies show benefits in treating LDL cholesterol, diabetes, cancer, stroke, aging, dermatitis, and body odor. Another study suggests that consuming persimmon before drinking alcohol reduces blood alcohol content and hangovers.[12]

Historical uses of the persimmon fruit included the manufacture of indelible ink, black fabric dye, persimmon molasses, and vinegar. Seeds were used for buttons that were "more durable than pearl or

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[5] Anburey, Thomas. Travels Through the Interior Parts of America. In a Series of Letters. United Kingdom: Lane, 1789, 432.

[6] George, A.P., Redpath, S., "Health and medicinal benefits of persimmon fruit: a review," Advances in Horticultural Science , 2008, Vol. 22, No. 4, SPECIAL ISSUE ON PERSIMMON: Plenary Lectures - "IV International Symposium on Persimmon" - International Society for Horticultural Science (ISHS) (2008), 244-249

[7] Porcher, Francis Peyre. Resources of the southern fields and forests, medical, economical, and agricultural. United States: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, printers, 1869, 423-426.

[8] Harris, Chapin Aaron., Gorgas, Ferdinand James Samuel. A Dictionary of Medical Terminology, Dental Surgery, and the Collateral Sciences. United States: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1867, 216.

[9] Farm Journal. United States: Farm journal, Incorporated, 1899, 9.

[10] Porcher, 424.

[11] Purdue University Extension, FoodLink: Persimmon, 2020. https://extension.purdue.edu/foodlink/food.php?food=persimmon

[12] George, A.P., Redpath, S., 246.

porcelain."[13] "The best substitute for coffee, yet discovered" was also made from roasted persimmon seeds. "The coffee exerts a friendly influence on the whole system, particularly the head."[14] A U.S. patent was even granted in the 1870s for this creative caffeine substitute.[15]

Persimmon seeds are also well-rooted in American folklore. Crop failures and weather patterns can be predicted (with hit-and-miss accuracy) by cutting a seed in half to see if the plant embryo is shaped like a spoon, knife, or fork.[16] [17] [18] If the embryo looks like a spoon, that means there will be heavy snow. A knife means harsh cutting temperatures. A fork means a mild winter, and the hay will be coming early (Figure 2).

Native-American people also used persimmon seeds as dice in their various gambling games.[19]

Figure 2: Looks like a cold, wet winter for Central Indiana. Photo by Kevin Carter.

The Delicious

Ripe persimmons have always been a favorite food. Native-American people ate them dried whole, in loaves, or as fruit leather. They also made bread with persimmon pulp and ground corn.[20] Later, persimmons were used by European settlers to make "delightful bread, pies, and puddings."[21] [22] By the latter half of the 19th century, recipes began to appear in print for these seasonal delicacies as well as for others such as persimmon custard[23] and (my favorite) persimmon jam.[24]

PERSIMMON PUDDING.

After the persimmons have been touched by the frost, gather them, and strain through a sieve enough to make one half gallon. Beat four eggs with four tablespoonfuls of sugar and same of flour and one pint of milk, with a large tablespoonful of butter or two of fine suet. Bake it in pans. Some use corn meal in preference to flour; it requires longer cooking.

Figure 2: A recipe for Persimmon Pudding from Mrs. Elliot's Housewife (1870). Image from Google Books.

The persimmon was important to historical African-American culture as well. Persimmons were "something to run at" – meaning it was a fruit to immediately enjoy while their season lasted.[25] Historical accounts describe the "persimmon dance" celebrated among enslaved

[13] Stonebraker, Joseph R.. A Rebel of '61. United States: Wyncoop Hallenbeck Crawford Company, printers, 1899, 91.
[14] FARMERS' REGISTER. N.p.: n.p., 1837, 596.
[15] Specifications and Drawings of Patents Issued from the U.S. Patent Office. N.p.: n.p., 1873, 467.
[16] Rayburn, Otto Ernest. Ozark Country. United States: University of Arkansas Press, 2021, 180.
[17] Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society. United States: Tennessee Folklore Society., 1967.
[18] Oliver, John E.. Indiana's Weather and Climate. United States: Indiana University Press, 2009, 80.
[19] The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes: Memoir on the manners, customs, and religion of the savages of North America. United States: A.H. Clark Company, 1911, 97.
[20] Barton, William Paul Crillon., Barton, Benjamin Smith. Elements of Botany, Or, Outlines of the Natural History of Vegetables: Illustrated by Forty Engravings. United States: Robert Desilver, 1836, 287.
[21] The Farmer's Register. N.p.: n.p., 1838, 596.
[22] Elliott, Sarah A.. Mrs. Elliott's Housewife: Containing Practical Receipts in Cookery. United States: Hurd & Houghton, 1870, 185.
[23] The Rural Carolinian. United States: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, 1872, 54.
[24] Leslie, Eliza. Miss Leslie's New Cookery Book. United States: T. B. Peterson, 1857, 567.
[25] Gibson, 518.

communities where loaves of persimmon bread and tubs of persimmon beer were joyfully relished.[26]

The Alcoholic (or not?)

In Aubrey's 1789 journal, he mentions a home-brewed liquor called persimmon beer.[27] In some Southern regions, this beer was called "possum toddy" named such due to the critter's penchant for the fruit.[28] [29]

Persimmon beer was considered by many to be a temperance drink. "A man could easily drink a gallon of it (if he could get it) and feel nothing but a great degree of satisfaction."[30]

Its common acceptance by the temperance community did not mean persimmon beer was free of alcohol. Rather, most brewing methods used resulted in a "small beer" – one with a low ABV (alcohol by volume) percentage. However, even the "near-beer" version could be distilled to produce a more potent persimmon brandy.

A stronger version of persimmon beer can be produced by either changing the brewing process or by adding other ingredients. For instance, by straining off the solids and boiling the batch – thus concentrating the sugars – one can produce a very strong beer.[31]

In his book The Cooking Gene, Michael Twitty mentions making "'simmon liquor" – his "social lubricant of choice" – in the manner "it always had been."[32] His version, fortified with honey, aligns more with a melomel (a high-ABV mead that is flavored with fruit).

The simplest historical method for brewing persimmon beer that I found was published in *The Florida Agriculturalist*:

"Take a clean barrel, knock out one head; put a faucet near the bottom. Place in the bottom of the barrel three or four inches of nice clean straw, pour your persimmons on the straw, mix with them a few baked sweet potatoes and a little shelled corn. Then pour on a sufficient quantity of water to cover the fruit to a depth of four or five inches. In a week or two the beverage will be ready for use."[33]

This recipe is technically for wine and not beer, though one could argue that the addition of "a little shelled corn" narrowly qualifies it as the latter. This simple open-barrel brewing technique was described in the 1861 *Southern Cultivator* magazine as the "ordinary way" to prepare the drink.[34]

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[26] Southern and South-western Sketches: Fun, Sentiment and Adventure. United States: J.W. Randolph, 1852, 102.
[27] Aubrey, 433.
[28] Deems, Edward Mark. Holy-days and Holidays: A Treasury of Historical Material, Sermons in Full and in Brief, Suggestive Thoughts, and Poetry, Relating to Holy Days and Holidays, Comp. United Kingdom: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1902, 569.
[29] Scribner's Monthly, an Illustrated Magazine for the People. United States: Scribner & Company, 1888, 766.
[30] The Florida Agriculturist. United States: Kilkoff & Dean, 1891, 225.
[31] Porcher, 387.
[32] Twitty, Michael W. The Cooking Gene. Unted States: Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2018, 290.
[33] The Florida Agriculturist, 225.
[34] Southern Cultivator. United States: J.W. & W.S. Jones, 1861, 291.

Figure 3: Honey locust pods at the crossroads in Prairietown at Conner Prairie. Photo by Kevin Carter

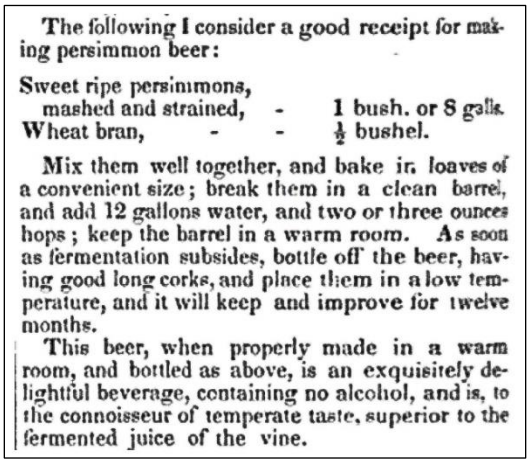
From a modern perspective, sweet potatoes are an unusual adjunct for beer. However, they are recommended (either whole-roasted or just their peelings) in most 19th century persimmon-beer recipes as one of three common adjunct options. The other two options are apple peelings and the seed pods of honey locust trees (Figure 3). These seasonally compatible adjuncts were added to make the beer more "brisk."[35]

Be forewarned! Before you wander off into the woods to pick locust pods, be sure to know the difference between the sweet, nutritious honey locust and its evil half-sibling, the black locust. At first glance, they may appear somewhat similar, but they are definitely not interchangeable. Every part of the black locust contains Robinin – a dangerous toxin similar to Ricin. A link to an excellent blog article on the distinguishing features of both can be found in the footnotes.[36] Once you know the difference between these two tree species, they are easy to tell apart.

The simplicity and ingenuity of the aforementioned brewing method (i.e., that it required no specialized equipment like mash tuns and cooling trays), the omission of the expense of brewer's yeast and hops, the fact that all the ingredients could be easily foraged, and that this drink is so delicious easily explains why the persimmon beer was so popular among enslaved African-American communities. Even the prescribed spigot could have been optional simply by rearranging the contents of the barrel so the straw, which was used for filtering and not flavoring, would be added last, and thus, the beer could be ladled directly from the barrel.

Another brewing method I frequently found in my research involved baking a "cake" or biscuit from a mixture of persimmon pulp and grain meal (either wheat bran[37] or corn meal[38]). One example of this method is found in the 1837 *Farmer's Register* (Figure 4).[39]

Here in Indiana at Conner Prairie, we hold a very popular festival each June called "History on Tap" where brewers from all over the State proudly showcase their libations. Thousands of guests show up, and hundreds of Uber drivers are afterwards kept busy. In addition to the music, fun, and samples, many of our historical interpreters populate Prairietown to engage and entertain our guests. As part of the festivities, we serve samples of historical



The following I consider a good receipt for making persimmon beer:

Sweet ripe persimmons, mashed and strained, - 1 bush. or 8 galls.
Wheat bran, - - ½ bushel.

Mix them well together, and bake in loaves of a convenient size; break them in a clean barrel, and add 12 gallons water, and two or three ounces hops; keep the barrel in a warm room. As soon as fermentation subsides, bottle off the beer, having good long corks, and place them in a low temperature, and it will keep and improve for twelve months.

This beer, when properly made in a warm room, and bottled as above, is an exquisitely delightful beverage, containing no alcohol, and is, to the connoisseur of temperate taste, superior to the fermented juice of the vine.

Figure 4: Persimmon beer recipe from the 1837 "Farmer's Register." Image from Google Books.

[35] ibid.
[36] Redemption Permaculture: Honey Locust vs Black Locust: What's the Difference Between Both. https://redemptionpermaculture.com/honey-locust-vs-black-locust-whats-the-difference-between-both/
[37] FARMERS' REGISTER, 596.
[38] Edgeworth, Mary L.. The Southern Gardener and Receipt Book: Containing Valuable Information, Original and Otherwise, on All Subjects Connected with Domestic and Rural Affairs .... United States: J. B. Lippincott & Company, 1860, 264.
[39] FARMERS' REGISTER, 596.

beers to our guests in the taproom of the Golden Eagle Inn. We served persimmon beer this year to rave reviews.

I took a bit of a risk making this beer. While I have brewed beer for years, I had never made this type before. Since I planned to serve this beer to the public, I opted to keep the straw and wooden barrel in the barn and use modern equipment and proper food-safety protocols instead. The recipe I used was derived from several historical recipes.

Knowing I couldn't completely rely on the opinions of our well-primed guests, I distributed samples of our persimmon beer to some of our exhibiters. I asked them to guess what they were drinking. Nearly all of them immediately assumed it was a crisp cider, but then they would hesitate and cock their head and look upward as they searched their mental reference files. When I told them it was persimmon beer, about half were surprised and delighted, the other half didn't know what a persimmon was.

She was right.

When supper had concluded that evening so many years ago, I passed on my grandma's persimmon pudding – a decision I will regret for the rest of my life. Maybe my father's urging to bite into that unripe persimmon was so he could have my serving of dessert all to himself. Decades passed before I had a second chance to discover this delectable native fruit. While that astringent childhood memory still lingers, every time I savor a bite of persimmon pudding, I swear I can hear a voice in that taste-cortex part of my brain. It's my grandma's voice gently whispering, "See, sweetheart, what did I tell you?"

A Recipe for "'Possum Toddy" Beer:

Ingredients:

3 – 4 pounds Wheat Bran
1 gallon Ripe Persimmon Pulp
The Peelings of 4 Large Apples
1 oz. Kent Golding Hops
1 packet SafeAle S-04 Brewer's Yeast
5-6 gallons Spring Water

Figure 5: Crushing baked biscuits of persimmon pulp and wheat bran. Photo by Kevin Carter.

Preparation:

Be sure all utensils and equipment have been properly cleaned and sanitized using 1oz Star-San sanitizer per 5 gal water.

Baking:

Preheat oven to 325-degrees (F).

Thoroughly mix bran and pulp. Press onto a parchment-covered baking sheet to 1" thickness. Bake for 1 to 1-1/2 hours or until browned. Do not burn. Allow to cool completely.

If biscuits are to be stored for later use, cut into 3" – 4" square biscuits. Store in a tightly sealed container and refrigerate or freeze.

Brewing:

Pulverize the biscuits into a course powder and place into a 6-gal plastic primary-fermenter bucket (Figure 6).

Place hops in water and bring water to boil for 20 minutes. Strain out the hops. Fill the primary fermenter containing the pulverized biscuit and apple peel with boiling hop water to within approximately 3-4" from the top of the pale. Make sure the contents of the fermenter are well mixed. Allow to cool to room temperature. Put primary fermenter in a dark place where it will not be disturbed.

Evenly sprinkle the dry yeast over the persimmon mix in the fermenter and allow to set for 30 minutes. With a sanitized whisk, aerate the mix well. Securely cover the fermenter with a piece of cotton cloth (e.g., flannel). Allow to work for 2 weeks.

Bottling:

Once this time has passed, line a sanitized strainer with three or four layers of new cheesecloth and ladle the beer through the strainer. Bottle the beer in sanitized bottles or transfer the beer to a keg to be carbonated using a CO2 priming unit.

About the Author:

Kevin Carter is a public historian and is responsible for historical foodways interpretation at Conner Prairie Museum. Kevin considers himself a tinker in both the traditional and figurative sense. When he's not chained to his desk, public speaking, or storytelling and interpreting on the grounds, he occupies his time with silversmithing, leatherworking, and making reproduction powder horns and accoutrements. He invites further discussion and conversation at kcarter@connerprairie.org.

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