# A history buff's buffet

**ORIGINS** FROM **R1**

## Potatoes

Turkey's essential sidekick originated and were first domesticated in the Andes of South America. Now the third-most-important food crop in the world after rice and wheat, potatoes were an important food source for the Incas as early as the 13th century — and they have long been boiled, baked and mashed (first by indigenous communities living in the Andean mountains). Bits of 10,900-year-old "mashed potato" were discovered in Utah and might have been the first potatoes grown in North America, harvested and eaten by the Navajo/Diné, Hopi and Apache tribes.

When they were introduced to the Old World by the Spanish in the 16th century, the tubers were viewed as a novelty (similar to how many Westerners now feel about edible insects). But by the latter part of the 1500s, potatoes were eaten by sailors to ward off scurvy and then by Europeans plagued with famine and starvation. While potatoes weren't actually part of the first Thanksgiving meal, they are now the leading vegetable crop in the United States.

## Turkey

The meal's quintessential centerpiece was domesticated in Mesoamerica and used not only for meat, but in ceremonial rituals and spiritual sacrifice, as bone artifacts recently found in temples and other religious sites reveal. The birds were traded with the Maya before being transported north from Mexico to Europe by way of early explorers.

Turkeys have a long history in the New World, where they were hunted by the Wampanoag and other tribes for more than 1,500 years. These indigenous Americans, like the Maya, turned turkey bones into tubing and tools, wove feathers into ceremonial capes and ate the meat. The birds were wild — nothing like the Butterballs of today — and were later hunted and eaten by English immigrants as well.

The first Thanksgiving fowl might have been turkey, says Darius Coombs, director of Wampanoag and Algonquin interpretive training, research and community engagement at Plimoth Plantation, but it could have just as easily been goose or duck that was, most likely, boiled, roasted and stuffed with herbs and onions. These birds were assuredly accompanied by venison. "Many of the Indians coming amongst us," settler Edward Winslow wrote to an unnamed friend on Dec. 11, 1621, "and among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted . . . went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain, and others." Smoked mussels, clams and oysters were also served, Peters says, as "the settlement was close to all sorts of shellfish beds."

Today, approximately 44 million turkeys grace Thanksgiving tables. They are primarily sourced from North Carolina, Minnesota and Arkansas, but devastating flooding from Hurricane Florence may affect turkey breasts processed in the Tar Heel state.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOLLY WALES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## Corn

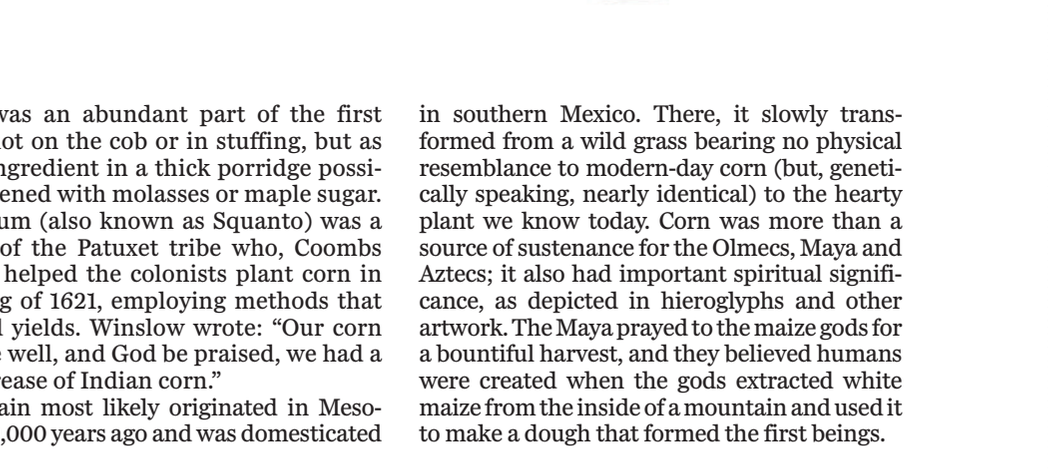
Corn was an abundant part of the first feast — not on the cob or in stuffing, but as the key ingredient in a thick porridge possibly sweetened with molasses or maple sugar. Tisquantum (also known as Squanto) was a member of the Patuxet tribe who, Coombs explains, helped the colonists plant corn in the spring of 1621, employing methods that increased yields. Winslow wrote: "Our corn did prove well, and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn."

The grain most likely originated in Mesoamerica 9,000 years ago and was domesticated in southern Mexico. There, it slowly transformed from a wild grass bearing no physical resemblance to modern-day corn (but, genetically speaking, nearly identical) to the hearty plant we know today. Corn was more than a source of sustenance for the Olmecs, Maya and Aztecs; it also had important spiritual significance, as depicted in hieroglyphs and other artwork. The Maya prayed to the maize gods for a bountiful harvest, and they believed humans were created when the gods extracted white maize from the inside of a mountain and used it to make a dough that formed the first beings.

## Cranberries

They are among a handful of fruits that actually originated in North America, important to Native American tribes, including the Algonquin, Chippewa and Cree, from Maine to Washington. They were used not only as food, but as medicine, dye, bait and substitute for tobacco. "Energy bars" of pounded berries mixed with dried deer meat and fat — called "pemmican" — were traded with fur traders and highly prized for their nutritional value.

Because of the flowering plant's resemblance to the head of a crane, the colonists called the fruit "craneberries" and used it in sour sauces they served with wildfowl. In 1622, with the introduction of honeybees to North America, the fruit began to be used in sweet pies and tarts that were served to the wealthy. Today, the cranberry industry is worth nearly $300 million, with Wisconsin producing most of the nation's cranberries, followed by Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon and Washington.



## Pumpkin pie

Unlike the hefty orange squashes often canned and destined for pie, the first pumpkins grew wild more than 7,500 years ago in what is now Central America. They were small, hard and had bitter flesh. The nutrient-dense varieties were domesticated in the Oaxaca highlands of Mexico and were one of the first food crops grown in North America, valued for hardiness and storage ability. By 1655, pumpkins were a culinary staple for settlers, often eaten in stews or mashed and turned into ale.

Acorn meal was typically used by the Wampanoag people and probably shared with the Pilgrims to make some semblance of bread, Peters says. But pies were, initially, impossible. Settlers hadn't constructed ovens and didn't have wheat flour for crusts. Some accounts suggest the Pilgrims improvised, using hollowed-out pumpkins as vessels for custards that were cooked over hot ashes. Early versions of pies were prepared as they had been in England, using wheat, water and animal fat to create "airtight, practically inedible pastry shells known as 'coffyns' " that preserve the sweet (or, typically, savory) contents within. The dessert didn't round out Thanksgiving meals until the 1800s, but, as Amanda Moniz detailed for The Washington Post in 2013, pumpkin pies became "so closely associated with the holiday that in 1869, the (Hartford) Connecticut Courant referred to the pie, along with turkey, as one of the 'inevitable' Thanksgiving dishes."

The wheat used for pie crust comes from a plant that is a cross between a wild goat grass (what most consider a weed) and a cultivated wheat variety that grew in Iran about 9,000 years ago, while the cinnamon most commonly found in pumpkin pie spice mixes is carved out of the inner bark of an evergreen tree that originated in southern China.

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