

FIRST THANKSGIVING MEAL

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For many Americans, the Thanksgiving meal includes seasonal dishes such as roast turkey with stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie. The holiday feast dates back to November 1621, when the newly arrived Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians gathered at Plymouth for an autumn harvest celebration, an event regarded as America's "First Thanksgiving." But what was really on the menu at the famous banquet, and which of today's time-honored favorites didn't earn a place at the table until later in the holiday's 400-year history?

TURKEY

While no records exist of the exact bill of fare, the Pilgrim chronicler Edward Winslow noted in his journal that the colony's governor, William Bradford, sent four men on a "fowling" mission in preparation for the three-day event. Wild—but not domestic—turkey was indeed plentiful in the region and a common food source for both English settlers and Native Americans. But it is just as likely that the fowling party returned with other birds we know the colonists regularly consumed, such as ducks, geese and swans. Instead of bread-based stuffing, herbs, onions or nuts might have been added to the birds for extra flavor.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many people report feeling drowsy after eating a Thanksgiving meal. Turkey often gets blamed because it contains tryptophan, an amino acid that can have a sedative effect. But studies suggest it's the carbohydrate-rich sides and desserts that allow tryptophan to enter the brain. In other words, eating turkey without the trimmings could prevent that post-Thanksgiving energy lull.

Turkey or no turkey, the first Thanksgiving's attendees almost certainly got their fill of meat. Winslow wrote that the Wampanoag guests arrived with an offering of five deer. Culinary historians speculate that the deer was roasted on a spit over a smoldering fire and that the colonists might have used some of the venison to whip up a hearty stew.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

The 1621 Thanksgiving celebration marked the Pilgrims' first autumn harvest, so it is likely that the colonists feasted on the bounty they had reaped with the help of their Native American neighbors. Local vegetables that likely appeared on the table include onions, beans, lettuce, spinach, cabbage, carrots and perhaps peas. Corn, which records show was plentiful at the first harvest, might also have been served, but not in the way