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Acadian Food

Michael Corbin

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Story: "Acadian Food"

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The first Acadian settlers in Canada, mostly farmers, soldiers, and craftspeople from mid-west France, brought with them many of the same vegetables they had grown in France and maintained their large and diverse herds of livestock. Acadians adapted their cuisine to incorporate the crops and animals that flourished in the Upper St. John Valley, particularly after the English began pushing the French farmers out of their original settlements onto less productive land. As a general rule, Acadian cooking is not complicated. Dishes are made of few ingredients, preparation is straightforward, and many are cooked using just one pot. But that does not mean Acadian cuisine is flat or flavorless. Acadian farmers grew hardy vegetables such as cabbage, turnips, beans, carrots, corn, chives, and, of course, potatoes. They grew wheat, barley, oats, and buckwheat (which became an important symbol of Acadian culture as the main ingredient in *ployes*, buckwheat pancakes). Apple trees were the only fruit that grew with any success and each family maintained at least a few. These farmers also maintained a wide array of livestock, including pigs, cows, oxen, sheep, chickens, and a small number of geese. In general, animals were kept for labor or other byproducts (such as milk and eggs), and were only slaughtered for meat when they were no longer fit for these services. Wild berries, plants, and herbs were important staples of the Acadian diet and home remedies. Fishing became an important source of food among the Acadians after their expulsion by the English, ranging from cod to trout to lobsters. Even in the areas with the worst climate and soil, wild game and fowl were abundant. Hare, moose, partridge and many other birds and mammals were hunted and trapped, many of them becoming popular features in standard dishes such as *pot-en-pot*. In short, Acadians did not allow harsh weather, poor soil conditions, and uncertain (or even hostile) political conditions to limit their culinary choices. Another important feature of Acadian cooking is the centrality of food to social events and holiday celebrations. Michael Corbin refers to this tradition in the clip heard here, noting that, "[Y]ou'll have to have *tourtière* [a type of meat pie] up at Christmas because it's not Christmas without *tourtière*." Whether at Christmas, a wedding, or just a gathering of family and friends, the party generally took place in the kitchen.

Transcript:

The traditional Acadian dinner that, to our tradition, would be *pot-en-pot*, which is the main meal, that is like a - my best description to it would be like a very thick stew, because it's made with, I use, it's usually made with moose meat, deer meat all kinds of wild game and stuff. But I make it with, because naturally at the restaurant I can only sell something that's USDA approved, so I use beef, chicken, and pork in mine with potatoes, onions. Then you layer that with dumpling, which dumpling is just made with flour, salt, and water. Put a little bit of water and chicken soup base in there, and different, I use *sarriette*, which is summer savory, and you put that in there, and that's it. Just bake it in the oven for about five hours and you serve it just like that. That would be the main meal.

And we had *soupe aux pois*, which is pea soup, my yellow pea soup not the green one because nobody likes the green one up home. I know it's so funny because one time I had made it at the café, the green one, because they ran out of yellow peas. And I said, "I have pea soup" and they said, "Ooh..." And I

opened up the lid and they saw them and they said, “Ugh what is that?” And I said, “It’s pea soup.” It tastes exactly the same, but it’s just that, I think visually they were thinking yellow, and I couldn’t save - one of them told me, he said, “That’s save the whale soup.” And I said, “What do you mean, 'save the whale'?” And he said, “Green peace.” I said, “Okay.” So anyways, so that’s what I called it after.

But anyways, so we had the *soupe aux pois*, the *pot-en-pot*; *tourtière* is very, very traditional in an Acadian dinner, but also at Christmas time you’ll have to have *tourtière* up at Christmas because it’s not Christmas without *tourtière*. And *tourtière* is made with pork and the different spices, like I was saying in Acadian cooking, cinnamon and cloves are very, very common in Acadian cooking, they’re the basic spice of Acadian cooking. You’ll put that in there with allspice and salt and pepper, and you put that in a pie, and that’s the meat pie, like a traditional Canadian meat pie they’ll call it, or *tourtière*. And then, we had *fougère*, which is fiddleheads, as the vegetable, and then we had the *ployes*, which you can’t have an Acadian dinner without *ployes*, and the *ploye* is a buckwheat pancake, which I think is probably the Acadian tortilla, to what Mexicans are you know what I mean, because it’s another source of bread. You can do anything with it, roll hot dogs in it, you can do anything, you know. And then naturally the baked beans are thrown in there and that’s pretty much an Acadian dinner.

Sources: More of Michael Corbin's Story Bank session is available at <http://storybankmaine.org/2009/03/05/acadian-chef-michael-corbin/>; For more on Acadian cuisine, check out Cormier-Boudreau, Marielle & Melvin Gallant. *A Taste of Acadie*. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 1991.