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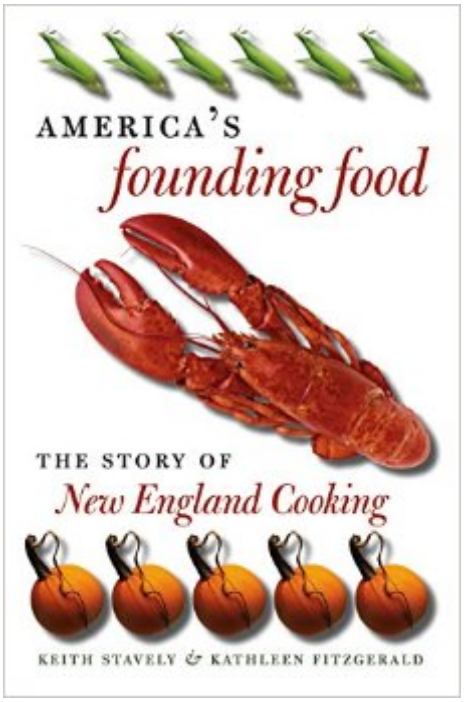
America's Founding Food: The Story Of New England Cooking



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Synopsis

From baked beans to apple cider, from clam chowder to pumpkin pie, Keith Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald's culinary history reveals the complex and colorful origins of New England foods and cookery. Featuring hosts of stories and recipes derived from generations of New Englanders of diverse backgrounds, America's Founding Food chronicles the region's cuisine, from the English settlers' first encounter with Indian corn in the early seventeenth century to the nostalgic marketing of New England dishes in the first half of the twentieth century.Focusing on the traditional foods of the region--including beans, pumpkins, seafood, meats, baked goods, and beverages such as cider and rum--the authors show how New Englanders procured, preserved, and prepared their sustaining dishes. Placing the New England culinary experience in the broader context of British and American history and culture, Stavely and Fitzgerald demonstrate the importance of New England's foods to the formation of American identity, while dispelling some of the myths arising from patriotic sentiment. At once a sharp assessment and a savory recollection, America's Founding Food sets out the rich story of the American dinner table and provides a new way to appreciate American history.

Book Information

Paperback: 408 pages
Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press (June 15, 2015)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 1469627140
ISBN-13: 978-1469627144
Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches
Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)
Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (9 customer reviews)
Best Sellers Rank: #1,159,446 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #173 inÂ Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Regional & International > U.S. Regional > New England #1444 inÂ Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Cooking Education & Reference > History

Customer Reviews

My New England bookshelf groans under the weight of historical studies focusing on the politics, theology, intellectual life, industry, and notable people of the region. These are all worthy if well-worn subjects. Then there's the New England tourism industry, selling "ye olde" Boston baked beans, clam chowder, and Indian pudding as vaunted, almost sacred, symbols of the region. Here,

finally, is a book that explains the connection between the two, taking both the history and the food seriously.There are many surprises here, for instance that turkeys were often boiled and garnished with oyster sauce when served for special feasts, and that the first English to settle the region grew corn because their wheat crops mostly failed. This is a careful, food-oriented story, with lots of detail on what people ate, and how it was processed and preserved as well as cooked. It's also interesting to learn what average families wanted to eat when they were dining on their daily pottage.The authors use memoirs, letters, and novels as well as cookbooks to uncover what New Englanders thought about the foods they ate. This is a compelling account and a detailed study, with lots of good stories to leaven the Boston Brown Bread. Whether you're interested in the ways gingerbread recipes changed from the court kitchens of the Middle Ages to the farm kitchens of New England, or in the reasons why a wallflower cuisine like New England cooking became enshrined as American food, there's something here for you.

Americans still think particular New England foods and menus, like Thanksgiving dinner, Boston Baked Beans, and boiled Maine lobster, are important parts of our American identity. This highly informative book tells us why these and other New England dishes were important to many generations of Americans, and continue to be part of our American heritage.With wit and erudition, the authors separate fact from fiction through careful analysis of some hoary traditions. Along the way, they left me chuckling over such food-lore gems as the Adams-Jefferson dispute on when to serve pudding and the controversy concerning the "authentic" way to make Rhode Island Jonny cakes, with one side declaring that the other's was "hick feed."There's something here for just about everyone interested in American history or the history of food. From a discussion of the economic motivation for setting up those quaint New England fishing villages to the environmental implications of animal husbandry (which the English colonists introduced into New England), we learn to think somewhat differently about New England's past. Along the way, we get a glimpse of American home life as it was lived, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, in New England--the houswife who worries that she's too late bottling her plums and the little boy whose mother's "fire-cake" is such a treat. This book makes you feel like you are in those kithcens. Boiling a hundred oysters to make Oyster Ketchup, helping to butcher a 280-pound hog, these New England cooks were really something!While it is a history and not a cookbook, this book gives both cooks and history buffs the solid information we need to separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of New England food lore. It offers a chance to see what New Englanders ate, and why, and most tellingly, what they thought about their food.

This is a scholarly, nuanced account of the history of New England cooking, with an emphasis on the social meaning of dietary choices. Corn, chowder, baked beans, boiled dinner--foods that are still icons of the region--are among the dishes discussed. Using culinary, historical, and literary sources, the authors put together a fascinating story of invented traditions and other social uses to which even the deceptively plain cuisine of New England can be put.

Although we know that armies march on their bellies and that the search for food has played a crucial role in building societies, the writing of history has often neglected this important subject. Only recently has food history taken its place alongside more conventional approaches to history-writing. This book is a fine example of the new interest in food history.What impressed me as I read it was how little I had known before, and how much I was learning about what New Englanders ate throughout the region's history. We've all heard about Boston baked beans and Indian pudding, but I didn't know about the gingerbread that colonial militamen nibbled on muster days. Nor did I know that bear was considered even better eating than venison by the Massachusetts Bay colonists. One nineteenth-century writer asserted that cod fish was to New England what roast beef was to England. What struck me most, however, was how the authors discuss the colonial revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how that period shaped our ideas of "historic" New England. What we think of as New England's historic foods--the "first" Thanksgiving meal, those Boston baked beans--were partly based in fact but were mostly the invention of the colonial revivial.The ways that people use their traditional foods to represent their culture are described in fascinating detail in America's Founding Food. There's a wealth of detail here, but also a great story about what food meant, from the settlement of New England to the revival of the region as a destination for those interested in America's roots. This is a substantial, thoughtful book.

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