

WHAT THE MODERN HOMEMAKER NEEDS TO KNOW

by Miriam Birdseye

THE author of this article contrasts a country Christmas dinner in 1680 with a city Christmas dinner today to show what has happened to food production and processing in our modern industrialized money economy. She points out that homemakers must develop a new kind of skill in food management, but that the farm home has much to gain by adapting some of the older ways to modern needs.

CHANGES IN 250 YEARS

IN THE American colonies 250 years ago almost every step in the preparation and processing of food, from the raw material to the table, was performed in the home, much of it by the housewife or under her direction. This meant that she had first-hand knowledge of the ingredients and the quality of practically every product the family ate. Today, on the other hand, almost every food product that is susceptible of primary or secondary processing² is available for sale in commercially prepared form for those who have the money and the desire to buy it.

Farm families constitute the only appreciable group in our population which still finds it possible and to a large extent advantageous to perform for itself the bulk of the food-processing operations that industry performs for a large part of the wage-earning city population, and that the middleman, the wholesaler, and the retailer distribute.

To visualize the changes brought about by industrialization of food processing, let us contrast the preparation of a holiday meal in a colonial homestead and in a typical modern apartment without a maid, where, by virtue of the fact that the homemaker holds a job, the family

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² The term "primary processing" as used in this article refers to the conversion of raw products into usable and durable form, as in making flours and breakfast cereals from grain, sirup and cornstarch from corn, and molasses from sugarcane or sorgo, or in canning vegetables and curing meat. Secondary processings involve the combination of several raw and primary-processed products into a product wholly or partly ready for immediate use. Typical examples of secondary-processed foods are baked goods, ready-made mixes, soups, salad dressings, and toppings. It is a question whether cold storage in wholesale quantities without preliminary treatment, as in the case of eggs, meat, fowl, and fruit, or the holding of other products like sweet-potatoes at higher temperatures should be classed as primary or preliminary processing. Much of the industrialization of food handling, of course, begins at this point.

of two has a reasonably good income but comparatively little time outside of office hours for homemaking activities.

Present-day Americans are amazed by well-authenticated accounts of foreigners who visited the Colonies in the early 1700's and actually saw wild turkeys weighing 30, 40, and even 60 pounds and selling for 25 cents apiece, oysters 12 inches long, 5-foot Chesapeake Bay lobsters, flights of pigeons that broke down whole branches under their weight, a wealth of waterfowl and fishes, deer and bear that might be had for the taking, and stupendous combs of wild honey stored in bee trees. Small wonder that after the first few years of privation pioneers from the Old World, with reasonable industry, could feast on occasion.

CHRISTMAS DINNER, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY STYLE

Let us attend a not-too-elaborate Christmas dinner on a Maryland tidewater plantation about 1680. The menu includes oysters on the half shell, turtle soup, ham, venison, turkey and ducks, potatoes, sweetpotatoes, and other vegetables, jellies, conserves, and pickles, pumpkin (pumpkin), mincemeat, and apple pies, custards, syllabubs, and other desserts, coffee, and sweetmeats. Good cheer is provided by cider and "divers wines and spirits."

Such a feast was literally the climax of a year's planning, planting, and preserving, with several days given up to intensive preparations at the last.

The oysters, of course, could be had for the gathering. The terrapin was caught locally and simmered in the pot hanging from the lugpole of green wood that spanned the huge fireplace, or from its successor, the iron crane. The hams, cut from choice home-raised porkers, were sugar-cured, hickory-smoked, and aged for months before they were ready to boil in home-pressed cider. The meats and game were roasted on spits in tin reflector "ovens" before the fire, with constant turning and basting, and the fire itself must be constantly replenished and burned to glowing coals. The herbs used for seasoning, cut last summer at their prime, were hung from the rafters to dry, and carefully stored. The vegetables were planted, gathered, and stored, and wild and cultivated fruits garnered in their season and made into sparkling jellies, plain or brandied preserves, or candied sweetmeats. Relays of hot, flaky biscuits will supplement wheaten loaves baked in the chimney oven, first heated with its special fire of twigs and small wood, and then brushed clean. The veritable fleet of "pyes" sweetened with honey or molasses has been made well ahead and set away in the north pantry. But before either the bread or pastry could be made, the grain had to be taken to the mill and ground into flour, the lard tried out with sprigs of rosemary and stored in wooden tubs, the cooking butter churned and packed down with salt or brine in big stone crocks. Of course, fresh churnings have been made for table use on the festive day.

Wines of dandelion, blackberry, elderberry, plums, and grapes were made in season and stored in cool cobwebbed cellars months or even years ago, but the cider has been prepared just far enough ahead to give it a bead and a tang. The choicer wines, brandies, and rum were imported, of course, from the Old World or from the West Indies. From the West Indies, too, come gleaming 10-pound cones of pure

white sugar, kept under lock and key in a metal-lined casket. It has been the sweet duty of one of the young ladies to cut with a pair of dainty sugar clippers from such a cone a store of beautifully proportioned sugar cubes, sufficient to serve with that delicious new-fangled drink, the after-dinner coffee—imported green, and freshly roasted and ground at home.

Now at last the table, with its gleaming damask and "best chany" imported from France or England, is ready. The mistress and her daughters, having planned or supervised the preparations from first to last, withdraw to rest and make their festive toilettes, against the coming of kinfolk and guests. For though a holiday dinner requires all this work, it is an event in the lives of servants as well as masters, and the more guests the merrier.

When the meal is over comes the aftermath of clearing up. The soft soap made last spring from the winter's discarded fat combined with lye leached from hardwood ashes in a wooden trough may be hard on the hands, and the dishwater has to be carried from the creek or the well and slowly heated in huge kettles, but what of that? Who stops to think that the firewood was cut last winter in the wood lot, dragged home on a sledge, and chopped to the proper size; or that if the fire goes out, it must be rekindled with flint, steel, and tinder, or with embers borrowed from some other hearth? If the wind scatters ashes over the floor, they can be swept up with the birch broom or the turkey-wing fan. Many hands make light work, and in a new country there are few occasions to compete in interest with a big family gathering.

CHRISTMAS DINNER, MODERN

Now to look in on the assembling of an apartment-house feast, modern style. In the 6- by 8-foot kitchen there is not much room to store things away or to lay out dishes, and it costs a lot for the homemaker to stay away from the office. What with the desire to keep slender and the need for hurry-up meals at both ends of the business day, her hand just is not "in" for preparing rich, time-consuming dishes. This household has no children, no maiden aunts, no servants to call on except the woman hired by the hour to serve and clean up. Plans must be laid well ahead, of course, but the actual work consists mostly of buying and assembling.

The cocktail, ready mixed or as "makings," comes from the drug store in the basement of the huge apartment building, and from grocery or delicatessen come ingredients for the hors d'oeuvres to go with it. The oysters and clear soup are easy—the radio has been pleading for weeks that you "buy that soup *today!*" Wafers? From a box, of course.

Just smell that turkey roasting! The housewife-business woman bought it quick-frozen in a bag, thawed it in her mechanical refrigerator, and stuffed it with day-old baker's bread, Minnesota butter, Utah celery, local parsley, and poultry seasoning from a freshly purchased tin. Cranberry sauce comes in a can, or even in dried flakes. Quick-frozen lima beans and spinach need only to be dumped from their cartons into boiling salted water and will be ready in less than 10 minutes. There is no substitute for the personal touch to the

sweetpotatoes, however. Boiled and sliced, they are baked with a glaze of butter, brown sugar, and a spoonful of bottled honey. The salad is put together by hand, crisp from the refrigerator, and colorful; and French or mayonnaise dressing from the store can be given an individual touch from the jar of dried salad herbs or a silvered wedge of Roquefort cheese. If the hostess mixes her own dressing, the olive oil may come from California, the vinegar from the Shenandoah Valley, the lemons and the pot of chives from Florida. Cloves of garlic, grown in the Connecticut Valley, were slipped into their cellophane envelope in Philadelphia. Along with Jersey endive, Texas lettuce, and greenhouse cucumbers and tomatoes, all are waiting in the basement grocery store.

The pies are made from canned pumpkin, canned mincemeat with trimmings, and pie-crust mix, and served with assorted cheese segments in tinfoil. The hostess preferred them finally, after considering a plum pudding, heated in the can and served piping hot with a ready-prepared sauce, and ice cream, which the dairy delivers packed with "dry ice."

Raisins and salted nuts come in cellophane wrappings or glass containers. And last, of course, the coffee, ground a few days ago for her favorite kind of pot and vacuum-packed or sealed and dated, to be served with tiny sugar lumps and multicolored mints from a box.

Even with so much labor paid for in the form of processed goods, there's plenty of work to assembling and clearing away a holiday meal for six. But when the dishes are scraped and stacked, washing is easy with scalding water from the swinging faucet and plenty of soap flakes. Rinsed and placed in the dish drainer, the china dries itself. The waxed linoleum is brushed up, a spot or two wiped off, and the kitchen floor is in shining order.

NEW SKILLS NEEDED BY HOMEMAKERS

These changes have come about through many causes, chiefly industrialization and the shift to a money economy. This means that instead of producing and processing at home much of what they need, the town and city populations produce no raw material, but instead market their time, labor, and skills for wages or salaries, which they in turn use to buy goods provided and services rendered by others. The processing of food has been transferred from the household to larger and larger industries, and these industries aim for survival through greater volume of production and wider distribution.

Home consumers have benefited by the industrialization of food processes, but they have lost by it too. The family as a unit loses through the reduction of the contribution that the housewife and the children previously made to the home by their labor, which added to the real income of the family. Shifting of work to the processing plants has minimized the home as a center of training for technical skills and postponed the time when a child feels himself a useful member of the household. The early training in the skills that kept the family going and the consequent association of children and parents were very real influences in developing character and personality.

Processing for profit is subject to the temptations that beset any business. The unscrupulous resort to adulterations and misrepre-

sentations that may enhance profits at least temporarily. The chief of the bureau of food and drugs of a State department of health recently listed among the duties of his staff the inspection of milk for cleanliness, freedom from adulteration, and proper pasteurization; ice cream for butterfat content and sanitation; butter for fat content; oil for freedom from adulteration; chopped meat for freshness, adulteration, and preservatives; canning factories for sanitary condition of foods, machinery, and workers; fruit for poisonous spray residues beyond the legal tolerance; shellfish, and the water in which they grow, for pollutions injurious to public health.

Processing as now practiced also adds a whole series of material and labor costs to the original price of the raw material. Some of this increase is necessary and some is not. Thus the percentage of the family budget required for food may increase to a point where it is out of proportion to the other items.

Placing food production and processing within the money economy requires that consumers develop an understanding of a different economy field and a new series of skills to take the place of the old. If enough money and understanding are available, consumers have a better opportunity to obtain a superior year-round diet. But the very poor, especially if they lack understanding, find the cost of a good diet prohibitive.

What do modern homemakers need to understand if they are to profit the most and suffer the least from the present industrialized stage of food distribution and food processing? Since homemakers do most of the consumer food buying, let us set down the minimum essentials of the guidance they need.

As a background, they need to know the proportion of the family income that may safely or wisely be allotted to food, and the quality of diet the allotted sum will provide if intelligently expended. This necessitates at the very least a working knowledge of the food groups that must be included in the daily diet, the representatives of each group that are cheap or dear in terms of food value and price, the relative contributions of refined and nonrefined foods in the same group, and the value in the diet of the "protective" foods. They must understand the rudiments of body requirements for growth, maintenance, and muscular work, and the main contributions the various food groups make to those needs. The foregoing information helps them to keep food expenditures within bounds and shows how important it is to secure health essentials first.

Homemakers also need to form the habit of planning meals several days ahead and of checking them by a daily food guide to insure that they follow the meal pattern or the diet plan selected.

A food list for a week or other convenient period, which tells how much of each particular food group must be used to build up the selected diet, is the next aid needed; and since there is a wide selection in most of these groups, homemakers must also make a market list based on the food list and on considerations of food values and current prices. For the city consumer, Thursday or Friday evening is a good time to make plans for the week, for the newspapers then carry information on week-end specials and prices.

This minimum background could advantageously be greatly ex-

panded, but it prepares the housewife for the actual selection of raw and processed foods from the various sources of supply.

In these days food guides and food lists are easily obtained in Government publications and popular texts and through free classes or groups conducted by home economics teachers or home economics extension workers.

It will help the housewife greatly if she knows and takes advantage of customary seasonal price fluctuations for the various commodities. The effects of good and poor growing seasons and of carry-overs from last season's supply are also reflected in prices, as well as the long swings in the supply of animal foods known as cycles.

The homemaker should make it a habit to study at the store the label of any product she proposes to buy. The law requires that this label state the weight of contents. Comparing weights and prices of the same article in containers of different sizes guides her in selecting the best value for her own conditions. She will need to know also what brands and commercial grades give the most satisfaction for the money expended and the use she wishes to make of them. She is fortunate if in her neighborhood she can find canned goods not only commercially graded for quality but also labeled with Government quality grades. Such quality-grade labeling tells her at a glance the characteristics of the contents and their suitability for her immediate purpose and for her budget.

What has already been said of the need for supervision of the sanitation and the quality of food products moving in local, State, and interstate channels indicates that consumers need to understand, stand back of, and when necessary promote appropriate laws and regulations for their own protection.

All this will develop the homemaker's discrimination in studying claims made by food distributors, whether through magazine advertisements, the radio, or the press. Thus she will be less likely to be swept off her feet and away from her buying plan by glittering promises and beguiling offers. In fact, she will develop that "stop, look, and question" attitude which is the first requirement of the shrewd buyer

HOME PRODUCTION AND PROCESSING ON THE FARM

The farmer, drawing the major part of his gross cash income from the raw materials produced on the land he cultivates, is like the merchant in that the expenses of his business must be subtracted from gross income to determine net income available for family living. In this respect the farmer differs from the wage earner, whose gross and net income are almost identical.

The merchant's family has an advantage in being able to obtain at wholesale prices such items as the business and business acquaintances handle. The farm family is benefited through its so-called farm privileges—the cash-sparing housing and fuel that come with the farm, plus such amounts of the cash crops as the family makes use of. In addition, it is at an advantage when available land and labor can be employed in raising and processing additional foods needed for the family table without correspondingly reducing cash profits.

Considerations of climate, soil, labor, skill, inclination, and the

profits that may conservatively be anticipated year in and year out from land and labor invested in cash crops, or from labor performed by family members off the farm, help a farm family decide for each essential food whether it is better economy to raise and home-process it or to buy it from retail stores or from neighbors. These are decisions which the family should reconsider yearly, keeping in mind that farm people often go without the protective foods that they do not raise. Strangely enough, some families consider it economy to sell, at farm prices, protective foods that they produce, like milk and eggs, which they really need for proper nutrition, in order to buy at retail other foods that contribute far less to the diet.

Were it not for the advantages derived through farm privilege and the opportunity to draw upon unpaid family labor as needed to process the raw foods the farm provides, the cash incomes of farmers as a group would be inadequate to maintain a desirable standard of living. The Bureau of Home Economics includes, in gross and net farm-income figures, not only the cash income but the money value of the housing and fuel the farm provides and of the food the family raises and actually consumes.

The availability of raw materials and family labor, of storage space, work space, and equipment of a sort, combine with small cash incomes and the inconvenience of buying at a distant food center to make the farm household a link between the self-contained production and consumption cycle of the early colonial homestead, which fed and clothed the family with almost no exchange of cash, and the city family where all or most members of working age market their services for cash and pay out cash in turn for the necessities of living.

When the farm family raises its own raw foods, processes and stores them at home, and finally prepares them for the family table, it short-circuits price increments arising from such operations as farm marketing, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail distribution, with the contributory costs of transportation, storage, advertising, and financing.

A sizable portion of our population earns its livelihood or invests its savings in the transportation of foods by rail, steamship, or motor-truck, in storage under diverse conditions, in advertising through various channels, and in financing the whole series of movements between farm producer and ultimate consumer. The farm family that produces much of its food supply at home and thus uses raw materials minus these price increments usually has a much more generous and well-balanced diet than the family that uses its land and labor for cash crops, subject to all the hazards of production and price fluctuation, and then buys most of its food out of net cash income.

Costs of farm production and marketing are heavy, and climate and price fluctuations take their toll of farm profits. This is shown by the recent consumer purchases study of the Bureau of Home Economics. In 1935-36 net family income was compared with gross farm income in selected counties in Vermont, Pennsylvania, Washington, and southern California. Net income was never more than about 50 percent of gross farm income. As gross farm income increased, net income increased also, but never at as rapid a rate.

Purchased at retail, an adequate, well-balanced food supply costs between \$100 and \$165 a person a year. The farm family in the

median- or lower-income brackets simply cannot get ahead, and indeed is fortunate if it does not fall behind, when the amount available for family living must defray a major part of the food cost. The alternative is a diet below a desirable level.

Canning and preserving, butchering, curing meat, making sausages and other meat products, butter, soft or hard cheese, bread, and pastry, and in certain areas grinding cereals and meals from home-grown grain are still familiar processes on farms, where family labor shifts rapidly from one operation to another as the week or the season progresses.

That home processing actually does spare cash has been shown again and again by records kept in more or less detail. In 1937, a Kansas housewife, following up a lesson on home bread making, reported: "I can easily save half the cost of our weekly bread supply by making my bread instead of buying it." A bulletin of the Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station (831)³ recently stated that for a family of five or six persons about \$24 a year could be saved by making bread instead of purchasing it. To the salaried worker this saving may seem negligible; but added to a farm-family clothing budget of, say, \$100 a year for three persons, it offers definite possibilities.

An enthusiast for home processing of food (136) quotes figures based on time and cost studies of actual operations in a well-equipped home kitchen, which indicate that home processing results in sufficient savings to compensate the housewife for her time at a price considerably above the average factory or clerical wage. She estimates that out of a possible total of \$101 spent yearly for baked goods by the average American city family of three or four persons with a cash income of \$2,100, \$45 could be saved yearly, with a time expenditure of approximately 2 hours a week. The return on the housewife's time would thus average 43 cents an hour—varying from 32 cents for making whole-wheat crackers to \$1.28 for baking muffins and chocolate nut brownies. She contends that these savings would justify the ownership of a modern electric or gas range with temperature controls, an electric mixer, and \$200 to \$300 worth of equipment, the investment totaling between \$300 and \$500. Needless to say, the farm families who most need to save could not afford many of these labor-saving devices, but would contribute more hours of labor.

The farm kitchen has a long history as a processing plant, however. Early American kitchens were a combination of cooking center, dining room, living room, and factory for the periodic or seasonal processing of foods and often for spinning, weaving, and garment making. Pioneer kitchens often served as bedrooms at night. Since the kitchen was the only really warm room in cold weather, it was necessarily the family gathering place and the domestic workshop.

The farm kitchen is still a real food-processing plant. The volume and variety of work turned out in it demand good ventilation, good lighting, and efficient arrangement. The cash savings brought about by home processing justify a reasonable investment in efficient equipment for cooking, refrigeration, storage, washing up, and cleaning; and up-to-date canning equipment is a necessity.

³ Italic numbers in parentheses refer to Literature Cited, p. 1075.