

Origins of Classic American Foods



SPAM – The “Miracle Meat”

Though much maligned over the years in some quarters (not to mention having its name stolen to identify unsolicited email), SPAM, the canned, processed pork and ham product, has made some interesting positive contributions to American culture. Invented in 1937, the product was essential to the war effort, both to feed the troops (SPAM needs no refrigeration), and as a meat staple during rationing of other meat products. In recent years, several tasty variations of SPAM have been released and its popularity continues.



Coca-Cola

Many stories and myths surround the story of America’s (if not the world’s) most popular soft drink. In 1886, a Georgia pharmacist named John Pemberton reinvented his French Wine Tonic (due to newly passed local prohibition) as a ‘soft’ drink – sugar substituted for the alcohol. The original version *did* contain extract of the coca plant and the kola nut, which is how the name was derived. However, growing public concern over the effects of cocaine led the company to eliminate coca extract from the drink altogether. Coca-Cola quickly became an enormous success. In 1886, sales averaged 9 drinks per day. By 2004, consumption rose to more than 1.3 *billion* servings per day!

Ice Cream

Ice cream was first made over two thousand years ago. In 1776, both the term “ice cream” and the product itself were first used in New York City. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson both loved ice cream, and Dolly Madison served an ice cream cake for her husband’s Presidential inaugural in 1809. Consumption became widespread by late in the 19th century, and in World War II ice cream was an important food for troops overseas. Today ice cream remains an American favorite, with over 23 quarts consumed per person each year.





Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches

No one really knows when or where peanut butter and jelly were first combined. Peanut butter wasn't invented until 1890, but quickly became a popular food product in the United States. But there's no mention of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before the 1940s. Food historians know that both peanut butter and jelly were part of the U.S. military's rations during World War II, and some speculate that American GIs may have added jelly to the peanut butter to make it easier to eat. Meat and butter were scarce and expensive in the U.S. during WWII. Peanut butter was a cheap, readily available source of protein. No matter how it started, the PB&J was a big hit in postwar America, especially on WONDER bread, and has been ever since.



Kool Aid

Invented in the early 20th century by Edwin Perkins of Hastings, Nebraska, Kool-Aid (originally called Fruit Smack) came about when Perkins (who invented a number of other food products, as well) needed to have a dry drink mix, as the bottled concentrate was breaking too much. The powdered, non-perishable drink mix appealed to Americans everywhere, and Kool-Aid became a runaway success! The smiling pitcher was created in the 1950s, and Kool-Aid Man was developed some time after that. Kool-Aid has been a staple drink of picnics and parties ever since.



Velveeta

Velveeta is a processed cheese first made in 1918 by Swiss immigrant Emil Frey of the Monroe Cheese Company in New York. Kraft Foods bought the company, and released Velveeta nationally in 1928. Velveeta features a soft, rubbery texture, a very mild taste that advertisers compare to cheddar cheese, and is noted for its easy melting. It comes in different flavors, and in a spreadable version too. Like SPAM, it's a popular food that millions of Americans enjoy with their meals.



Red Vines (licorice)

Red Vines is a brand of candy created in 1920 by the American Licorice Company of Chicago. Known for their unique chewy quality, Red Vines resemble American black licorice, except that they are red and do not have flavor extracted from the liquorice plant. A favorite of many Hollywood celebrities, *Red Vines* enjoys its share of TV, film and music credits including appearances in *Friends*, *Six Feet Under*, *Monk*, *Die Hard* and Aimee Mann's song, "Red Vines." Red Vines enjoyed a burst of popularity when they were featured in the Saturday Night Live skit *Lazy Sunday*.



Hershey Chocolate

Founded by Milton Hershey in the late 19th century, Hershey Chocolate is one of the great American candy companies. Using German chocolate-making equipment, Hershey created custom candy products that caught the imaginations and palates of Americans everywhere. Using more milk in the chocolate than European recipes was one of his innovations. Today, Hershey is an entire town in Pennsylvania, dominated by the chocolate company. Hershey's chocolate remains an overwhelming favorite for Americans of all ages.



Birthday Cake

The ancient tradition of honoring a birthday (anniversary) with a cake came to America with European settlers, beginning in the 16th century. It is probably one of the oldest and most widely practiced world traditions. Placing candles on the cake is a way to mark time (the celebrant's age), and blowing the candles out with one breath signifies good luck. On July 4th, our nation's birthday (233 this year!), the cake symbolizes our celebration of the endurance and strength of the U.S.A.



Apple Pie (& Mom)

America cannot claim to have invented the apple pie, just to have perfected it. Since the earliest Colonial days, apple pies have been enjoyed in America for breakfast, for an entrée, and for dinner. Colonists wrote home about them and foreign visitors noted apple pie as one of the first American culinary specialties. Here's the surprising part, though: the expression "as American as apple pie" is not that old. The expressions 'simple as pie' (since everyone supposedly knows how to make apple pie) and 'apple-pie order' (1780) were common in the colonies. But it was only in the twentieth century, after World War II, that we began to be 'as American as apple pie.'



Toll House Cookies

America's most beloved cookie was invented in the 1930s by Ruth Wakefield, the proprietress of a Cape Cod-style toll house converted to an inn. She combined a Colonial-era Butter Drop Cookie recipe with chunks of chocolate from a Nestle's bar. Her invention was a hit, and soon she made a deal with Nestle for a lifetime supply of chocolate in exchange for letting them print her recipe on their label. Soon after, Nestle created the "morsels" that we know today as the chocolate in the cookies.

Popcorn

One of the truly American foods, the use of popcorn is believed to have originated thousands of years ago. Similar to though not the same as regular kernel corn, popcorn kernels (actually seeds) explode when heated, yielding a chewy, tasty and nutritious food. At the first Thanksgiving in 1621, Native Americans introduced the Pilgrims to popped corn, which led to the first breakfast cereal: popcorn with milk and sugar. During World War II, when sugar was rationed, Americans' consumption of popcorn increased enormously, particularly at the movies. Today popcorn is enjoyed at the movies, in the home, and in many workplaces, due to the popularity of microwaveable popcorn.



Potato Chips

One of America's favorite snacks was born out of a snit between a chef and a patron at a swank resort in upstate New York. In 1853, when a guest complained that his French Fries were too thick, the chef fired back with paper-thin potato slices, fried crispy brown. The guest loved them! "Crum's Saratoga Chips" was quickly a smash success. By 1895 the first potato chip factory was in operation, and in 1932, the Lay's company in Nashville became the first national potato chip brand. Americans today consume more potato chips (and Fritos and French fries) than any other people in the world; a reversal from colonial times, when New Englanders consigned potatoes largely to pigs as fodder. No picnic or barbeque is complete without this marvelous snack.

