



While frosting a 12th-Night cake, Shirley Willis, the head chef at Tryon Palace, New Bern, said the question she is most often asked is "How can you get such beautiful results cooking in a dutch oven?" A dutch oven is a cast iron pot with a tight fitting lid that is placed in the open fireplace. Hot coals are piled around and on top of it. "Cooking times vary depending on how cold or humid the kitchen is," she said.

"I started cooking for the Tryon Palace Christmas Celebration in June."

Shirley Willis has been cooking in the 18th-century kitchen fireplace and beehive ovens for three years. She will prepare all of the authentic period dishes in display during the Christmas celebration at Tryon Palace, North Carolina's colonial capital, December 8 through 21.

"I had to interpret the recipes (sp. receipts), find the ingredients, and cook each dish that will be displayed at Christmas to see how it tastes, looks and if it will stand up to 14 days of display. I started in June," she said.

Food played the major role in an 18th-century party or celebration. A colonial cook would have begun preparations early for the formal opening of the Palace on December 5, 1770. Guests would come by horse and carriage through wilderness trails from all parts of the province. They would be hungry.

The guest list and dinner plans had to be prepared far in advance. Apples, bananas,



Colonial guests had "quite a sweet tooth". Shirley displays a hedge hog made of sweet blanched almonds.

oranges, pineapples were shipped in barrels, spices in casks, butter in firkins. Salt and sugar came in blocks to be chipped and hand ground. Fruit and flowers were glazed by boiling and powdering to make edible table decorations. Many ingredients had to be shipped by sailing vessels.

Since Shirley's recipes are authentic, finding some of the foodstuffs on display was almost as difficult.

Here are some favorite 18th-century Christmas recipes

(The modern equivalents are also given so you, too, can cook them.)

A Very Rich Twelfth Cake

Put into seven pounds of fine flour, two pounds and a half of fresh butter, and seven pounds of nicely picked and cleansed currants; with two large nutmegs, half an ounce of mace, a quarter of an ounce of cloves, and a pound of loaf sugar, all finely beaten and grated; sixteen eggs, leaving out four whites; and a pint and a half of the best yeast. Warm as much cream as will wet this mass, and pour mountain wine to make it as thick as batter; beat, grossly, a pound of almonds, mountain and orange-flower water, and put in a pound and a half of candied orange, lemon, and citron peel. Mix the whole well together; and put the cake into a hoop with paste under it, to save the bottom while it is baking.

Family Receipt-Book, London, ca. 1811

Cream until light

1 lb. butter
1 cup light brown sugar
Beat until thick and lemon colored and add
9 egg yolks
Beat until stiff but not dry
9 egg whites

Fold in a second cup of light brown sugar and add to first mixture.

Sift
3 1/4 cups flour
2 teaspoons mace
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1 teaspoon soda

Stir into flour mixture
3 lbs. currants
2 lbs. seeded raisins cut into small pieces
3/4 cup almonds blanched and chopped or cut into strips

Add to first mixture.

Line deep pans with waxed paper buttered on both sides. Fill each 1/2 full, adding as you go layers of 1 cup citron and candied peel cut into thin strips. Cover loosely with buttered paper and tie firmly in place. Steam 3 hours and bake 1 1/2 hours in a slow oven (300° F.). Or bake 4 hours at 275° F. without steaming. Rich fruitcake is always more satisfactory if part of the cooking is accomplished by steaming.

Press surface with finger; if cake feels firm and does not retain imprint of finger, it is done. A wire cake tester, inserted in center of cake, will come out clean and dry if cake is done. Run knife around inside of pans and remove cake when nearly cool. Slice with very sharp knife. (Adapted from Fanny Farmer, The Boston Cooking School Cook Book, Boston, 1936.)

To Make Pastils (Small Mint Candies)

Take double-refined Sugar beaten and sifted as fine as Flour; perfume it with Musk and Ambergrease; then have ready steeped some Gum arabick in Orange-flower Water, and with that make the sugar into a stiff Paste; drop into some of it 3 or 4 Drops of Oil of Mint, or Oil of Cloves, or Oil of Cinnamon, or of what Oil you like, and let some only have the Perfume; then roll them up in your Hand like little Pellets, and squeeze them flat with a Seal. Dry them in the Sun.

E. Smith, The Compleat Housewife, Williamsburg, 1742

Simmer until dissolved

1 tablespoon gelatin
1/4 cup water
Add to
1 cup 4X sugar or more
4 drops peppermint or spearmint oil,
oil of cloves or cinnamon, lemon
or orange oil, or almond extract
4 drops appropriate vegetable coloring

Roll into balls and flatten with a seal or fork to make pastilles.

To Make Whipt Syllabubs

Take a quart of Cream, not too thick, and a Pint of Sack, and the Juice of two Lemons; sweeten it to your Palate, and put it into a broad earthen Pan, and with a Whisk whip it, and as the Froth rises, take it off with a Spoon, and lay it into your Syllabub glasses; but first you must sweeten some Claret, or Sack, or White wine, and strain it, and put seven or eight Spoonfuls of the Wine into your Glasses, and then lay in your Froth. Set them by. Do not make them long before you use them.

E. Smith, The Compleat Housewife, Williamsburg, 1742

Stir well

1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 1/2 cups red or white wine or sherry
2 cups half-and-half
grated rind and juice of 1 lemon
Pour into wineglasses.

Whip

1/4 pint heavy cream
1/4 cup 4X sugar
1/4 cup red or white wine or sherry
grated rind and juice of 1 lemon
Pile as high as possible on the glasses of cream mixture. Drink with the help of a spoon. (Note: Red wine and cream produce a blue pink rather unappealing to the twentieth-century eye.)



Called in the 1770's, "the most beautiful building in the Americas," the colonial capitol of North Carolina, Tryon Palace, awaits its Christmas visitors.

Tryon Palace, December 8th through 21, 1988

Recipe for an Historic Christmas Celebration



If a gentleman found the dried bean in his slice of the 12th-Night cake baked for an 18th-century Christmas party, it became his honor and expense to host the party the following year.

A colonial lady might spend six months sewing the dress she planned to wear at the party and as much as two weeks getting to the party over forest paths and muddy roads by horse and carriage. The big treat for the guests were the tables laden with food, the desserts, the music and the dancing.

Each year the host tried to outdo the festivities of past years. This year Tryon Palace has found the bean. You are invited.

There will be tables of food cooked from 18th-century recipes, dancing to the harpsichord and violin, caroling, wassail for all, and visual treats of elaborate natural decorations.

The party will be in New Bern, the colonial capital of North Carolina. It will last from December 8 through 21. When Josiah Martin was governor of the province of North Carolina (he succeeded William Tryon), he held events he called "grand illuminations". Special Candlelight tours, lit by more than 800 candles and torches, are scheduled for the evenings of December 8, 9, 10, 15, 16 and 17 from 5 to 8 p.m. During those times dancers will perform the minuet to 18th-century music in the Palace's Council Chamber. There will be other period entertainment and carolers in the Palace Courtyard.

In charge of the arrangements for this year's Christmas Celebration at the Palace is Susan Ferguson, Assistant Horticulturist. She, along with Horticulturist, Herb Rea, decorators Dixie Dixon, New Bern, Pat Dixon, Bayboro, Allen Toler, New Bern, and Shirley Willis, Palace cook, will be assisted in preparing the decorations and food by more than 20 volunteers.

"In the dining room," Susan says, "there will be a dessert temple display. A miniature temple, built by Bill Widener of the Palace staff, will be the centerpiece in a picturesque and romantic scene." The scene is created with candied fruits and flowers -- sweetmeats.

Decorations will also be lavish in the other buildings on display during the Christmas Celebration: the John Wright Stanly house, built in 1783, the Dixon-Stevenson house, 1828, the Jones house, used as a civil war prison, and the Commission House of the 1880 era; all will be decorated in styles appropriate to their period. The Jones house, home for the Eastern office of the Governor, will have a Christmas tree decorated with apples, cotton balls, handwrapped tobacco, peanut garlands -- all North Carolina products.

The reception center at the corner of Pollock and George Streets will be lushly decorated for the first time, and will feature an interpretive display of the materials used in Tryon Palace decoration, along with furniture and doll exhibits.

The traditional wassail and ginger cookies will be served to all visitors in the decorated dining room of the Victorian Commission House.

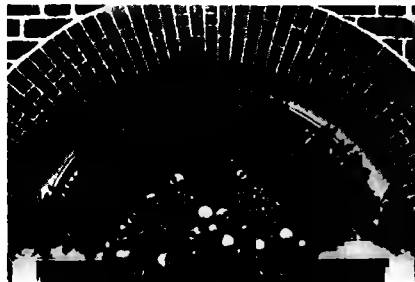
Daytime hours, Dec. 8 through Dec. 21, for the Christmas Celebration will be from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and from 1:30 to 4 p.m., Sundays. Tickets for the daytime and candlelight tours are the same price.

Certainly, William Tryon, Governor and Commander-in-Chief over his Majesty's Province of North Carolina, would have wanted you to come to his party. So, put on your best suit, your fanciest frock and hope your horse doesn't throw a shoe on your way to the "very grand and noble Entertainment and Ball at the Palace."

Photos and Story by George H. Hall



A hostess, Betsy Ward, descends the "Great Stair Case" of polished mahogany in the Palace. The newel post is decorated with evergreens and fruit.



Above — Outside doorways of the Palace and associated buildings are decorated with displays of fruit and greenery.



Below — Decorators vie for new designs in interior displays based on authentic styles of the period.



Carolers serenade visitors with songs of joy from under the outside colonnade between the candlelight tours.