

## New- and Old- World Foodways in Florida: Eating for 500

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Hurling across the universe at warp speed, a death star is on a collision course with Planet Earth. Humanity has twenty-four hours to prepare for a climactic last act. Astrologers and astronomers predict landfall at the happiest place on earth—Main Street Disney.

Having just celebrated your eighty-fifth birthday and a life well-lived, you accept earth's fate with stoic resolve but epicurean grace. Prepare for the Ultimate Last Supper! May we all die dreaming comforted by the understanding that lives worth living were made more pleasurable by meals with friends and family. I propose a toast: To the state with the prettiest name, a drink with the most beautiful name, *Morir Soñando* (To Die Dreaming). A Dominican concoction made with orange juice, milk, and vanilla extract, *Morir Soñando* is pure Floribbean. May we all die dreaming!

"Florida's Last Supper" asks guests to contemplate their final meal. Not to be confused with death row requests for cheese burgers and burritos, this "Last Supper" asks readers to consider lives well lived, lives expressed in foodstuffs.

Behold Florida's cornucopia! No one—not the most unpardonable denizen on Raiford's Green Mile or skinny South Beach fashionista—can resist Florida's Last Supper. A Garden of Earthly Delights beckons diners to a setting so overindulgent and bountiful that not even Hieronymus Bosch could fantasize.

- Boughs laden with Minneola tangerines, Pine Island mangos, and Jupiter Island jackfruit cascade over the table,
- Belle Glade lettuce, Oviedo celery, Immokalee radishes, Sanford celery hearts, and Wauchula cucumbers, topped with Don Quixote's beloved Manchego cheese aged in Jackson County's limestone caves enshrine the salad bowl. The main course now begins.
- Free-range spring hens, raised and freshly dressed in Masaryktown, lightly dusted with flour and Himalayan sea salt, are sacrificed to the gods of sizzling lard.
- A culinary *obbligato* of Fighting Rooster pilau (pronounced perloo or perlow), combines cypress rice grown on Rice Creek outside Palatka, a stewed over-the-hill Key West gamecock, glistened yellow by the saffron harvested from the Asturian birthplace of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés in Asturias, Spain.
- To mollify barbecue purists and avoid fisticuffs, spits of Okeechobee-raised beef and Hamilton County pork roast slowly over embers that once deflected British cannon balls.
- The aroma of hot-rising yeast rolls made from wheat kernels discovered in an ancient cellar at Mission San Luis and ground on the Chipley grist mill on Hard Labor Creek wafts through the air.
- Slices of Frostproof oranges and Greenville watermelon, a Bonifay yam casserole and Islamorada key lime pie, the latter garlanded with frangipani blossoms, the former liberally soaked in pure cane syrup squeezed at Fort Lonesome, complement the all-Florida food fantasy.
- A bottle of Castillo Red, Rioja grapes grown on the San Sebastian Vineyards of St. Augustine, a glass of rum distilled from Peace River Valley sugar cane and stepped in Imperial River hibiscus, and a mango *batida* blended at Robert-Is-Here fruit stand in Homestead, complete this Florida feast. Eat well my friends!

The feast was made possible by powerful forces that helped created La Florida and New Spain, Florida and the Modern World. Every ingredient, from the larded pie crust to the sprigs of hibiscus, from the saffron rice and cast iron cauldron to the rooster's cockscomb and the hog descended from de Soto's herd, originally came from someplace else. Especially the cooks and diners! How wheat, milk, and sugar; pigs, chickens, and cows; Spanish friars, African slaves, and Romanian Jews came to Florida is a stirring story combining tragedy and romance, pleasure and pain.

Seventh-generation Floridians, as well as transplants to Del Boca Vista, can still take pride in knowing that a Last Supper consisting of indigenous ingredients with deep roots in the New World is equally seductive.

Cracked Indian Key conch; fresh shrimp seined from the Anastasia Island flats; Apalachicola oysters harvested by the Ward brothers (the hardest workers brothers in the seafood business); steamed Steinhatchee clams; buttonwood-smoked mullet caught near Cortez; octopus plucked from Anclote Key and grilled; Gasparilla Island grouper cheeks flash-fried; broiled pompano plucked from Panther Key and deboned by the last surviving waiter from the famed Las Novedades Restaurant in Ybor City; corn-fed, farm-raised, deep-fried Cape Coral catfish (the once famed instant city of the 1950s fell to the great mortgage collapse of the twenty-first century and its canals have been readapted as catfish ponds); roasted wild turkey from the Vernon pine flats, stuffed with pond apples; fresh-picked ears of Zellwood corn; a tureen of gopher gumbo (hold the okra and rice!) topped with a fresh quail egg and slices of Ruskin tomatoes; bowls of roasted Chattahoochee pumpkins. The feast is finished with sweet fritters made from coontie flour dough fried in bear fat and drizzled with Wewahitchka Tupelo honey, crowned with boiled peanuts from Jay. Clutches of fresh-picked soursops, guavas, and persimmons, tied together by vanilla beans and tamarind pods hang from the pecky-cypress rafters. Ghost-orchid wine plucked from a Big Cypress slough, sipped from a giant sloth's skull unearthed in a Bone Valley reliquary, finish Real Florida's Last Supper.

Geography and climate may be destiny, but the appearance of key lime pie, chicken pilau, and whole hog barbecue was anything but inevitable. Fittingly and poetically, one of the first portraits of life in this New World was Jacques Le Moyne's drawings and Theodore de Byr's sixteenth-century engraving of Timucua Indians grilling an assortment of fishes and reptiles over an open flame. The Arawak Natives of the Caribbean called the wooden sticks upon which the food grilled *barbacoa*.

The storyline, from the first taste of Indian corn, French bread, and Spanish garbanzos on the banks of the Saint Johns' River to the Pig n' Whistle BBQ to America's First Burger King on Jacksonville's Beach Boulevard, is complicated yet satisfying.

### **Columbian Exchange**

The most momentous event in the history of modern Florida occurred sometime in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. No chronicler recorded the time, place, and details of the moment, but the event most likely involved a Spanish sailor, soldier, or friar wading ashore to encounter an Ais or Tequesta warrior or shaman. Perhaps the scent of strange body smells, the pain inflicted by Toledo steel or coral-tipped spears, or mutually unintelligible words marked this first meeting of New and Old Worlds. Perhaps it involved an offering of maize porridge or a gourd containing *Ilex vomitoria*, the black drink.

The historian William H. McNeill aptly explained the significance of 1492 and 1513: "What Columbus did was to change the world in which he lived and in which American Indians lived by connecting the two in a way that lasted half a millennium." If there was any "discovery" made, it was mutual, between peoples and cultures alien to one another.

Foragers, hunters, and gatherers from Asia first encountered the peninsula of Florida at least ten thousand years ago. The original natives proved remarkably resourceful adapting to global cooling and global warming. Few places on the continent rewarded inhabitants a diet so rich in protein and varied in edible plants and animals. So rich, so bountiful were the waters of Charlotte Harbor that the Calusa built a complex, hierarchical society *without* an agricultural base. Taking measure of the Timucua Indians at the mouth of the St. Johns in the 1560s, Jacques Le Moyne noted, "There is a time of the year when the natives feast with each other. For this purpose they choose special cooks." The French artist's observation reverberates across the centuries: "The place where the cooking is done swarms with activity."

When Europeans encountered American Indians, food defined and divided societies and civilizations. To the Calusa and Apalachee, the Spanish fondness for salted pork, weevil-infested bread, and rotting cabbage was as revolting as it was revealing. Food defines. To Spaniards, conquerors of Moors and Protestants, the food they carried heightened their sense of moral superiority. The fact that Indian women performed agricultural work, that Natives did not plant crops in orderly European-style rows, only reinforced notions of conquest and conquered.

In his seminal 1972 book, Alfred Crosby calls this extraordinary coming together of continents the “Columbian Exchange.” The years 1492, 1513, and beyond brought together not merely humans, but plants and animals, microbes and cultures. Globalization changed the face and faces of La Florida. Many foods prized today by St. Johns County locavores reflect five centuries of globalization. In his pathbreaking book, 1493, Charles Mann concludes, “The Columbian Exchange is the reason there are tomatoes in Italy, oranges in the United States, chocolates in Switzerland, and chili peppers in Thailand.” A character in the Charles Portis novel, *Grits*, opined while eating a corn tortilla, “Corn, potatoes, tomatoes, yams, chocolate, vanilla,—all these wonderful things the Indians had given us. Whereas we Europeans had been over here for 500 years and had yet to domesticate a single food from wild stock.”

The Spanish historian Oviedo noted that Juan Ponce de León, on his second voyage in 1521, was outfitted with “200 men and fifty horses,” and, as a colonizer, “he took mares and heifers and swine and sheep and goats and all kinds of domestic animals useful in the service of mankind . . . [and] he was supplied with all kinds of seed.”

The introduction of new plants and crops foreshadowed Florida’s future as the winter fruit and vegetable capital of America. Sugarcane, oranges, lemons, lettuce, turnips, greens, melons, yams, peppers, rice, and okra helped create a new diet. Moreover, crops that had not traditionally been cultivated in Florida but had thrived elsewhere in the Americas—tomatoes, potatoes, peanuts, and peppers—took root here.

An Apalachee or Timucua Rip Van Winkle would have been startled to witness the changes on the land. Horses, cows, burros, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens, ducks, geese, swans, rats, and even earthworms accompanied the “invaders.” The invasive animals were also changing the ecology of the Florida.

In such new environments, not all species survive. Sheep died by the flock. Others triumphed supremely. In a root hog or die setting, the omnivorous razorback devoured weeds, grasses, nuts, birds, eggs, shellfish, and fruit. Offspring of the famed Ibérico black pigs had accompanied Narváez and de Soto and provided later settlers an almost unlimited amount of fresh meat. Minorcan Reds and Andalusia Blues, along with white-faced black Spanish chickens dubbed the “fowls of Seville,” became familiar sights in backyards. Spanish brush and scrub goats survived the voyage and became a source of milk and meat. In the Spanish hinterlands, “*la tierra de bravos toros*,” Castilians bred an especially tough breed of cattle. Ponce brought the first cattle to Charlotte Harbor in 1521. By 1737, a Spanish engineer observed that “the country seems to be well stocked with horned cattle and wild horses.”

Spanish *ranchos* have long vanished, but the black, briary, horned cattle from Andalusia and Castile endure in Florida. A charred porterhouse accompanied by a baked potato represents a perfect example of how Americans blended foods from New and Old Worlds. A new American table unfolded. Spaniards, as well as Indians, Africans, Italians, and Greeks adapted to Indian corn, snap beans, squash, pumpkins, and sassafras. Old-world crops, such as Valencia oranges, Canary Island sugar cane, okra, bananas, and watermelons thrived in the new setting.

To understand the global dietary revolution that occurred after 1500, contemplate the following: Not until the sixteenth century and later, no Italian had ever eaten *pizza con pomodori* (pizza with tomatoes), no Irishman had ever peeled a potato, and no Hungarian had ever added paprika to goulash; moreover, there could be no such dishes as Javanese peanut sauce, fiery Bengalese curry, or St. Augustine’s chicken pilau with datil peppers.

Archaeologists excavating Pensacola's earliest settlements have found evidence of persimmon and papaya that originated in Mexico, as well as almonds, plums, and cherries that may well have crossed the ocean from Spain to Veracruz and then boarded ships to Florida. Not everyone accepted the new dietary order. In 1573, a soldier complained of a regimen of "herbs, fish, and other scum and vermin."

The odyssey of the Datil pepper provides a perfect example of twisting paths food traveled to and from Florida. For centuries, the Datil pepper offered a splendid example of how immigrant groups bring their foodways and folkways to America. Cruelly indentured in New Smyrna in the 1770s, a group of Minorcans wrested their freedom and made their way to British St. Augustine. There, they survived, prospering in the Ancient City. Their lives and diets were enriched by the golden Datil pepper, which tradition insisted was brought from the Balearic Islands. Whether the fiery pepper was smuggled from the Balearic Islands, aboard ships containing cargoes of Mandingo slaves, brought to Florida by Cuban messenger-fishermen along with incense and sacraments—we simply have not found the missing link.

### **Spanish Foodways**

Rank, race, and fortune determined what and how one ate in Spanish Florida. Writes Amy Bushnell, "An *hidalgo's* table was set with Mexican majolica rather than Guala pottery and sea shells. Instead of a soldier's diet of salt meat, fish, and gruel, the *hidalgo* dined on wheaten bread, pork, and chicken raised on shellfish."

Determined to impose a Nueva España upon La Florida, Spain faced serious environmental, cultural, and social obstacles. Avoiding starvation was paramount, and feeding the garrisons, missions, and civilians proved daunting. Replicating a Spanish diet founded upon wheat, olive oil, and wine proved impossible. Florida's hot and humid climate mostly doomed the cultivation of grape vineyards and olive trees. A succession of Spanish governors attempted to grow wheat, but other than modest harvests in Apalachee country, the efforts failed.

Soldiers and civilians carried memories of their beloved peninsular foods, but La Florida was neither Asturias nor Extremadura. If Spanish Florida was Indian Florida and Spanish wives were rare, Native women or *mestizae* (offspring of a European and native) served as cooks, wives, and consorts. The most dramatic dietary change was the source of carbohydrates. In Spain, as throughout much of Europe, workers and soldiers ate prodigious amounts of wheat bread. But as Amy Bushnell points out, "Maize, not wheat, was the staff of life in Florida." The next most important dietary change was the sheer amount of protein consumed in La Florida. In Spain, hunting and fishing on royal lands was prohibited to ordinary folk, but in Florida, Spaniards looked upon forests and streams with new-found possibilities. Pork became an American staple.

Patricia Griffin describes the colorful marketplace of St. Augustine: "Beef and pork were the common meats. Fish, more plentiful and much cheaper, was sold on little four-foot square tables. Farmers placed their baskets of vegetables on the ground nearby and poultry lay tied beside them. Tomatoes, sweet peppers, yams, chayote, squash, and melons were frequent local products. Hawkers milled about, baskets on their heads, offering shrimp, or oysters, or fruits."

### **Foodways and Pathways**

At some point early in the sixteenth century, a royal cosmographer identified a spit of land north of Cuba. As the voyages and expeditions of Pineda, Ponce de León, Cabot, and Narváez revealed, the body of land was no mere island, but an appendage of a great continent. Janus faced, with one side facing North America and the other looking toward the Caribbean, Florida became the pathway between the Americas. Florida has occupied the distinct position of being America's southernmost state *and* the northernmost province of the Caribbean.

In Florida, foodways largely followed vantage points. The Apalachee and friars at Mission San Luis in present-day Tallahassee benefited from the rich bounty of crops and game available along the hills and river systems of the American Southeast. Tallahassee, the future territorial and state capital, was a

day's walk from the Georgia border but 500 miles and light years culturally from Miami. A sub-tropical climate blessed the Tequesta residing along Key Biscayne. Geographically and culturally, the settlers along Key Biscayne shared more with inhabitants of Cuba and the Bahamas than Georgia.

But foodways of a society are more complicated than they would seem. Consider 1820s Pensacola. When Spain ceded Florida to the United States in 1821, the transfer signaled not only a new authority, but the clash of cultures. Vestiges of Creole Pensacola lingered. When General Andrew Jackson arrived to take possession of West Florida in 1821, his opinionated wife Rachel expressed horror. "The inhabitants all speak Spanish and French. Such a mixed multitude . . . fish peddlers filling the street with incomprehensible cries."

A familiar pattern emerged. Each new migrant and group arriving in Florida brings one's foodways and foodstuffs. The history of food in Florida is a story of adaptation and exchange, resistance and denial. African slaves, too, adjusted to strange new foods, all the while imparting new spices, flavors, and tastes.

Cities allowed Floridians a sampling of new tastes. As early as the 1830s, residents of Tallahassee, Apalachicola, and St. Augustine found an astonishing variety of items on store shelves and restaurants: French cognac, Madeira wine, and Caribbean rum. Dr. W. Ellis Hughes served in the U.S. Army during the Second Seminole War. In 1838 he dined at St. Augustine's Levington Hotel. "At Mr. Levington's table," he recorded his meal: "elegant roast beef, fried chicken, turtle soup, lettuce, potatoes, rice . . . boiled fish." In the 1850s, the *Pensacola Gazette* advertised "Piney Barrens" wood ducks and fox squirrels for the holidays. Diners finished their meals with a tasting of South American coffees, Holland gin, Absinthe from New Orleans, and Cuban cigars. Local grocery stores delivered dressed and cleaned gopher; Friday specials included gopher gumbo.

The hog, not the gopher, was king of Florida's food chain. In 1837, a visiting Frenchman observed, "The animal that gives the most extraordinary results is the hog." Few Floridians needed a French aristocrat to remind them of their fondness for pig meat. Hogs will eat anything, so much so that in St. Augustine, pigs were fed mullet and oysters in such quantities that residents complained their flesh tasted like fish!

Pork was served in almost every imaginable fashion. Cooks boiled, baked, and fried the preferred white meat. Floridians salted and smoked prodigious amounts of butchered pork.

Arguably Floridians' most venerated meal was fried chicken. But for good reason, the barnyard chicken was reserved for Sunday dinners when the preacher paid a visit. Fried chicken was so treasured because it was considered a luxury—until the 1950s, chicken was more expensive than veal or steak! Many elderly Floridians can remember when every city boasted a poultry store where customers selected a live Rhode Island Red or Plymouth White and returned an hour later to pick up a freshly "drawn and dressed" spring chicken.

If chicken was so tasty, reasoned many Floridians, what about other birds? Lt. George McCall and his comrades savored roast flamingo and pelican upon exploring Tampa Bay in 1824. Gladesman Glenn Simmons believed passionately, "There is nothing better to eat than a Cape Sable coot. Simmons's contemporary, Loren "Totch" Brown spoke reverentially of "Chokoloskee chicken," aka the white ibis.

### **Today's Columbian Exchange**

The Columbian Exchange did not end in 1513; it endures in today's kitchens, cafes, and markets. Shoppers can stroll almost any food aisle and select Thai oyster sauce, balsamic vinegar, tandoori paste, curry spices, Jamaican jerk chicken, Polish pierogis, Laotian spring rolls, and bottled mojo marinade. A profusion of new—actually quite old—fruits and vegetables tempt our palates: jicama, tomatilla, prickly pear, kiwis, bok choy, Peruvian purple potatoes, mozzarella made from water buffalo, and mung beans. Floridians have never enjoyed such varieties of food choices. Floridians who once thought Chun King and romaine lettuce were exotic, now test dietary frontiers. Consider the

fusion possibilities: curried mullet in rosemary, blood orange reduction, South Beach tamales and cheese grits, and Moo Shoo swamp cabbage.

Beginning in the 1980s, a “new” Florida cuisine gathered national acclaim. Called Nuevo Cubano, Floribbean, or Pan Latino, the cooking infuses the ingredients of the Americas, starring Miami as the Gateway to the Americas. Of course, Florida cooks—mestizaje and criollas, Bridgetts and mammys—have been doing this for centuries. Witness the popularity of Chinese-Cuban fried rice. The dish originated, not in Miami in 1991, but rather in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba with the importation of Chinese to work on the railroads and sugar plantations. They left behind their culinary imprint and brought it to Tampa in the 1890s.

Fittingly, Florida’s oldest eating establishment is the Columbia, “the Gem of Spanish Restaurants.” Founded in 1905 in Tampa’s Ybor City, the Columbia reinforces the importance of memory and tradition. No dish is more iconic than *caldo gallego* (Galician soup). The soup contains white beans, greens, ham, broth, and potatoes (the last ingredient an homage to the Columbian Exchange). A similar dish, *cocido*, was served at America’s first Thanksgiving—in St. Augustine in 1565! A hearty soup fit for cold Asturian and Galician winters, *caldo gallego* seems out-of-place in Florida’s hot, humid climate. Gazpacho would seem better suited, a cold tomato soup popular in southern Spain. But Galicians and Asturians, not Andalusians, immigrated to Tampa. Food and memories matter.

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