



Waste not (want not)

ECONOMY | Great Depression forced creativity out of cooks, but same recipes don't fly today

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What did Grandma eat during the Depression?

Parallels between today and the 1930s have many people reaching for history books, hoping the Great Depression offers lessons for coping with current hard times.

When it comes to the kitchen, though, changed tastes, new nutritional data and, most importantly, real differences in the cost of foodstuffs mean that Grandma's recipe file won't cut it during the recession 21st century-style.

Hard times

In 1933, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 25 percent of the labor force was out of work. Like today's unemployment rate (7.2 percent in December), that statistic probably underestimates the extent of the crisis. The official numbers don't count freelancers, day laborers and others doing part-time, temporary or, in some cases, unpaid work; jobless people who've become too discouraged to keep job hunting; or the underemployed.

"By and large, government relief programs were such that people didn't starve to death," says Bruce Kraig, emeritus professor of history at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Not that food was abundant. In 1938, activists sponsored a "relief banquet" at the Congress Hotel, demonstrating the average meal of families on welfare, Kraig said. The 8-cent dinner included carrots, onion, a slice of bread and half an apple. In comparison, a lobster dinner at the hotel in 1937 cost \$2.75.

Families on relief received \$28.50 a month. (Based on the Consumer Price Index, that's about \$466 in today's dollars.) Those lucky enough to get a job with the Works Progress Administration made an average of \$41.57 a month.

Della Gieselmann, 100, a resident of Smith Village, a continuing care community in Beverly, worked in New York during the 1930s.

"I got a job doing housework for a family. I had to cook for the family," she says. "They paid me \$5 a week." Out of that, she sent money to help her brothers.

"The men, they couldn't get jobs, so we had to help out the family," Gieselmann says. "We were glad we could survive."

Survival cooking

If you read cookbooks and glossy women's magazines of the 1930s, you'd never know there was a depression going on. Publishers must have figured that poor people weren't buyers.

Dining During the Depression (Reminisce Books, 1996), a collection of recipes contributed by people who grew up in the 1930s, tells a wider story. It features a variety of dishes made from weeds, such as poke salad, dandelions, milkweed and cattails.

Where they could, people grew large gardens. Farmers struggled, but country folks ate better than urbanites.

Velma Floyd, 91, a resident of the Smith Crossing retirement community in Orland Park, grew up on a farm in Lawton, Iowa, near Sioux City.

"My dad butchered meat, and my mother canned it. It had a special taste. Today, I can still tell," Floyd says.

The stove, she recalls, had no way to regulate the temperature, so cooking in it took considerable knowledge and patience, unlike today's microwave ovens. "That's all I have now," Floyd confides.

Working-class families had few conveniences.

"Everything was homemade," says Rosalie Schnierle, 89, a Gage Park resident who grew up in Back of the Yards. "There was a lot of cooking. There was a lot of baking,"

Her family didn't own a refrigerator, so they had to buy food daily.

"I remember going to the Atlas Market and buying two pounds of meat and a bone," Schnierle says. Her mother would make it into a stew with potatoes and vegetables, and that would be dinner.

Stews and soups, which could stretch a long way, made up many people's principal meals in the 1930s. Cooks made soups out of whatever they could find: coffee soup, pretzel soup, milk and noodle soup and the famous Depression soup -- 1/3 cup ketchup and 2/3 cup boiling water.

Charity kitchens ladled out soup to the unemployed. Even notorious gangster Al Capone contributed, setting up Chicago kitchens to feed 3,000 jobless people three meals a day.

"Breakfast consists of coffee and a sweet roll, and dinner and supper of soup, bread and coffee, with a second or third helping permitted," the *New York Times* reported.

Then and now

Kraig, whose parents met on a WPA project, said his mother remembers mostly cooking potatoes.

"That's always poor folks' food. Poor people eat starchy foods," Kraig says.

Dining During the Depression offers many recipes for potato dishes, even potato candy.

Says a 93-year-old woman named Clara, the star of a series of YouTube videos about Depression cooking by filmmaker Christopher Cannucciari: "My father used to buy a sack of potatoes. We ate potatoes every day, potatoes with pasta, potatoes fried, potatoes with eggs."

Back then, a dollar would have bought 100 pounds of potatoes. The best Idahoes cost \$2.25 per 100 pounds, according to a 1939 ad for Paradise Food Mart in Joliet.

A Chicago grocery chain recently advertised russet potatoes on sale at \$5 for 10 pounds. That's more than double the price of just a few years ago and, figured in 1939 dollars, 145 percent of that year's price.

Potato prices rose dramatically in 2008, due to partly to weather conditions, along with a drop in the number of acres nationally devoted to growing spuds. The National Agricultural Statistics Service reports that farmers planted about 1 million acres of potatoes last fall, down 8 percent from the previous year.

Cooks could afford little meat, so they made do with meatless recipes like nut hash and black-eyed pea sausage, according to *Dining During the Depression*. Such meat as there was tended to be cheap cuts.

Two pounds of frankfurters sold for 21 cents in 1933, as advertised by the Fair, a market at State, Adams and Dearborn streets -- and you could get free delivery.

Hot dogs are still cheap -- if you're not fussy about their contents. On a recent shopping trip, the Our Family brand was priced at \$2 a pound. The ingredients include "mechanically separated" chicken, pork, modified food starch, beef, hydrolyzed soy protein and a long list of additives. By contrast, Vienna Beef hot dogs, \$7.60 at the same store, contain only beef, flavorings and a couple of routine curing salts.

In the 1930s, chicken was luxury food, as revealed by the ill-fated Republican promise of prosperity during Herbert Hoover's 1928 presidential campaign: "A chicken in every pot."

Leg of veal, then a cheap byproduct of the dairy industry, was only 9 cents. Skewers of veal were nicknamed "city chicken."

In 1934, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported, ready-to cook city chicken skewers sold at two for 15 cents. Recent local prices for veal ranged from about \$17 per pound for cutlets to \$28 per pound for chops.

Due to factory farming, Great-Grandma's delicacy is now cheap, everyday food. Whole fryers typically sell for less than \$2 per pound.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average American ate just 10 pounds of chicken per year throughout the '30s; today, we eat more than 61 pounds each annually, much of it in McNuggets and other fast-food meals.

There is one culinary lesson we can take away from the days when the jobless went from door to door asking for food and marking with chalk the houses of generous givers for the next comers, as Mary Owsley, who spent the early '30s in Oklahoma, recounts.

Quoted in Studs Terkel's 1970 oral history of the Great Depression, "Hard Times," the Uptown resident says, "A lot of times, one family would have some food. They would divide. And everyone would share.

"Even the people who were quite well-to-do, they was ashamed. 'Cause they was eatin', and other people wasn't."

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