

# Food for Keeps

**Skills:** Science, Language Arts, Math, Social Studies

**Objective:** The student will explore food preservation methods from early American history through today.

## Background

Eating healthy is a matter of choice for most of us today, but it wasn't so simple for early American colonists. We know that a healthy diet includes eating plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and that we can usually get some variety of these at the grocery store. But early Americans could only get fresh fruits and vegetables during the growing season. There were no refrigerated rail cars or trucks to bring food from more temperate climates. For the rest of the year they had to rely on food preservation techniques that were difficult and time-consuming.

Methods available for preserving food included drying, salting, sugaring, pickling and cold storage. These methods had been developed through trial and error, but no one knew exactly why they worked. Bacteria had not yet been discovered.

We now know that drying, salting and sugaring reduce the activity of water. This inhibits the growth of bacteria and the activity of internal enzymes that cause food spoilage. Acidification and salting inhibit the growth of many spoilage bacteria, and the low temperatures in cold storage slow down their reproductive rate.

## Activities

### ACTIVITY ONE

1. Read and discuss background and vocabulary.
2. Hand out copies of the Reading Page.
  - Students will read independently or as a class.
  - Students will discuss scientific reasons for why the different methods of food preservation work.
3. Hand out the student worksheet.
  - Students will match the food preservation method with the correct definition.
4. Students will use internet search engines or library references to research favorite foods and determine the methods used for processing them.

### ACTIVITY TWO

1. Bring an assortment of fresh foods, along with their processed counterparts (beef/beef jerky, pork/bacon, chicken/canned chicken, grapes/raisins, fresh beets/canned beets, etc.) Seal raw meat in plastic bags so students can see it but not handle it.
  - Students will match the fresh food with the processed food.

**P.A.S.S.**

**GRADE 6**

**Science Process**—1.1,2;  
2.2; 3.1,2,5,6; 4.5; 5.4

**Physical Science**—1.1

**Reading**—1.1a; 3.1bd; 5.1a

**Math Process**—1.3; 2.1;  
4.1; 5.4

**Math Content**—5.1,2

**Social Studies**—3.2

**GRADE 7**

**Science Process**—1.1,2;  
2.2; 3.1,2,5,6; 4.5; 5.4

**Physical Science**—1.1

**Reading**—1.1; 3.1ac,2a;  
5.1a

**Math Process**—1.3; 2.1;  
4.1; 5.4

**Math Content**—5.1

**Social Studies**—5.2

**GRADE 8**

**Science Process**—1.1,2;  
2.2; 3.1,2,5,6; 4.5; 5.4

**Physical Science**—1.2

**Reading**—1.1; 3.1ab,2a;  
5.1a

**Math Process**—1.3; 2.1;  
4.1; 5.4

**Math Content**—5.1

**Social Studies**—1.1

## Resources Needed

assorted fresh foods and their processed counterparts—fresh and canned fruit or vegetables, raisins, beef and summer sausage, frozen food, freeze-dried food, etc.

very lean flank steak, partially frozen

teriyaki sauce

gloves for food handling

## Vocabulary

**acidification**—to turn something acid

**brine**—water saturated with a large amount of salt

**canning**—the act, process or business of preserving food in airtight containers

**contamination**—an unclean or impure state

**cold storage**—a protective storage for foods in a refrigerated place

**drying**—to preserve by extracting the moisture

**freezing**—the lowering of the temperature of food to temperatures below 28 degrees F

**irradiation**—the act of subjecting something to radiant energy in the form of waves or particles

**microbial**—a microscopic organism, especially one that transmits a disease

**osmosis**—the defusion of fluid through a semipermeable membrane until there is equal concentration

**pasteurization**—the process used to destroy harmful organisms in milk

**pemmican**—a food made chiefly from beef, dried fruits, and suet (the hard fat around the kidneys in beef and mutton from which tallow is made)

**pickling**—a solution of brine or vinegar often spiced for flavoring foods

**preservation**—to prepare food for future use by canning or salting

**refrigeration**—to preserve food by chilling.

**rosin**—A yellowish—brown sap from various pine trees.

**salting**—To cure or preserve using a salt mixture.

**saltpeter**—Potassium nitrate.

**scaffold**—A raised wooden framework or platform.

**sugar**—A sweet crystalline carbohydrate sucrose.

—Students will compare and contrast fresh with processed.

2. Divide students into groups.

—Students will experiment with drying fruit and other foods, using a food hydrator, a microwave oven, a conventional oven and air drying.

—Students will design their own experiments, under adult supervision.

—Students will review and observe safety rules.

—Students will explain their procedures and report findings to the other groups.

3. Make beef jerky, using the recipe on Student Worksheet C.

4. Students will make pemmican, as described in the reading, by pounding some of the jerky with dried fruit and dividing it into plastic bags.

5. Students will bring examples of processed food from home and identify the method of processing used.

## ACTIVITY THREE

1. Conduct a tasting party with an assortment of processed foods.

—Students will conduct surveys to determine which food tastes best to the largest number of students.

—Students will graph results of the survey.

—Students will compute simple probabilities as fractions, decimals or percents.

## Extra Reading

Kerr, Daisy, *Keeping Clean: A Very Peculiar History*, Franklin Watts, 1995.

Smith, Linda Wasmer, *Louis Pasteur : Disease Fighter* (Great Minds of Science), Enslow, 1997.

## Answers for Student Worksheet A

1. raisins, beef jerky; 2. ham, pickles; 3. yogurt, cheese; 4. bacon; 5. canned fruit, ketchup; 6. milk; 7. lettuce; 8. frozen peas; 9. coffee; 10. frozen orange juice; 11. ground beef.

# Food for Keeps

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## DRYING

Drying was a technique used by early American colonists to preserve apples, peaches, pears and apricots along with some vegetables, meat and fish. Nets woven of hair were used to support the fruit or fish and allow good air circulation. The food had to be turned frequently and protected from insects, bird droppings and blowing dirt.

The tribes of the American Great Plains developed their own method for drying bison meat. This provided a safe food supply through the long periods between hunting seasons. After eating their fill of the fresh bison meat, the Indians would take the remaining meat and make pemmican. They would slice the meat thin and hang it on scaffolds. They hung streamers along with the meat, so they would blow in the wind and keep wolves away. Once the meat was dry they pounded it and placed it in buffalo rawhide bags about the size of a pillow case. Sometimes they added dried berries for flavor. The sugar from the berries also helped with preservation. They poured hot melted marrow in so that it surrounded each particle of meat. Then they sewed the bag shut. Before the contents became hard from cooling, they walked on it to flatten it. A single sack weighed close to 90 pounds and could be placed across small logs or rocks to keep them off the damp ground.

## SALTING

Salting was another method colonists used to preserve food. Salt pork, beef or fish (and some cheese) often provided the only animal protein available during the winter other than wild game.

Hog butchering was done in the fall, as soon as it was cold enough to chill the carcass rapidly. A certain amount of the meat was reserved fresh, for immediate use, and some was made into sausage. The rest, especially the hams (hind legs) and side meat, was treated with salt containing saltpeter (potassium nitrate). This was stored until it had lost a great deal of water through osmosis. It was then exposed to hickory or fruit-wood smoke for several days. After that it was hung in a ventilated shed or barn for 6-18 months as it gradually lost moisture.

## SUGARING

As a preservative, sugar acts like salt in reducing water activity enough to prevent the growth of spoilage bacteria. Early settlers used sugar to preserve fruits for winter use. The fruits were boiled with sugar, and the containers were sealed with beeswax or a mixture of candle wax and rosin. Sometimes a piece of paper would be pasted to the top of the jar with egg white. Sugar was also used as a preservative in meat preparations.

## PICKLING OR BRINING

Fruits and vegetables were the most difficult foods to get out of season. Pickling or brining was a fairly simple way to preserve vegetables without changing their flavor too much. The vegetables were submerged in a mild salt and vinegar brine in a crock.

## COLD STORAGE

Cold storage was possible in the northern US. Root cellars, in which the winter temperatures hovered between 30 and 40 degrees F., were common. In especially cold weather, a large tub of water was placed on the floor. This water gave off heat as it turned to ice, keeping the vegetables from freezing. If a family didn't have room for a root cellar, a pit served much the same purpose. Vegetables were laid in layers, separated by straw, and the whole was covered with earth.

Ice houses were the first refrigerators. During the winter, these above-ground houses were filled with blocks of ice cut from streams and lakes and packed in sawdust for insulation. The ice could then be deliv-

ered to homeowners during the spring and summer. The ice was used to keep dairy products, fish and meat from spoiling. The ice box did not become popular until the mid-1800s. It had to be recharged frequently with a new block of ice

Although settlers in the South had access to a more varied food supply year round, they had more difficulty getting ice for short term protection against the warmer climate. Ice was shipped from Massachusetts to the southern states in the early 19th Century, but because of the cost it was available only to wealthier people.

Eggs could be stored in the root cellar or basement. The eggs were dipped in boiling water for 20 seconds then coated all over with butter or glycerin and packed in sawdust. They would keep this way for 2-3 weeks.

#### CANNING, FREEZING AND REFRIGERATION

The invention of canning created a revolution in food preservation and availability. The development of commercial freezing and refrigeration made preservation of fresh meat possible. Refrigerated rail cars, then refrigerated trucks, also increased the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables.

#### PASTEURIZATION

Microbial contamination of dairy products led to widespread use of pasteurization in these foods. Louis Pasteur had perfected this method to save the wine industry in France in the late 1870s. It involved heating to reduce the number of disease producing bacteria.

#### IRRADIATION

One of the most recently developed food preservation methods is irradiation. Irradiation kills E coli, a deadly bacteria found in beef and other foods. Irradiation pasteurizes food by using energy, just as milk is pasteurized using heat. Irradiation destroys insects, fungi, or bacteria that cause spoilage and human disease. During irradiation, energy passes through food much like a ray of light passes through a window. This energy destroys most of the bacteria that can cause disease yet allows food to retain its high quality. Hospitals use irradiation to sterilize food for patients with weak immune systems, and astronauts have eaten irradiated foods for many years.

Today's processed foods retain most of their nutritive value during processing, and in most cases the loss of nutrients due to processing is less than loss from cooking.

# Food for Keeps

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Match the food preservation methods below with the food or foods for which it is used.

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|---|------------------------|
| 1. drying—Extraction of moisture by sun, air, heat or vacuum to inhibit the growth of molds, bacteria and yeasts  | ___bacon               |
| 2. salting—The addition of salt or a brine solution to foods to decrease the activity of molds, bacteria and yeasts.  | ___beef jerky          |
| 3. fermentation—the use of special bacteria, molds or yeasts to prevent spoilage by converting the elements of food that spoil easily to stable elements that act as preservatives. | ___frozen peas         |
| 4. smoking—The addition of smoke and heat to preserve food by the action of the chemicals from the smoked wood and the partial drying of the food.                                  | ___coffee              |
| 5. canning—The packing of food in a container, sealing the container and heating it to sterilize the food.  | ___yogurt              |
| 6. pasteurization—The heating of milk and other liquids which reduces the number of disease-producing bacteria.   | ___canned fruit        |
| 7. refrigeration—The lowering of the temperature of food to inhibit the growth of bacteria, molds and yeasts.   | ___raisins             |
| 8. freezing—The lowering of the temperature of food to temperatures below 28 degrees F to stop the growth of bacteria, yeasts and molds and to kill parasites.                      | ___ketchup             |
| 9. freeze-drying—The freezing of food and the subsequent removal of water from the frozen food through the use of heat and a vacuum.  | ___ham                 |
| 10. food concentration—Heating food until it boils and removing the water or partially freezing food and removing water in the form of ice crystals.                                | ___lettuce             |
| 11. irradiation—Passing energy through food to destroy insects, fungi, or bacteria that cause human disease or cause food to spoil.   | ___cheese              |
|   | ___frozen orange juice |
|   | ___ground beef         |
|   | ___pickles             |
|   | ___milk                |

# Beef Jerky

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1. Cut very lean, partially frozen flank steak into thin strips, 1 1/2 to 2 inches wide.
2. Dip the strips in teriyaki sauce.
3. Dry the strips, using one of the following methods:

## SUN—DRIED

4. Tie small packages of the strips of meat in cheese cloth and hang them in a sunny window. Keep the packages loose enough so air can circulate around the strips.
5. Every day or so shake the packages gently to make sure they are getting plenty of air.
6. Jerky is ready to eat in about a week, when the meat is shriveled and black and brittle.

## OVEN—DRIED

4. Arrange the seasoned strips in a single layer on wire racks. Place a piece of aluminum foil on the bottom of the oven to catch drippings.
5. Preheat the oven to 150 degrees F., and then turn the heat back to 120 degrees F.
6. Place the meat in the oven, leaving the oven door open at the first stop.
7. After five or six hours, turn the strips over.
8. Continue drying at the same temperature for four hours more.
9. Jerky is ready when it is shriveled and black. When cooled, the jerky should be brittle.

## MICROWAVE—DRIED

4. Arrange the seasoned strips flat and close together on a microwave—safe bacon rack. Cover with waxed paper.
5. Microwave at medium low.
6. Turn the strips over, placing the drier strips in the center of the rack.
7. Rotate the rack 1/2 turn, and continue microwaving at medium low for 21 minutes, until the strips are dry but slightly pliable.
8. Remove to the paper towels.
9. Repeat with remaining strips.
10. Cover the strips with paper towels, and let them stand for 24 hours.

Storage: Wrap the sticks of jerky in plastic wrap, and put them in a container with a tight-fitting lid. Store in the refrigerator or freezer.