

Traditional Métis Food and Diet

The Métis have contributed immensely to Canada's dietary fare, adapting many of the simple, nourishing and flavourful foods traditionally eaten by their First Nations, Euro-Canadian and European ancestors. The Métis have particularly adapted such French-Canadian foods as *tourtière* (a pork-based meat pie) and *boulettes* (meatballs) and such Aboriginal foods as pemmican or wild rice. These nourishing foods, easy to prepare and transport, were particularly well suited for the semi-nomadic Métis. Métis meals and recipes consisted of products people obtained from hunting, gathering or farming. In other instances, Métis recipes included ingredients from trading posts.

Traditionally, the Métis ate a high fat and carbohydrate-rich diet. This was necessary because they lived active, often physically demanding lives. The energy produced by such a large caloric intake was then used to live a subsistence lifestyle. Furthermore, since Métis families were involved in farming, hunting, fishing and gathering plant material, they had a varied diet, which helped offset droughts, floods, early frosts and poor hunts. However, there was always the possibility that, on a particularly bad year, a family would run short of fresh food. Winter was a long season and no matter the skill of a hunter or trapper there was the threat that there would not be enough food for the season. Therefore, most Métis families tried to ensure they could make it through difficult years and harsh winters by preserving and storing food from their gardens, fields and kills.

Métis women commonly dried (and smoked) meats and berries for later use. Dried berries and fruits could later be boiled to make tarts and pies or could be eaten with cream. Drying and smoking meat and fish was done outdoors in the sun and wind on racks over low fires. Dried meat and fish could be eaten plain or boiled in stews. Pemmican, a staple of many Métis diets and a product that could last for years, was an indispensable but bland food resource made from pounded and shredded buffalo meat fortified by berries and hot buffalo fat. Meat, berries and fruits were also canned. Autumn was canning season and some motivated families canned up to one thousand quarts of vegetables, fruits, wild berries, fish and wild meat! Indian corn, which was a fairly common garden product, and barley were dried and ground for easy storage and use in soups, stews, bannock and bread.

Storing fruits and vegetables in small cellars or in root houses ensured that families had fresh sources of vitamins and minerals during winter. Meat could be kept cool in a well or by burying it in sawdust, wheat, or under the ground. It would last for about ten days when kept in a bucket at the bottom of a well. People also froze fish, wild game, and meat from slaughtered livestock and kept it in heavy containers or in a tree and thus away from hungry animals. If the family had access to one, icehouses were used to keep meat and vegetables frozen. Frozen meats lasted until the following spring without going bad.

If a family raised cows, they were able to make their own butter, cook with cream and drink milk. To preserve butter in winter, women would fill a

small tub with butter, cover it with a cloth topped with coarse salt and pour a mixture of brine and egg over it. The tub would be tightly covered with a lid and kept in a dairy shed separate from the house.

Bannock is a traditional Métis food, which was used by people who had to eat a quick, nourishing, and tasty meal, particularly when doing an activity. Like pemmican, bannock was a high-energy food eaten by travelers or other people engaged in a great deal of physical activity, who did not have time to prepare food. It has a high fat and high carbohydrate content, which supplies long-term energy for those on the trap line, or hunting, or paddling long distances. However, it becomes an unhealthy food if eaten on a regular basis in a sedentary lifestyle because of these same characteristics. Métis women also baked pies, tarts, and other goodies for their families and when friends came to visit. Christmas was a time when many women baked treats such as ginger snaps, mincemeat and raisin pies, and fruitcake.

The most common method of cooking seems to be either boiling or frying. Meals tended to include a high percentage of wild meat and fish mixed with garden vegetables, particularly potatoes. In place of oil or butter, Métis cooks used marrow fat or "*graisse de moelle*". When families could afford it, they purchased items such as sugar, raisins, flour, rice, butter, syrup, bacon and canned meats from the local stores.

Adapted From:

Paquin, Todd, Dorion, Leah, Préfontaine, Darren R. "Métis Food and Diet".
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