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Photo: Cheryl Rose

Plymouth Plantation English village.



Ann Prince performs in her Pilgrim role as Mary Soule at the Plymouth Plantation.

Plymouth Plenty

By Ann Prince, Associate Editor of Mass Audubon Sanctuary magazine

Although Chief Josiah Wompatuck was born six years after our nation's first Thanksgiving, he more than likely later became friends with the Native American and English participants.

"Plymouth Plenty" is contributed to the Friends of Wompatuck by Mass Audubon's **Sanctuary** magazine's associate editor Ann Prince. The story first appeared in **Sanctuary** in 2011.

Jim Rose, Wompatuck State Park Historian

Plymouth Colony's three-day harvest feast in the fall of 1621 was likely even better than our present day Thanksgiving meal.

In the early 1980s I worked at Plymouth Plantation playing the part of Mary Soule. At the time, I often wished I could go back to the year we were reenacting, 1627, and spend one day in the village as it was 350 days before. My boss (aka Francis Cooke in the village) thought I would be horrified by the real 17th-century Plymouth, but I figured that one day wouldn't hurt, especially if it was dur-

ing a mild season of the year. The curiosity was overwhelming at times, but, of course, going back in time is impossible. Instead, we have to rely on the inexact field of history to surmise how people lived long ago.

Piecing together what happened and in particular what was served during the "first Thanksgiving" (which was actually autumn festivities celebrating a successful harvest and a surfeit of food after a bleak first winter) requires detective work. What wild and cultivated food would have been available? What fare were the English and the Wompanoag familiar with? What were the methods of cooking and their favorite recipes?

The most definitive information is a firsthand narrative by Edward Winslow who gave an account of the event in a letter dated December 12, 1621. He wrote that both the wheat and the corn harvest were good, though the barley didn't do as well and the peas weren't worth gathering. Once the crops were harvested, he

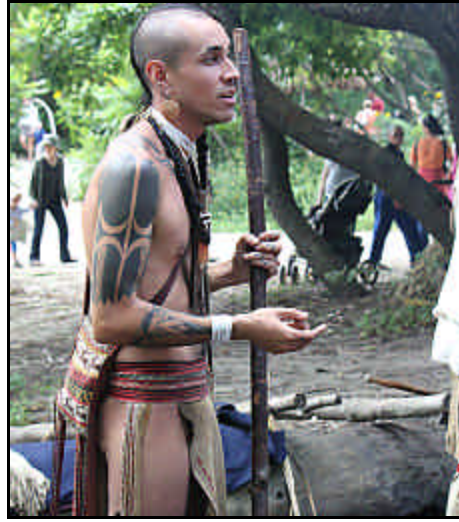
wrote that four men went fowling and brought back enough birds to feed 50 villagers for a week. These were most likely migratory fowl, including ducks and geese. John Pory, who visited Plymouth in 1623, mentioned the "swarms and multitudes" of waterfowl that covered the bay from September till March. Then the sachem Massasoit brought along to the event 90 men who joined the 50 colonists for three days of entertainment and feasting. No one knows whether any Wompanoag women or children attended. To add to the bounty, some Native men went out and returned with five deer. Since they have been commoners across the sea, the English folk were probably eating venison for the first time in their lives in Plymouth. Only the wealthy landowners back in England were allowed to hunt for deer in their forested "parks."

The venison and fowl were roasted on spits over hot coals, as were probably wild turkeys, which were plentiful

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Mayflower II.



Plymouth Plantation Wompanoag roll player.



Painting of Edward Winslow by Robert Walker, 1651; in the Pilgrim Hall Museum.

Plymouth Plenty (continued from page one)

in Plymouth then. Birds such as ruffed grouse, bobwhites and heath hens may have been cooked over the fire as well. And, since it was there for the taking, seafood may have been caught and prepared. “Our bay is full of lobsters all the summer and affordeth a variety of fish,” wrote William Bradford in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. “In September we can take a hogs head of eels in a night, with small labor, and can dig them out to their beds all winter. We have mussels... at our doors.”

Every morning at the “Plantation” I would get a basket of food and instructions of what I was suppose to cook that day. There was usually some sort of meat or some eggs, and kept flour, onions, salt, oil, and a few other staples in our houses. It was an easy transformation for me, since at 24, I’d had more experience cooking over a campfire than with 20th-century appliances. Also, tending the kitchen garden just outside in the yard was second nature since one of my interests was botany, and getting my hands into what my mother called “good clean dirt” was something I always enjoyed.

As “goodwives” we used big kettles that hung in the fireplace over the flames, frequently making a stew we called “potage,” which we thickened with corn meal or wheat flour. To supplement our provisions, we raised various potherbs and root vegetables including carrots, onions, beets,

parsnips, spinach, cabbage, chard, leeks, collards, sage, parsley, mint, thyme, savory, and marjoram. Toward midsummer, our potages became much more flavorful as our gardens flourished.

No doubt the harvest festival of 1621 included potage. Not only were there plenty of bones with leftover meat available to boil a day or so into the feast, but stew was a part of the Native people’s diet too - a dish they called *sobaheg*. Their version had ingredients such as beans and grits; venison or some other meat such as turkey or smaller game birds; beaver or bear; squash or pumpkin; walnuts, chestnuts and ground nuts; and Jerusalem artichokes. After a winter of near starvation, likely the colonists were flexible about adding new foods to their familiar cuisine, so any combination of imported and native foods could have rounded out the stews.

Corn was a staple for the Native people and soon was adopted by the newcomers. The Wompanoags ate “Indian corn,” a colorful and hard flint corn, at every meal. Dried corn was soaked and crushed to make grits or boiled with beans to make succotash, and it was ground with mortar and pestle to make corn meal, which was used in recipes for cornbread and corn pudding. The English adapted their own recipes for porridge, pancakes, and bread. “Our Indian corn, even the coarsest,” wrote Edward Winslow, “maketh as pleasant a meat

as rice.” Needless to say, in various forms, Indian corn was on the menu throughout the three days of festivities.

While pumpkin pie was not a dish either the English or Wompanoag were familiar with or would have conjured up, fresh native pumpkin, cooked on hot coals, could have been on the bill of fare, as well as fresh or dried fruit, tarts made of the host of wild berries and plums. “Here are grapes, white and red, and very sweet and strong also,” wrote Edward Winslow. “Strawberries, gooseberries, raspas, etc. [and] plums of three sorts, with black and red.”

Considering all the options - the abundant wild fare, native crops, the harvest reaped from seeds of vegetables and herbs brought from Europe and New World and Old World recipes - an educated guess on what was served at the renowned 1621 Plymouth harvest feast would make a gratifying gourmet meal: roasted fowl, venison stew, fresh seafood, turkey with potherbs, seared pumpkin, nuts and berries, seasonal herbs, root vegetables, fresh fruit, plum tart.

Edward Winslow concluded his letter sent to England with this generous sentiment: “And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.” ■