

Democratizing America's Most Famous Dessert

by Lynne Belluscio

With the Fourth of July fast approaching, I noticed that there was an article in the newspaper about historic 18th century food that might have been on the menu for the Fourth of July in 1776. It included food that is mentioned in an English cookbook by Hannah Glasse. Of course there is no mention of hot dogs, mustard, ketchup, hamburgs and macaroni salad. Forget about potato chips and Kool Aid. A cold bottle of beer? Not in 1776.

Rather hard cider or a rum punch. Imagine turtle soup, scalloped oysters, ham, and Indian pudding made with corn meal. But the curious thing that might have been on the table in 1776 was Jell-O – not Jell-O as we know it, but what was called a “jelly” in the 18th century.

Made from scratch from boiled calves feet, scraped horns from the hart deer or the air bladders of sturgeon, jellies were often the centerpiece of the table. They were molded in fancy copper molds and could be sweet or savory.

For the most part, the colors were pretty “muddy” and weren't the colorful creations that we know today. Green might be made with spinach juice and red might be made with cochineal (ground up spider bodies that were used to dye cloth). These gelatin ancestors of Jell-O took several days to make and were not on the pioneer's table. Maybe if you had dinner with Thomas Jefferson or George Washington you might have had a jelly. Not only were the ingredients expensive but the molds were only found in the kitchens of the rich and famous.

Now skip ahead to 1897 when Pearle Waite introduced a fruit flavored gelatin which his wife named Jell-O. We don't know if he had any ideas for Fourth of July recipes. But what had changed was that “jellies” were no longer food for the rich and famous. In fact, when Orator Woodward acquired Jell-O in 1899, he made a point of advertising that Jell-O was for everyone. For only ten cents, you could have a beautiful dessert and you could get molds by sending in box tops. Some molds were free. Jell-O was - and is - a true American food.



It democratized an elitist food. What better way to celebrate the true meaning of the Declaration of Independence than a big dish of Jell-O!

Now skip ahead to the 1960s and Jell-O creates an ad campaign that offers ideas for celebrations, including the Fourth of July. The magazine ad suggests that red Jell-O be molded in a juice can. When placed on the dish, a long string of black licorice - a fuse -- is put in the end of the Jell-O “firecracker.” It's a simple idea, but looks great!

Today, I'd used the Jell-O Jiggler recipe for the firecracker, so slices could be handed out to everyone. (It would also be a great way to serve Jell-O shots.)

Now skip ahead another twenty years. The Jell-O Company continues the tradition of offering molds, only now they are made from plastic. And when Jell-O introduces Berry Blue (some sources state 1988 and others 1992) - all of a sudden everyone can be patriotic and create a red, white and blue Jell-O. (You can also make “Blue Goo Volcanoes” and “Jell-O Aquariums.”) Today, you can use an American Flag mold or an Uncle Sam Hat mold for the Fourth of July. Jell-O also offers Jell-O Jiggler molds in patriotic shapes. (We have all of these molds in the museum shop at the Jell-O Gallery.)

Although it is said that nothing is more American than apple pie, I contend that it is Jell-O that epitomizes the American patriotic spirit. It encourages creativity. It is affordable. It has a great shelf life. It is enjoyed by young and old alike. It's easy to make. Everyone has a Jell-O story. It's made in America. (And because it is a food, there's no tax on it!) And after all, it is red, white, and blue.