



Martha Summerhayes' Culinary Adventures

By Jan Cleere

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When Martha Summerhayes disembarked at Fort Yuma in August 1874 from aboard the ship *Newbern* out of San Francisco, she stepped onto the hot Arizona soil and looked around in dismay. She declared the desert “positively hostile in its attitude towards every living thing except snakes, centipedes and spiders.” Martha’s opinion of Arizona changed little during the ensuing years as she moved from one Army post to another. Yet after she returned to her native Nantucket, she often longed for the strange critters, spindly trees and fiery sunsets of the desert southwest.

However, it’s doubtful Martha missed her cooking experiences on the western frontier for she was about as handy in the kitchen as a cowboy without his horse. She readily admitted her own culinary failings in her 1908 book, *Vanished Arizona*. “. . . My own attention had been more engrossed by the study of German auxiliary verbs . . . than with the art of cooking.” Quince jelly and floating islands were all Martha mastered before following her Army Lieutenant husband, John “Jack” Wyer Summerhayes, into the wilds of Arizona aboard leaky steamships and Army ambulances.

She learned to prepare meals using whatever was at hand whether it be a freshly shot turkey or a can of “something” that had shown up in her Army rations. Jack cautioned her she would “have to learn to do as other Army women do — cook in cans and such things, be inventive, and learn to do with nothing.”

The Arizona Historical Society has acquired two of Martha’s “receipt” books, one volume written in 1885 in Fort Halleck, Nevada, and the other dated February 21, 1895, *David’s Island*, New York Harbor. The recipes presented here appear “as is,” so that grammatical nuances and terms of the day can be appreciated along with some rather unique cooking methods.

As Martha and Jack waited to sail from San Francisco Bay to Fort Yuma, she made the acquaintance of steamboat Captain Metzger who presented her with his recipe for doughnuts. They obviously made quite an impression on the sophisticated, twenty-eight year-old.

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Doughnuts (best ever I ate)

(Captain of Steamboat in Bay of San Francisco)

1 lb. of flour
3 oz. of butter
3/8 lb. sugar
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 pint or sponge (yeast)
2 eggs
1/4 gill rose water

Enough milk to make the whole into a soft dough.

Rub the flour, butter, sugar and cinnamon together, add the eggs, and then the sponge, rose-water and milk. Let to rise at night. In the morning, roll it out about ¼ inch thick – cut it into diamonds, let them rise again, when light, drop into hot lard. Sugar them when cool.

The captain's doughnuts call for "1/4 gill rose water." Gill is an old English measurement equivalent to one-fourth pint or four ounces, so the good captain might have obtained his culinary expertise in jolly old England before traipsing across the ocean to present Martha with his sugary masterpieces.

Nettie's Pigs Feet shows how much work was required in preparing fresh meat. Who would ever forget to remove a pig's toenails or scrape off the hair before cooking?

Nettie's Pigs Feet

Have the butcher take off toenails. Lay the feet in salt & water. Break them, scrape & clean any hair off. Scale if necessary. Then boil until tender. Cut in an onion, salt & cloves. Let them stand in the water when done & add a little vinegar. When nearly cold, take them out, put them in a dish, split them, cover them until you want to use them. When you use them, dip in beaten egg & cracker crumbs & fry in hot lard.

Martha arrived at Fort Apache pregnant with her first child. With a new baby on the way and practically no housekeeping or cooking experience, Martha needed as much help as she could rustle up. As an officer, Jack Summerhayes was allowed to hire a "striker," an enlisted man to help with the meals and some occasional housework. Striker Bowen was a godsend to Martha. He could stoke the fire and rock baby Harry without missing a beat at either end. He won raves for the tenderness and succulence of his oyster patties made from canned oysters that probably sat on an Army wagon for months.

Fresh milk was a rare treat in the desert and Martha was allocated one pint each evening. Soldiers were assigned the "udderly" bucket-kicking chore of finding and roping wild cows, then trying to milk them without getting kicked in the head.

Martha relied on occasional Army pack trains to replenish her larder. However, supplies were often delayed for weeks, even months. She sometimes waited endlessly for basic needs such as sugar and flour — or a letter from home.

Meat on the hoof was available though. The abundance of deer, turkey, prairie chickens and woodcocks produced great sport for soldiers and hearty repasts for the camp. Mutton, beef and pungent oxtail soup graced many a table. Nothing was left unused.

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Calf's Head (Nantucket way)

Put in head, tongue, heart, and lights and a little salt. After much skimming, put in the brains and sweet bread. Tuck up in a muslin bag, with sweet herbs & onions. In half-an hour, take these out and chop fine, adding butter, seasoning, hard boiled egg, and a little of the broth. Stew down a little. This is the dressing to pour over the whole when served. Put in the liver and boil about an hour. When all is done, take from the browning pan on a platter, and pour the dressing over. To make a soup of the liquor, take off the fat when cold, heat it and strain it, boil it down, add a cup of milk thickened, or rice – or you can add portions of the tongue cut up, hard boiled egg & sherry.

Whether cleaning a deer, wild turkey or coot, the carcass had to hang and drain, mindful that the day's temperature might climb well over 100 degrees.

To Cook Old Squaws or Coots!

The birds may be hung several days if weather is cool. Then, when ready to cook them, have them skinned and drawn. Wipe them carefully with a damp cloth inside and out until perfectly free from odor or blood, then sprinkle salt and pepper inside, throw in an onion or two, and wrap up the bird in thin slices of larding pork, pinning with skewers. Leave some thin slices in the bottom of the kettle and lay in the birds. Cover closely and let them cook slowly for about two hours, turning frequently until tender. Serve with bread sauce – with a few capers in. This is Margaret O'Neil's way, and the birds were delicious.

Measurements in some of Martha's recipes sometimes meant a good guess. Using a teacup or a wineglass to gauge ingredients might lead to some rather delicious, or disastrous, results depending upon the depth of one's cup.

Hatty's Punch

About 4 lumps of sugar, rubbed on lemon peel

1 wineglass Jamaica rum

1 wineglass white curacao

1 wineglass brandy

1 bottle dry American champagne

1 bottle plain soda

2 or 3 slices oranges, take out seeds

All the ingredients except soda & champagne should be well mixed. Pour in champagne & lastly soda, just before serving in a punch bowl over block of ice.

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Medicinal recipes also grace Martha's books.

Mrs. Russells Oil Mixture

Equal parts of salad oil, molasses and brandy boiled until it thickens. Take a dessert spoon as often as necessary, that is, once in two or three hours, if there is a movement or pain in that area.

Photos of Jack Summerhayes in his later years show him sporting a full head of snowy-white hair. It may have been Martha's formula for hair tonic — a can of pine tar mixed with 2 quarts of boiling water and 6 rusty nails — that kept the hair on his head. After letting this toxic mixture ferment for a week with daily shakings, it was ready to administer upon Jack's sun-bleached tresses.

Martha learned to cook traditional Mexican dishes, but confessed she could never toss tortillas as high as the Spanish ladies. She described tortillas as a "peculiar paste of flour and salt and water . . . patted out until they were as large as a dinner plate, and very thin; then thrown onto the hot sheet-iron, where they baked. Each one of the family then got a tortilla, the spoonful of beans was laid upon it, and so they managed without the paraphernalia of silver and china and napery."

Jack was transferred to Fort McDowell, Arizona, in 1875 in the heat of the summer when cow pies were riper and more plentiful than fresh food. Martha struggled to improve on the Army food available to her but complained, "We experimented with all sorts of tinned foods, and tried to produce some variety from them, but it was all rather tiresome."

While most of their Army life was spent traveling from one Arizona post to another, Martha and Jack were also bivouacked in other remote forts along the western frontier. Women traded recipes whenever and wherever they met, bringing new foods into new territories. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, she ran across a cook who knew how to make a meal from the meanest ingredients.

Marie's Marrow Dumplings for Soup

(From Austrian cook at Santa Fe - 1891)

Take the marrow from two or three bones, beat it up well, add two eggs not beaten, stir & beat well, then add four or five pounded crackers, salt, mace & nutmeg – roll into little round balls – boil 15 minutes in the soup. Enough for four or five persons.

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This plum pudding recipe probably found the cook a little tipsy by the end of the day.

Lizzie York's Plum Pudding

Take a single or 5 club loaf of baker's bread. Crumble or mill it apart quite fine. Pour over it one pint of scalded milk. Add a full 3/8 of a lb. of butter. Stir until melted.

3/8 lb. of sugar (white)

3/4 lb. raisins

1/2 lb. currants

3/8 lb. citron

3 eggs beaten together, plenty of spice of all kinds, mace especially. Nearly 1/2 cup of molasses. Salt. 1/4 pint of brandy. Taste and retaste. Steam four hours. Cold sauce.

This makes one pudding and is very rich.

The Summerhayes left Arizona in 1878 but were ordered back to Fort Lowell in 1886. Traveling through Tucson after eight years absence, Martha found the formerly rowdy town amazingly civil. Ice, fresh fruit, and clean waiters in hotel restaurants had her flummoxed. "... all this luxury doesn't seem to belong to this place."

When Martha finally left Arizona for the last time, she was more than happy to see the end of dusty trails that painted a thick brown coat over her clothes and left her son gagging for air. But as she watched the cactus disappear over the horizon and the red glow from the sun fade into the western sky, she took with her reminiscences of native foods and strange cultures that she remembered long after she returned to civilized, East Coast dining.