

Period Food for a Crowd ©

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Outdoor Food Market, Colonial era, image created between 1820 and 1850, Library of Congress photos and illustrations

The first thing that should be noted when preparing period foods for a large number of people is that you must decide what you want to serve, the amount needed for the desired number of servings, and then locate cookware of a sufficient size to accommodate that amount. Do not try to make several pots or bowls of the same dish to achieve that quantity or you will pay dearly in the long run in the amount of time it takes to wash all those vessels.

There are some techniques that work for large quantities, and some that do not. To be successful you must make note of that, and modify any technique which is prohibitive given the available utensils. For example, while beans may very successfully be boiled, then put into a bean pot with seasonings and baked near the fire or on the hearth for a small number of people, doing so for 50 or 100 is beyond the reach of most cooks.

In such an instance a compromise can be made in that after the beans are cooked most of the liquid is removed, and cooked onion, molasses, bacon or salt pork, salt, and pepper added and the mixture slowly simmered to marry the flavors without allowing it to stick to the bottom of the pot as would happen should too much heat be used.

Any fried food that doesn't remain tasty at room temperature should be avoided, as it will certainly not hold its heat until you have time to prepare the needed quantity, and because it requires constant attention, and therefore, a great deal of work. This would include items such as fritters, fried beets or cucumbers, etc.

Roasted meats can easily be prepared in large quantity, however, you will need to take care with pork, bear, chicken, etc. which can present health issues if undercooked. Beef, lamb, venison, etc. which are safe and tasty when served rare to medium are much better choices when cooking a large joint or a whole animal.

When roasting meat use only hot coals, and keep a second fire going so that the cook fire can be replenished with coals if needed, and do not place wood underneath roasting meat.



Tavern Scene, Library of Congress Photos and Illustrations

Puddings and pies (whether sweet or savory) are difficult to prepare for serving large crowds due to the number of dishes needed, the length of time it takes to bake the multiple dishes, and clean-up after the meal is prohibitive.

Boiling is, perhaps, the easiest method of cooking, especially for a large number of servings, and requires the least amount of attention during the cooking process. The fire can be adjusted by adding additional wood or pulling the coals away, and using a single pot makes clean-up much quicker and easier after the meal.

For the average cook, especially in a period setting soup and stew are the favored dishes to serve when feeding more than a small group. Once the ingredients are in the pot it can be left to slowly simmer and requires little attention. It is also one of the least expensive meals because quantities can be bulked up by adding inexpensive fillers such as vegetables, pastas, grains, etc.

Below are guides and amounts for various dishes that are easily prepared in large quantities. Compare the period recipe to the **suggested** quantities and techniques for adapting it to feed 50 and 100 people.

It is always best to adjust seasonings near the end of cooking time – you can add salt, pepper, herbs, etc., but you cannot take away.



Onion Soup, per Hannah Glasse

Take half a pound of butter put it into a stew pan on the fire; let it all melt, and boil it until it has done making any noise; then have ready 10 or a dozen middling onions, peeled and cut small. Throw them into the butter and let them fry a quarter of an hour; then shake in a little flour, and stir them round, shake your pan and let them do a few minutes longer, then pour in a quart or three pints of water, stir them round, and take a good piece of upper crust, the stalest bread you have, about as big as the top of a penny-loaf, cut small, and throw it in. Season with salt to your palate. Let it boil ten minutes, stirring it often, then take it off the fire, and have ready the yolk of two eggs, beaten fine with half a spoonful of vinegar. Mix some soup with them, then pour it back into the dish. This is a delicious dish.

For 50 servings:

18 ½ pounds of onions, peeled and sliced

3 cups butter, melted

28 cups broth

44 slices French bread (to thicken, this may be replaced with flour if desired)

Melt the butter in a large kettle, add the onions, and cook until tender, and just beginning to brown, do not overcook. Add the broth and stir in the bread. This may be slowly simmered for several hours until ready to serve.

For 100 servings:

38 to 40 lbs. of onions, peeled, sliced, 6 cups butter, 56 to 60 cups broth, and 75 to 85 slices French bread.

Version #2:

For 50 servings:

About 75 onions, peeled, and chopped or sliced

4 ½ cups of butter, melted in the pot

2 cups of flour

45 cups broth [water adds nothing to the flavor of soup]

Add the onions to a large pot with the melted butter, and cook just until they begin to brown, do not overcook. Stir in the flour, and slowly stir or whisk in the broth. Let simmer at least 10 minutes, or very slowly simmer up to an hour. To make cream of onion follow these directions except reducing the broth to 30 or 35 cups and replacing the remaining amount with milk and/or cream which you will stir in just before serving. Do not allow the soup to boil after adding the milk/cream.

For 100 servings adjust the amounts to approximately:

150 onions, 9 cups butter, 5 cups flour, 85 to 90 cups broth, OR - 50 cups broth, 35 cups milk and/or cream, if cream of onion soup is desired.

Dried Pea Soup, The Virginia Housewife, 1838

Take one quart of split peas, or Lima beans, which are better; put them in three quarts of very soft water with three onions chipped up, pepper and salt; boil them two hours; mash them well and pass them through a sieve; return the liquid into the pot, to thicken it with a large piece of butter and flour, put in some slices of nice salt pork, and a large tea-spoonful of celery seed pounded; boil it till the pork is done, and serve it up; have some toasted bread cut into dice and fried in butter, which must be put in the tureen before you pour in the soup.

For 24 servings:

2 large onions, chopped; 8 to 10 stalks of celery, chopped or sliced; $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter [or olive oil]; 6 quarts of broth; 5 or 6 carrots, chopped; 4 lbs. split peas; 4 to 8 garlic cloves, minced [per taste], 1 bay leaf [optional]; 3 to 4 cups trimmed and chopped ham; salt and pepper to taste.

Saute the vegetables in a large pot with the melted butter until soft and fragrant. Add the remaining ingredients and simmer until the peas are tender (about 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours). Remove the Bay leaf, if using, and discard. As the soup thickens near the end of cooking keep it stirred so it doesn't scorch and if it gets too thick, add broth per your discretion.

This soup may easily be doubled or tripled in quantity following the same preparation technique.

Stewed Beef, The Practice of Cookery Adapted to the Business of Every-day Life, 1850

Stew in five quarts of water the middle part of a brisket of beef weighing ten pounds, add two onions stuck with two cloves, one head of celery, one large carrot, two turnips, cut small, a handful of sorrel leaves*, half an ounce of black pepper, and some salt. Stew it gently for six hours. Make a strong gravy with carrots and turnips, the turnips to be scraped and fried of a brown colour in butter; add pepper, salt, and a little cayenne; thicken it with flour and butter, and pour it over the beef, with the carrots and turnips.

* Chopped parsley may be substituted for sorrel.

For 100 Servings:

25 lbs. beef, cubed; 8 to 10 bay leaves; 15 to 20 lbs. potatoes, diced; 5 lbs. onions, chopped; 2 to 3 heads of celery, chopped; 5 lbs. carrots, scraped and sliced; a dozen turnips, peeled and diced; several cloves of garlic, minced; a half dozen cloves [optional], salt and pepper to taste, and a cup of chopped parsley.

Brown the meat in butter or oil. Remove from the pot. Add the onion and celery to the pot with a little more butter or oil, and sauté until wilted and fragrant. Add the meat back to the pot with about a cup of flour. Stir the flour into the meat mixture until it browns, then add the water or broth, the celery and carrots, bay leaves, and garlic. Simmer several hours until meat is tender - having added the potatoes the last hour and a half of cooking time. About 15 to 30 minutes before it is to be served stir in the chopped parsley.

A Fricasey of Kidney Beans, Hannah Glasse

Take a quart of the seed, when dry, soak them all night in river water, then boil them on a slow fire till quite tender; take a quarter of a peck of onions, slice them thin, fry them in butter till brown; then take them out of the butter, and put them in a quart of strong draw'd gravy [broth or stock]. Boil them till you may mash them fine, then put in your beans, and give them a boil or two. Season with pepper, salt, and nutmeg.

For 100 servings:

10 to 11 lbs. dried kidney beans, soak several hours, or overnight to reduce cooking time

Saute a dozen chopped or sliced onions in a cup of butter or oil until translucent in a large wash pot. Put the beans to cook in the large pot with water, or preferably broth or stock. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Simmer until tender [probably 3 to 4 hours]. When almost ready to serve, grate in nutmeg to suit your taste, [optional]. Also optional: add any combination of bay leaf to taste, garlic to taste, ham/bacon/salt pork, or stir in 2 cups of molasses during the last hour or so of cooking time. Any dried bean may be used.

For 50 servings:

Use 6 lbs. dried beans, 6 large onions, and half a cup of butter or oil.

Cold Slaw, Directions for Cookery, in its Various Branches, 1840

Take a nice fresh cabbage, wash and drain it, and cut off all the stalk. Shave down the head into very small slips, with a cabbage cutter, or a very sharp knife. It must be done evenly and nicely. Put it into a deep china dish, and prepare for it the following dressing.

Melt in a saucepan a quarter of a pound of butter, with half a pint of water, a large tablespoonful of vinegar, a salt-spoon of salt, and a little cayenne. Give this a boil up, and pour it hot upon the cabbage. Send it to table as soon as it is cold.

For 100 servings:

7 to 8 large heads of cabbage, one of which may be purple cabbage which is period correct. Purple cabbage should be kept separate until ready to dress and serve so the color does not run.

5 lbs. carrots, scraped or peeled

Grate the cabbage, and shred the carrots. If making this in a period setting use an antique cabbage cutter to cut the cabbage, or slice with a knife, but always keep the pieces small enough it can be easily eaten with a fork without having to be cut on the plate. Vegetable oil, or preferably olive oil, may be used instead of the butter if desired.

Heat the oil slightly, and add vinegar, salt, and pepper. Whisk all together well, and pour over the salad.

Dressing:

1 c. vinegar, 1 cup oil, 1 1/2 c. white sugar, 1 tsp. salt, 1 tsp. mustard seed [optional], 1 tsp. celery seed [optional]. Combine all. Boil 5 minutes. Chill.

Coffee for 25, 50, & 100:

25 - Use 1/2 pound, plus, of coffee, and 1 1/2 gallons of water

50 - Use 1 pound, plus, of coffee, and 3 gallons of water

100 - Use 2 pounds, plus, of coffee, and 6 gallons of water

Lemonade:

25 - 10-15 lemons, 1 1/2 gallons of water, sweeten to taste

50 - 20-30 lemons, 3 gallons of water, "

100 - 40-60 lemons, 6 gallons of water, "

Tea:

1/4 cup tea & 1 1/2 gallons of water for 25

1/2 cup tea & 3 gallons of water for 50

1 cup tea & 6 gallons water for 100 - sweeten to taste

Watermelon:

For 25 - about 38-40 lbs.

For 50 - about 75 - 78 lbs.

For 100 - about 150-160 lbs.

Salads:

For 25 servings - use approximately 4 heads of lettuce, 5 lbs. carrots, 3 to 5 lbs. tomatoes, and 1 pint of dressing

For 50 servings – use 8 heads of lettuce, 12 lbs. of carrots, 7 to 10 lbs. tomatoes and 2 to 2 ½ pints of dressing

For 100 servings – Use 15 heads of lettuce, 25 pounds of carrots, 15-20 lbs. tomatoes, and 2 quarts of dressing

Note: Prior to about 1830 use loose leaf lettuce, and the tomato should be left out, with other vegetables such as cucumber, celery, radishes, etc. used instead when being eaten in a period setting. This is a general guide, substitute vegetables per taste.

Meat :

Ham for 25 – 9 to 10 lbs., for 50 – 15 – 20 lbs., and for 100 – 30 - 35 lbs. [Weight without bone]

Chicken for 25 – about 15 lbs., for 50 – 30-37 lbs., and for 100 65-80 lbs.

Soup, quick reference:



2 gallons should serve 25, 3 ½ gallons should serve 50, and 7 gallons should serve 100.

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