

ACWA Chuck Wagon Cook-off Menu Ingredients and Spices

Research by *Dave McDowell*

Chuck wagon food should not be viewed as if it were a menu or series of dishes handed down over generations by a single culture, with an unchanging set of ingredients and prepared according to one ancestral recipe. The cultural diversity of the individuals involved in the trail drives and cow camps coupled with their creativity and the food opportunities that presented themselves along the trail undoubtedly affected the food. Regional differences also affected the menu. Northern cow camps fed differently than those in the southern Border States.

Food items and spices that were available in the United States prior to and shortly after the Civil War should not be limited or eliminated without absolute proof that they could not have been present in the cow camp.

It is well documented that the Spanish brought ingredients from their homeland, including cheese, lard, and rice. Influences later came from Mexico and the cowboys of the South, further altering the cuisine. We must also keep in mind that we are cooking to sell tickets for meals that will please today's public. Historically perfect meals would not meet the tastes and expectations of most event attendees and therefore some discretion in the ingredients supplied and judging must be used. Most of today's events provide or allow milk and butter, which would have been seldom seen on a trail drive in the 1880's

Beef, beans, coffee and bread were the chief food groups of the cowboys that followed the chuck wagon on the trail drives. Vegetables and fruit made up less than 10% of the diet on early drives. By 1819 canning had arrived in the United States and canned goods were available to the general population and by 1890 became more prevalent on chuck wagon supply lists. Canned goods were bulky and added a lot of weight, but even with that taken into consideration, there is adequate documentation that canned tomatoes were carried and served as a treat on occasion.

The year 1857 was very dry and we had to go to the Brazos River region to buy corn for bread. Cornbread, beef, sorghum molasses and coffee was the principal diet in those days, and it was a wholesome diet.
J. M. Cowley, Fentress, Texas

Ingredients used in a cook-off should be those that would have been reasonably available during the cattle drive era (1866-1886). Mayonnaise, commercially prepared sauces, baking mixes, seasoning mixes and rubs, or other modern ingredients should be allowed in the cook-off food preparation. The following information is offered to help sort out what might have been available during that time frame.

Meat: Cowboys lived on beef supplemented once in a while by wild game. They would kill a beef about every five days because without a means to keep it cool it would start to spoil after that time. Steaks were generally the first thing cut off of a freshly killed beef. Pan fried steaks, stews and roasts were common fare in the cow camp.

Beans: As for beans, most southwest cooks used pinto beans because that is what was available but navy and red beans were also most likely used. The lowly dried bean was cheap, easy to keep and transport in

the back of the wagon and easy to cook. The cook might add a bit of salt pork or bacon, a can of tomatoes, peppers, onions and garlic if he was lucky enough to have those items.

Breads: During the Civil War and for a few years afterwards wheat flour was scarce in the southwest – corn was the available staple in the diet and principal ingredient used for flour. Cornbread was common during that time period but was gradually replaced by biscuits as white flour became available. Sourdough biscuits were the preferred bread in a majority of the cow camps, but cowboys would tolerate baking powder biscuits with few complaints. Pan de campo, flat bread cooked in a skillet was traditional in south Texas and in 2005; the state of Texas designated Pan De Campo as the official state bread. All of these breads as well as yeast rolls/bread are generally allowed and can be in the form of a loaf (like sheep herders bread), rolls or biscuits.

Desserts: Desserts ran the gamut including a wide variety of puddings including; bread pudding, rice pudding, regular pies, fried pies, and cobblers. Dried fruit was predominately used when on the trail, but, canned or fresh fruit may also be provided by the event or used in competition.

Potatoes: Spuds were not often carried due to weight and bulk but are included as one of the five dishes judged in modern cook-offs. Rice and dumplings were often used in place of potatoes.

Spices: Cow camp spices, seasonings and sweeteners were very limited in the early days following the Civil War and the cocinero was lucky to have salt, black peppercorns and molasses. The Spanish introduced many new varieties of livestock and culinary items when they invaded Mexico in 1521. They brought pigs, cows and sheep, which were all new to the continent, and they also introduced new spices including: garlic, coriander (cilantro) and dairy products like cheese. (The leaves and stems of the coriander plant are commonly known as cilantro). Some Texas historical references state that oregano grew wild and was available along the trail and used in chili type dishes. This was undoubtedly Mexican oregano. The Mediterranean version was little known in the United States prior to the Second World War. Mexican oregano (sometimes known as Mexican sage) is a relative of Lemon Verbena. Garlic is among the oldest known horticultural crops. In the Old World, Egyptian and Indian cultures referred to garlic 5000 years ago. Nearly a dozen species of wild onions and garlic are native to Central Texas and the southwest. Spices used in the cook-off should be those that it is reasonable to assume were available in the late 1800's – commercial produced seasoned salts, lemon peppers; commercial rubs and the like are not allowed. Cinnamon, nutmeg, dry mustard, allspice, vanilla and cloves may not have been common items in the chuck wagon spice drawer on early trail drives; but they were available and may be used by the wagon teams. The XIT wagon supply list on a trail drive from Texas to Montana included such things as: lemon extract, all spice, mustard, vinegar and syrup.

Chili Peppers: According to most accounts, chile peppers were introduced the second time into what is now known the United States by General Juan de Onate, who founded Sante Fe in 1609. However, they may have been introduced to the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico by the Antonio Espejo expedition of 1582-83. We do know that soon after the Spanish arrived, the cultivation of peppers in New Mexico spread rapidly and the pods were grown both in Spanish settlements and native pueblos. Research shows that Bell peppers have been cultivated for more than 9000 years, with the earliest cultivation having taken place in South and Central America. In numerous references to peppers by Thomas

Jefferson, one unmistakably refers to the bell pepper, seeds of which were sent to him from Mexico in 1824. It is reasonable to assume that Bell (sweet peppers) and hot peppers could have been used by a chuck wagon cook. The chile peppers used in the earliest dishes were probably chilipiquin or bird pepper which is native to Arizona and Texas. Some events do allow the use of canned chiles because local health department regulations make the use of fresh chiles impractical. Dried chile can also be used.

TABASCO® brand Original Red Sauce was created in the mid to late 1860s by Edmund McIlhenny from peppers that had come from Mexico or Central America. McIlhenny secured a patent in 1870, and by the late 1870s, he sold his sauce throughout the U.S.

Sweeteners: Sugar was not only expensive, when it was available to the trail drive cook; it was in the form of loaf sugar. Loaf sugar was sold in cones and sliced (or chopped) off as needed. It was difficult for the cook to measure and to use as it had to be pulverized in some manner for most uses. The most commonly used sweetener in the chuck wagon cook's arsenal was molasses or lick as the cowboys called it. As years passed and a greater variety of food supplies became available, white sugar and syrup became more common in cow camps. Both white and brown sugar as well as honey and molasses may be used by the wagon teams.

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