

What Did Your Great-Great-Great-Grandparents Eat?

Analysis by [Ashley Armstrong](#)

November 26, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Life expectancy in the United States is currently declining, making it the only developed nation with this concerning trend. Since the 1930s, there has been a dramatic 700% increase in chronic disease development, rising from 7.5% prevalence to 60% of the population having one or more chronic conditions today
- › In the 1800s, people ate three structured meals daily (breakfast, dinner, supper) without snacking or fasting, maintaining a simpler relationship with food than we have today
- › Our ancestors consumed a high-carb diet rich in saturated fats, with minimal polyunsaturated fats (PUFAs), as they didn't use vegetable oils or eat many nuts and seeds
- › The 1950s marked a significant shift in dietary recommendations, particularly regarding saturated fats and animal products, leading to major changes in the American diet
- › To optimize your health, return to simpler food principles: cook at home, source quality ingredients within your means, stay active, and prioritize happiness over strict dietary rules

There is profound value in looking to the past, drawing from the wisdom of our ancestors to uncover how they cultivated healthy, balanced lives and sustained their communities across generations.

While their life expectancy may not have been as long, this data is skewed by low birth survival rates, which modern Medicine has drastically improved. And did you know that

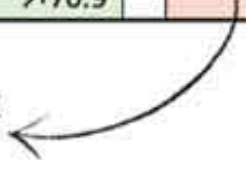
the U.S. actually has a decline in life expectancy in modern times?

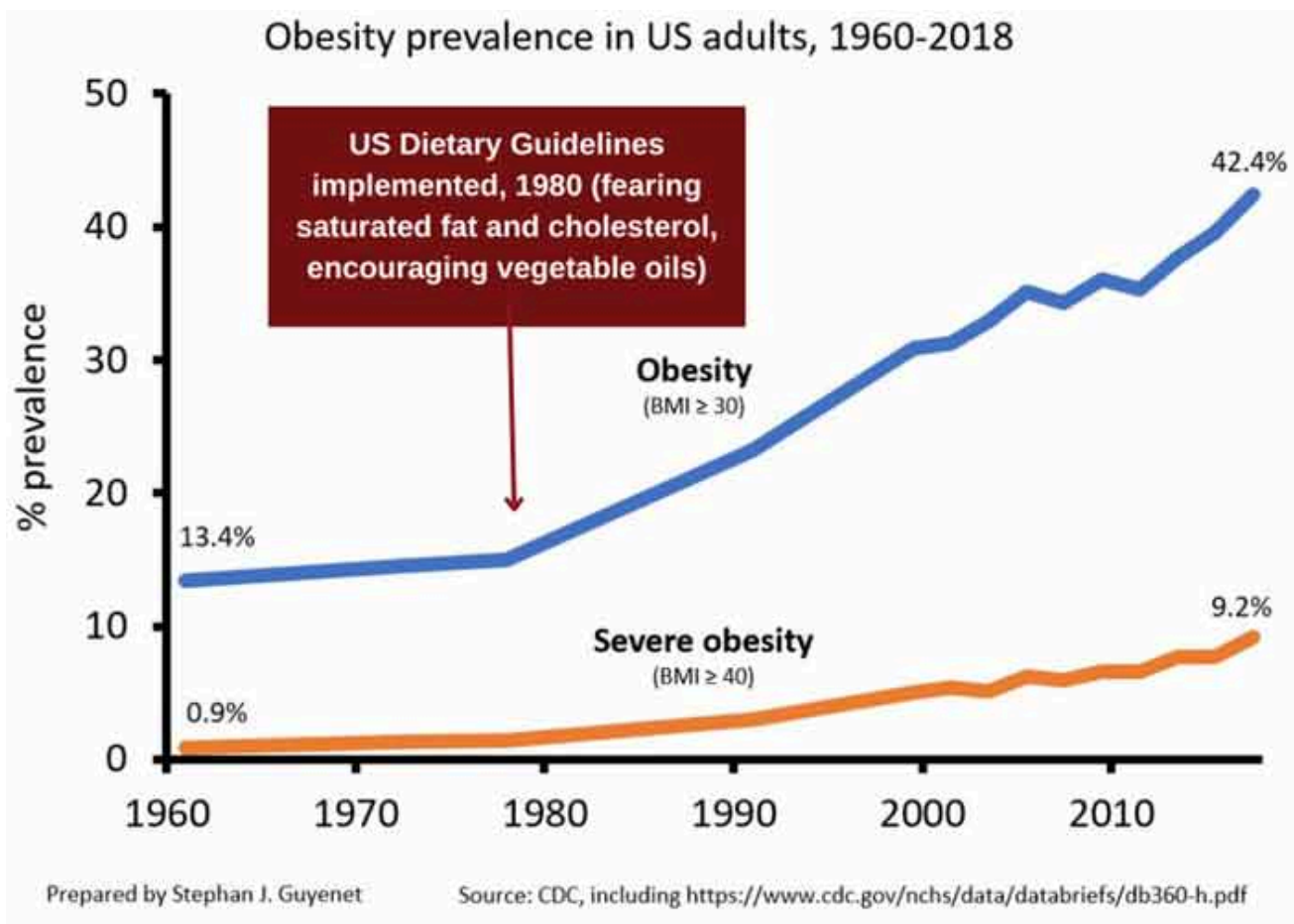
America is the only developed nation with a *declining* healthy life expectancy and total life expectancy!¹ We aren't doing something right!

Healthy Life Expectancy (years)			
Country	2010	2015	2019
Japan	73.0	↗73.6	↗74.1
Switzerland	71.4	↗71.8	↗72.5
Cyprus	70.8	↗71.6	↗72.4
Spain	71.0	↗71.6	↗72.1
France	71.2	↗71.7	↗72.1
Iceland	71.4	↗71.9	↗72.0
Italy	71.1	↗71.6	↗71.9
Sweden	71.2	↗71.4	↗71.9
Luxembourg	70.5	↗71.5	↗71.6
Malta	70.4	↗71.3	↗71.5
Netherlands	70.9	↗71.1	↗71.4
Norway	70.2	↗71.2	↗71.4
Canada	70.8	↗71.2	↗71.3
Ireland	70.1	↗70.7	↗71.1
Denmark	69.4	↗70.5	↗71.0
Finland	69.6	↗70.7	↗71.0
Portugal	69.3	↗70.5	↗71.0
Austria	69.9	↗70.4	↗70.9
Australia	70.2	↗70.6	↗70.9
Germany	70.0	↗70.1	↗70.9
Greece	70.0	↗70.4	↗70.9
Slovenia	69.2	↗70.0	↗70.7
Belgium	69.2	↗70.0	↗70.6
New Zealand	69.8	↗69.9	↗70.2
United Kingdom	69.4	↗69.7	↗70.1
Chile	68.5	↗69.4	↗70.1
Estonia	66.9	↗68.3	↗69.2
Czechia	67.7	↗68.3	↗68.8
Poland	67.1	↗68.0	↗68.7
Croatia	67.3	↗67.9	↗68.6
Slovakia	66.5	↗67.6	↗68.5
Hungary	65.8	↗66.7	↗67.2
Romania	65.4	↗66.3	↗66.9
Lithuania	64.3	↗65.3	↗66.7
Latvia	64.3	↗65.8	↗66.3
USA	66.7	↘66.6	↘66.1

Source: World Health Organization (WHO) 12-04-2020

Decline in each of the last 2 measurement periods





Since the food we eat every single day plays the biggest lever in improving our health, let's investigate the diets of our ancestors.

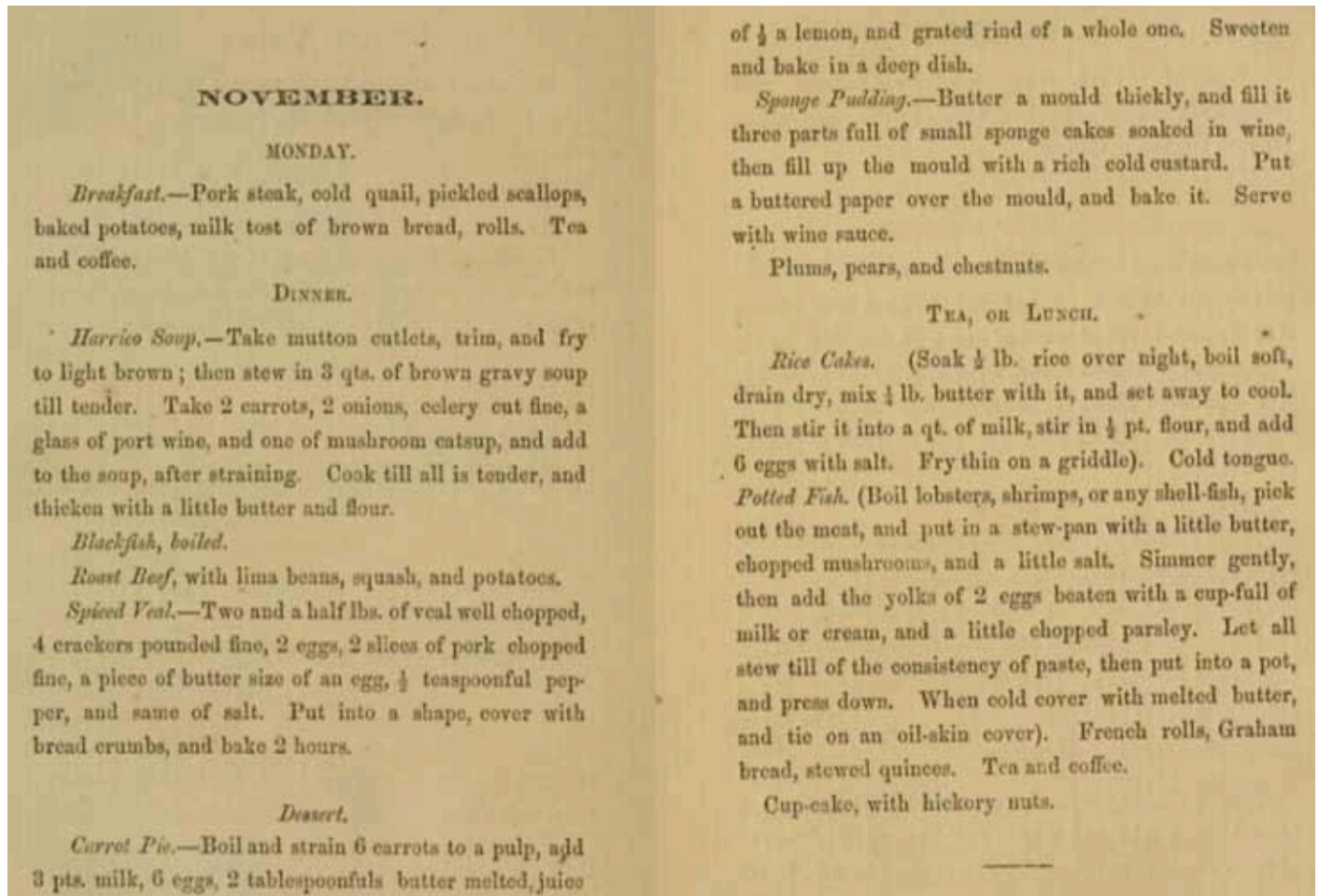
The 1800s offer us a unique window into a different relationship with food – one where abundance was celebrated, meals were a source of joy, and the dinner table was the heart of family life. In an era before processed foods and modern food fears/orthorexic behavior, people maintained a simpler, more intuitive connection with their meals.

What I find most intriguing is how their approach to food differs from our modern perspective. While we often grapple with complex dietary rules and restrictions, our ancestors focused on nourishment, celebration, and making the most of available ingredients.

So, let's step back in time and explore what graced our great-great-great-grandma's dinner table for the month of November. The meals might inspire your own culinary adventures! I'll share some photos from a few different vintage cookbooks, then discuss some of the consistent trends at the end!

Truthfully, they ate a very metabolically supportive diet. They ate a lot of food (calories), didn't fast, ate high carb, consumed primarily saturated-rich fat sources and ate low PUFA, and they consumed B vitamin rich animal protein sources.

I am slightly fascinated by the farming and culinary traditions of our ancestors, so I hope you enjoy these vintage meal plans as much as I do! So, first, let's check out meals from "What shall we eat?" published in 1868. Meals our great-great-great-grandparents could have consumed.



TUESDAY.

Breakfast.—Cold turkey, sweetbreads, stewed with mushrooms, buckwheat cakes, wheaten grits with cream, rolls and bread. Coffee.

DINNER.

White Soup.—Take broth made of veal, or white poultry, cut the meat off, and put the bone back, adding 2 or 3 shank-bones of mutton, and $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. fine lean bacon, with a bunch of sweet herbs, a piece of fresh lemon-peel, 2 or 3 onions, 3 blades of mace, and a dessertspoonful of white pepper. Boil all till the meat falls quite to pieces, and strain.

Trout.

Roast Prairie Chickens, with sweet potatoes, rice, and beets, spiced currants.

Hook.—One lb. rump steak, do. pork steak, $\frac{1}{2}$ loaf of bread. Chop together like sausage-meat, add 2 eggs, and season with salt, pepper, and sage. Bake like bread, and cut in slices.

Dessert.

Quaking Pudding.—Scald 1 qt. of cream (or milk), and when almost cold add 4 eggs well beaten, $1\frac{1}{2}$ spoonfuls of flour, nutmeg, and sugar. Tie it close in a buttered

cloth, boil one hour, turn it out with care, and serve with wine sauce.

Cranberry Tarts.

Pears and hickory nuts.

TEA, OR LUNCH.

Cold lamb with tomato catsup. *Kidney Fritters.* (4 eggs well beaten, with a teacup of cream or milk, pepper and salt, pounded mace, chopped parsley, and mushrooms, or mushroom catsup. Chop the kidneys fine, and mix together; pour into a buttered pan, and stir over the fire.) Muffins, Graham crackers, bread, quince jelly, macaroons. Tea.

WEDNESDAY.

Breakfast.—Beef hash, salt mackerel broiled, cold duck, buckwheat cakes, rolls, boiled hominy. Tea and coffee.

DINNER.

A Cheap Soup.—Two lbs. lean beef, 6 potatoes, 6 onions parboiled, a carrot, turnip, head of celery, $\frac{1}{2}$ pt. split peas, 4 qts. water, some whole pepper, and a red herring. Boil well, and rub through a coarse sieve. Serve with fried bread.

Boiled Perch.—Boil quickly with salt, then simmer slowly 10 minutes; melted butter and parsley sauce.

Boiled Mutton, butter sauce, with potatoes, onions, turnips, and carrots.

A French Pic.—Lay a puff paste on the edge of a dish, put veal in slices with forcemeat balls, and sweetbreads cut fine. Add mushrooms, seasoning, cover with gravy, a crust, and bake 1 hour.

Dessert.

Hasty Pudding.—One qt. milk, while boiling shake in 2 tablespoonfuls of flour, and stir till it thickens. Put in a deep dish, stir in an oz. of butter, do. sugar, and add grated nutmeg. Sugar sauce.

Floating Island.

Pears, apples, and dates.

TEA, OR LUNCH.

Cold roast veal, birds stewed and spiced, cold. *Potato Fritters.* (Boil 2 large potatoes, scraped fine, 4 eggs, 1 large spoon of cream, do. wine, a squeeze of lemon, and a little nutmeg. Beat the batter $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour, and fry in boiling lard.) Corn pone, crackers, and cheese, stewed pears, dry toast, bread, tea. *Seed Cake.* (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. flour, 1 lb. sugar, 8 eggs, 1 oz. seeds, 2 spoonfuls yeast, and same of milk.)

THURSDAY.

Breakfast.—Cold rabbit, minced mutton, poached eggs, corn muffins, rice cake, rolls. Tea and coffee.

DINNER.

Spanish Soup.—Three lbs. beef, 1 lb. ham, cover well with water, boil and skim. Add a teaspoonful pepper, simmer 2 hours; cook separately a cup of rice, onions cut small, and cabbage. Eat them separate from the soup if desired.

Roast Oysters.

Roast Veal, with corn, tomatoes, and baked mashed potatoes.

Beef Steak Broiled.

Dessert.

Peach Pic.

Matrimony.—Make ice cream, after the Newport receipt, (1 qt. milk, 1 pt. cream, 2 tablespoons corn starch, and the yolk of one egg, sweeten and flavor to taste; mix the corn starch in part of the milk, and add the egg, then add to the milk, boiling hot. When cool it is ready for the freezer,—and mix with fresh, or canned peaches; freeze all together.)

Grapes, chestnuts, and pears.

TEA, OR LUNCH.

Cold roast beef, pickled tripe, crackers with anchovy, paste spread on them; raspberry jam, corn bread, dry

toast. *Sponge Cake.* (Break 10 eggs into a deep pan, with 1 lb. sifted sugar, set the pan into warm water, and beat $\frac{1}{4}$ of an hour, till the batter is thick and warm. Then take out of the water, and whisk till cold. Stir in lightly 1 lb. flour, and flavor with essence of lemon.) Tea and chocolate.

FRIDAY.

Breakfast.—Turkey hash on toast, cold ham, sardines, scallops fried, cream toast, rolls. Tea and coffee.

DINNER.

Game Soup.—Take 2 old birds, or pieces left from the table, cut fine, with 2 slices of ham, 3 lbs. of beef, a piece of celery, and 2 large onions. Put on the fire with 5 pts. of boiling water, and stew gently for 2 hours. Then strain, and put back into the pot with some stewed celery, and fried bread, season well, skim, and serve hot.

Lobster.

Roast Lamb, with cauliflower, oyster plant, and potatoes.

Chicken Pie.—Half boil a large fowl, and cut in pieces; put the broth rich into a deep dish with a handful of parsley scalded in milk, and season well. Add the fowl, and bake with a raised crust. When done, lift the crust, and add $\frac{1}{2}$ pt. cream, scalded, with a little butter and flour in it; mix well with the gravy.

Deuert.

Apple Pie.

Boiled Rice, in cups, with cream and sugar.

Apples, pears, and nuts.

TEA, OR LUNCHEON.

Dutch herring, raw oysters, cold hock, milk toast, Graham bread, stewed apples. *Spanish Fritters.* (Cut French rolls into pieces length of a finger, mix together one egg, cream, sugar, and cinnamon, and soak them in it. When well soaked, fry a light brown, and serve with wine and sugar sauce.) Chocolate, cheese.

SATURDAY.

Breakfast.—Beefsteak with mushrooms, cold potted game, fried Indian pudding, sausage, toast, rolls. Tea and coffee.

DINNER.

Venison Soup.—4 lbs. venison cut in small pieces, and stewed gently in brown gravy soup. Strain, and serve with French beans cut in diamonds, adding 2 glasses of port wine; separate from the soup if desired.

Fried Perch.

Roast Turkey, cranberry sauce, with potatoes, beets, and squash.

Irish Stew.—5 thick mutton chops, 2 lbs. potatoes, peeled and cut in halves, 6 onions sliced, and seasoning. Put a layer of potatoes at the bottom of the pan, then a couple of chops, and some onions; then another similar. Add 3 gills of gravy, and 2 teaspoonfuls mushroom catsup. Cover close, and stew 1½ hours. A small slice of hare is an addition.

Dessert.

Baked Apple Dumplings.

Blancmange.

Fruit and nuts.

TEA, OR LUNCH.

Cold tongue, pickled fish, French bread, boiled rice stewed prunes, *Ginger Pound-cake.* (1 lb. butter, do. sugar, do. flour, 8 eggs, and 2 tablespoons yellow ginger.) Tea and coffee.

SUNDAY.

Breakfast.—Cold roast turkey, ham cake, anchovy, toast, fried samp, buckwheat cakes, brown bread, gems. Tea and coffee.

DINNER.

Tomato Soup.—Plain beef soup, with 2 cups of fresh or canned tomatoes, well seasoned.

Boiled Cod, oyster sauce.

Roast Ducks, with currant jelly, sweet potatoes, cauliflower, spinach, and stewed potatoes.

Boiled Ham.

Dessert.

Mince Pie.

Delicate Dish.

Grapes, apples, and almonds.

TEA, OR LUNCH.

Broiled salmon, cold corned beef, Boston crackers, with tomato catsup, waffles, dry toast, preserved grapes, assorted cakes. Tea.

DECEMBER.

MONDAY.

Breakfast.—Fried chicken, cream sauce, potatoes à la maître d'hôtel, baked beans, brown bread, rolls, dry toast. Tea and coffee.

DINNER.

Ox-tail Soup.—Cut up 2 ox-tails, separating them at the joints; fry them with butter, together with 4 lbs. of gravy beef, a carrot, turnip, 3 onions, a leek, a head of celery, and a bunch of sweet herbs; add a pint of water, and a teaspoonful of peppercorns; stir over the fire till the pan is covered with a glaze; fill up the pot with 3

Next, let's check out a meal plan from "What shall we have to eat?" published in 1893. Meals our great-great-great-grandparents, or great-great-grandparents might have consumed.

MONDAY, NOV. 6

Breakfast—California Breakfast Food with Cream. Omelet. Hot Buttered Toast. Coffee.
Dinner—Beef Stew with Dumplings. Potatoes. Turnip. Bread and Butter. Bread Pudding.
Supper—Salmon Patties. Rye Bread. Butter. Apple Sauce. Cake. Tea.

RYE BREAD.—3 pints rye flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ cake yeast, 1 pint new milk, 1 tablespoonful sugar, 1 teaspoonful salt, lard size of a walnut. Mix and then work for 15 minutes. Let it rise over night, then beat and cut for 10 minutes. Put the dough in the pans from the bowl without moulding on board. Let it rise till half as large again. Bake in very moderate oven from one-half to three-fourths of an hour.

TUESDAY, NOV. 7

Breakfast—Brewis with Cream. Warmed-over Stew. Sour Milk Griddle Cakes. Maple Syrup. Coffee.
Dinner—Mutton Chops. Potatoes. Canned Peas. Bread and Butter. Peach Pudding. Use canned fruit.
Supper—Salmon on Toast. Bread and Butter. Soft Gingerbread. Baked Quinces. Tea.

SOFT GINGERBREAD.—1 cup molasses, 1 teaspoonful soda, 1 teaspoonful ginger, 1 teaspoonful butter. Beat together and pour on $\frac{1}{2}$ cup boiling water, and beat in 1 pint flour. Bake about 1 inch deep in a sheet. This is very nice, if pains are taken to have the water boiling and to beat well.

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 8

Breakfast—Hominy with Cream. Baked Sausage. Creamed Potatoes. Bread and Butter. Coffee.
Dinner—Broiled Beef Steak. Potatoes. Canned Corn. Bread and Butter. Rice Pudding.
Supper—Macaroni with Cheese. Crumpets. Butter. Fruit. Cake. Tea.

BAKED SAUSAGE.—Put in a shallow tin and bake in a hot oven till brown. Have ready a hot meat dish spread with tissue paper, place the sausage upon it and put in the oven a minute. Remove the paper and serve. In cooking sausage in this manner all the grease is tried out and the meat is much more healthful.

THURSDAY, NOV. 9

Breakfast—Oatmeal with Cream, Baked Eggs, Warmed Potatoes, Bread and Butter, Coffee.
Dinner—Roast Veal, Curried Rice, Potatoes, Bread and Butter, Mince Pie.
Supper—Cold Sliced Roast Veal, Thin Bread and Butter, Hot Baked Apples, Cake, Tea.

MINCE PIE.—1 cup chopped meat, $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups raisins, $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups currants, $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups brown sugar, $1\frac{1}{2}$ molasses, 3 cups chopped apples, 1 cup meat liquor, 2 teaspoonfuls salt, 2 teaspoonfuls cinnamon, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoonful mace, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoonful powdered cloves, 1 lemon, grated rind and juice, $\frac{1}{4}$ piece citron, 1 cup cider. Mix in the order given using enough meat liquor to make quite moist, and cook in a porcelain kettle until the apples and raisins are soft. Do not add the cider until the meat is cooked.

FRIDAY, NOV. 10

Breakfast—Hominy with Cream, Minced Veal on Toast, Crumb Muffins, Butter, Coffee.
Dinner—Fried Smelts, Potatoes, Stewed Celery, Cold Slaw, Bread and Butter, Bananas, Grapes.
Supper—Creamed Salt Fish, Bread and Butter, Fruit, Cake, Tea.

CRUMB MUFFINS.—A good way to utilize bits of dry bread and crusts is to brown them thoroughly in the oven, then pound fine in a mortar. To $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of crumbs add 1 quart sweet milk, 2 well-beaten eggs, 1 teaspoonful sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup flour. Beat all together briskly, and bake in sissing hot gem pans.

SATURDAY, NOV. 11

Breakfast—Stewed Pears, Broiled Meat Cakes, Bread and Butter, Hominy Griddle Cakes, Maple Syrup, Coffee.
Dinner—Roast Pork, Apple Sauce, Potatoes, Pickles, Bread and Butter, Lemon Pie, Cheese.
Supper—Sliced Pork, Currant Jelly, Bread and Butter, Cake, Chocolate.

ROAST PORK.—The spareribs are the best for roasting. Season with salt and pepper and dredge with flour. Baste often, and allow 20 minutes to each pound.

SUNDAY, NOV. 12

Breakfast—Wheat Germ with Cream, Oyster Omelet, Fried Potatoes, Breakfast Puffs, Coffee.
Dinner—Chicken Pot-pie, Mashed Potatoes, Baked Sweet Potatoes, Cranberry Sauce, Celery, Bread and Butter, Charlotte Russe.
Supper—Potato Salad, Bread and Butter, Fruit, Cake, Tea.

OYSTER OMELET.—Beat 4 eggs very light. Cut out the hard parts of 1 dozen oysters. Wipe them dry and cut them into small pieces, then throw them into the egg season. Cook as any other omelet.

Isn't it eye-opening to take a look at 1800s meal plans? No crazy diet rules, no food fear, and plenty of calories. While we don't need to go this extreme with food prep, it's a reminder to ditch the diet stress. Notable trends:

Ate 3 meals/day, no intentional fasting,
but also did not frequently graze/snack

No dietary extremes

(instead of "breakfast, lunch, dinner" they called the meals "breakfast, dinner, supper")

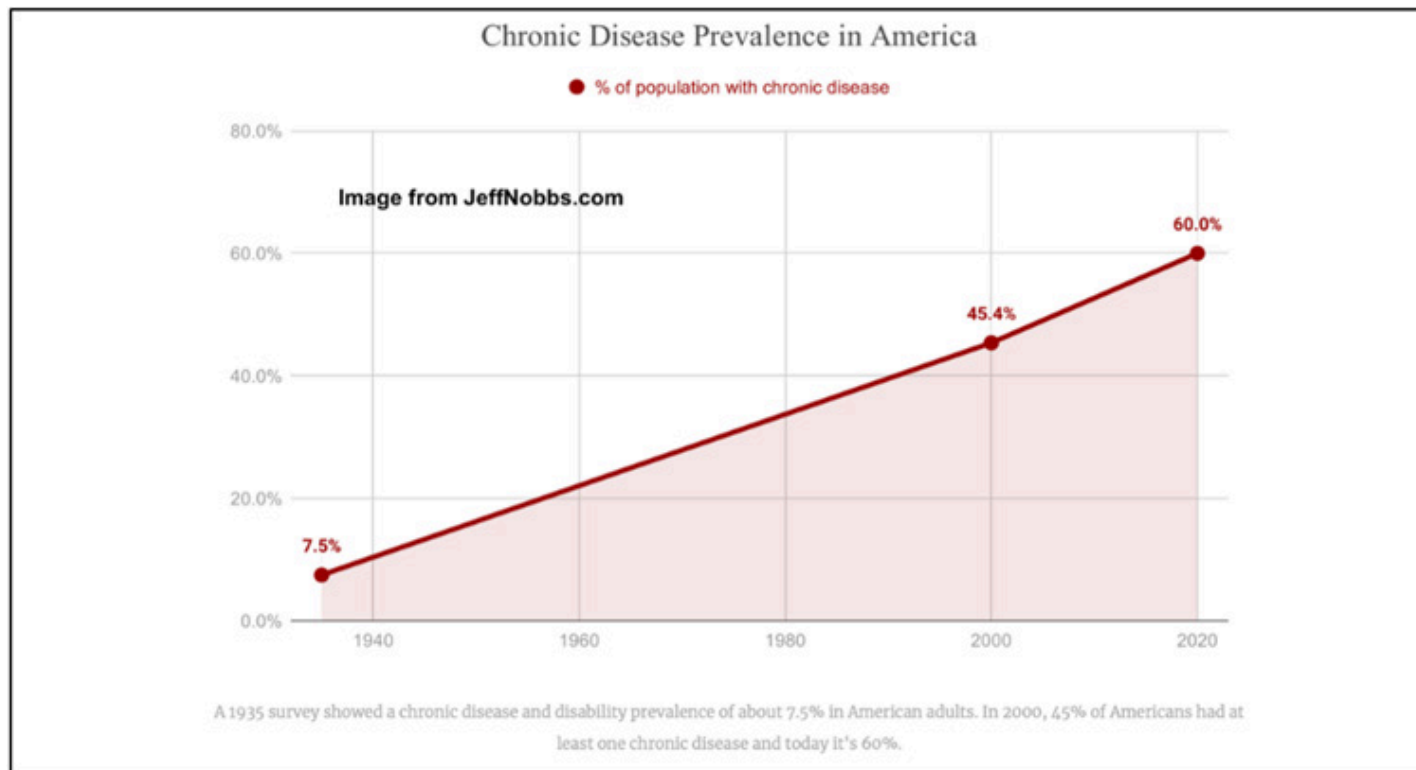
Did not fear carbs (ate high carb)

Consumed mostly saturated fats, and ate relatively lower polyunsaturated fats (PUFA) (no vegetable oils, and didn't eat much nuts and seeds)

Consumed food that is demonized across a variety of diet camps: meat, dairy, flour, sugar, fruit, potatoes, and grains

No processed food/food in a package

One of the biggest changes has been the TYPES of fat consumed.



The saturated fat, animal product and cholesterol fear-mongering propaganda starting in the 1950s led to a huge shift in our dietary fat. Since the 1930s, there has been a 700% increase in chronic disease development. In the 1930s, the chronic disease prevalence was 7.5%.² Today, 60% of the population has one or more chronic disease.^{3,4}

I'm not sharing these meal plans to suggest that you should eat exactly as they did. Instead, my goal is to help you reduce food fear and stress as you navigate the overwhelming and often confusing health space. The last thing any of us need is more stress in our lives!

Gaining perspective from the diets of our great-great-great-grandparents can be both liberating and grounding. In today's world, where so many foods are scrutinized, this perspective can help alleviate unnecessary fear around eating.

Letting go of food fears can significantly enhance your well-being. Feel empowered to explore traditional food preparations and discover what nourishes your body best, rather than letting someone else's anxieties dictate your choices. And to address the elephant in the room — yes, they did not have to deal with the crappy food system we all face today. OF COURSE food sourcing is important!

Our modern food system is undeniably complex and imperfect, and it does contribute to various health issues. But better options do exist, such as organic sugar or non-GMO, organic flour. Embrace the idea that there's always a step forward you can take.

Instead of feeling overwhelmed, consider focusing on just one area of your sourcing to improve for the rest of the year — whether it's meat, dairy, eggs, produce, or grains. Small, sustainable changes help avoid overwhelm and empower you to make a difference. Do the best you can and avoid what you personally can't tolerate.

But instead of stressing about eating "good" and avoiding "bad" foods on a list made from some random health influencer (which will differ depending on who you follow) ... Keep it simple: cook at home, source as high of quality ingredients that you can, stay active, and prioritize happiness.

About the Author

Ashley Armstrong is the co-founder of [Angel Acres Food Club](#), which specializes in seed oil free, low-PUFA eggs that are shipped to all 50 states, and [Nourish Food Club](#), which

ships 100% grass fed, vaccine-free, regeneratively raised beef and lamb, plus low-PUFA pork and chicken, A2 dairy and cheese, and traditional sourdough to all 50 states.

Armstrong is fascinated with old school agriculture practices and is focused on building a food system with small scale regenerative farms at the center. The goal is to produce food how it used to be made, before heavy chemical use and the large increase in PUFAs.

Sources and References

- ¹ WHO, GHE: Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy
- ² American Journal of Public Health, 13 Jan 2011, 101(3):438-447
- ³ RAND, May 26, 2017
- ⁴ CDC, Chronic Disease