

Johnnycake Is Traditional, and ^{Un}Controversial

Controversies surrounding this delightful treat run the gamut from its naming (journey, johnny, or hoe cake) to component ingredients (milk or water), but one thing about which all of us should be in lockstep: enjoyment of fried cornmeal patties predates white settlers on this continent.

Ben Franklin extolled their flavor as “better than a Yorkshire muffin”; the Marquis de Lafayette consumed them in great quantities; diplomats ordered ingredients to be shipped from overseas, always on-hand for sudden, late-night cravings; and for residents of our tiniest state, they’ve been a staple for centuries, eaten at every meal, during all hours of the day. The fact is that what we’ve been devouring for so long are the fruits of indigenous peoples’ ingenuity where it concerns domestication of the one native cash crop that’s come to define the Americas: corn.

Beginning at least 10,000 years ago, resourceful natives were cultivating hybrid species from wild grass, refining their yield to perfection by employing cross-fertilization techniques later touted by European horticulturalists. The wisdom of their labors was gobbled up by subsequent inhabitants, who were generously gifted tutorials on growing techniques during peaceful early days, when colonialist and colonized coexisted in relative harmony.

