

Alexandre Peck

Food in American History

Beth-Anne Cooke-Cornell

July 24, 2014

A French Canadian Delicacy: *Cretons*

One of the culinary thrills of visiting the province of Quebec is the opportunity to immerse yourself in a sea of rich, flavorful foods that are unique to the region. Influenced by the cuisines of France and England, Quebec's gastronomy heavily revolves around rich foods such as cheeses, maple syrup, *cretons*, *pouding chômeur*, *tourtière*, *fèves au lard*, *tarte au sucre*, *soupe aux pois*, and *poutine*. In my culture, breakfast historically represents the most important meal of the day as it was often the only chance for a full meal and family time. To this day, waking up to a table full of assortments remains one of my favorite childhood memories. The one dish in particular that was a hit for everyone at the breakfast table was *Les Cretons à Mami* (kreh-ton). This classic French Canadian dish is a meat spread that is served over a grilled piece of bread during the cold winter months. Over the years, whenever I visit my grandmother in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, I make sure to have her famous *cretons*. I hold this little treat dearly because it is a reminder of one of my favorite childhood memories as well as my family's French Canadian heritage.

Embracing your heritage and cultural roots is something that is often lost in translation in today's modern world. For French Canadians, food has always been a way to express love and family. This is apparent through our distinct history. The first French Canadian settlers were individuals who were forced to embrace their geographical landscape and use it to their advantage. Due to the boundless coastline along the Atlantic, and the endless amounts of forests,

the settlers became exceptional fishermen and hunters (Wallace par 2;3). These “Acadians” were also responsible for creating the country’s vast fur trade network. As a result of these settlers’ occupations, French Canadian cuisine was much less sophisticated than its European roots. In fact, the gastronomy of Quebec is a singular melting pot of English, Native Indian, and French roots (Mélin). It was mostly comprised of wild game (elk, caribou), fish, corn, and breads. For the French Canadians, much like our fellow American settlers, “the precariousness of their food supply led them to adapt and, albeit reluctantly, to eat foods that were available rather than foods that were preferred” (Wallach 45). In addition to their unique diets, French Canadians also had to adapt their meals to accommodate their high-energy occupations. As suggested by Rosen, “[*cretons*] were likely one of those hearty, efficient, farmhouse foodstuffs that forest workers and the like once filled up on before heading out into the bitter cold for the day.” The *trappeurs* – or hunters, needed a big meal to carry them through a long day of hunting. Consequently, breakfast was usually the heartiest meal of the day and would include *cretons*, *grillades*, and *tourtières* (Cyr). With that being said, my family’s foodways are heavily influenced by Acadian practices, and are still applied to this day in the United States. In fact, when they were expelled from Canada in 1755, the Acadians migrated down South following the Louisiana Purchase (Wallach 62). There, the food traditions “were eventually named for the English corruption of the settlers’ place of origin, the colony of New France known as “Acadia,” becoming known as “Cajun” (Wallach 62). Thus, the Acadian cuisine spanned many territories because of their adaptability to different climates and their simplistic approach to cooking food. When studying your own culture, it is not only important to know where you come from, but to also understand how you got there, and I believe that my dish is a great tribute to my French Canadian background.

As odd as it may sound, French Canadian cuisine mirrors its English roots more than its French ones. Our dishes are very heavy and rich while our French counterparts offer lighter plates. Like the English, who were “known for being particularly partial to animal flesh” (Wallach 14), we enjoy our wild meats. Alternatively, the French roots are showcased through refined cooking techniques and locally produced fruits and vegetables. As Wallach describes it, Thomas Jefferson employed a modified version of French cooking. She states “Jefferson brought French *cuisine bourgeoise*, French home cooking that emphasized simple ingredients that were expertly prepared, home with him. Thus the concept of French food that Jefferson embraced may not have been far removed from other ideas about simple republican foods” (Wallach 53). Wallach demonstrates that French Canadian cuisine adopted a fusion of English and French practices to create their own gastronomy.

*Cretons* is a fairly simple dish in terms of the ingredients used. Mami’s recipe includes a mix of ground pork and veal. It is seasoned with onions, ground cloves, salt and pepper. All of the ingredients are blended together into a big pot to make the meat spread much like the Native Indians did to make corn pudding. As Wallach writes, “A mixture of ingredients were held together with water, tied up into a cloth bundle, and then boiled in a pot filled with water to create a filling meal or substantial side dish” (Wallach 19). While this is a straightforward dish, each ingredient was introduced to the Americas in their own unique ways.

The staple ingredient to this dish, pork, has a long documented history and plays an important role to the North American diet due to its high protein yield. The pig, which is a major source of meat in most cultures, can be traced back to as early as 8,000 B.C. in Turkey (Kiple). Pork was introduced to the American diet during Hernando de Soto’s expedition from 1539-42 and moved its way up the East coast to the settlement of Jamestown by 1607 (Kiple). Pig was

also a species that could easily adapt to any environment, particularly North America, since they fit well into the forested countryside as foragers. Kiple also writes that “in late autumn, the semi-feral animals were rounded up and slaughtered, and their fatty flesh was made into salt pork, which along with Indian corn was a staple of the early American diet.” This goes to show the diversity of the ingredient as it is used both as a meat and a seasoning. Pork was also one of the ingredients that was heavily industrialized with the technological advancements during the nineteenth century. As a carnivorous nation, the food item that was the most heavily impacted by the railcar was meat. Wallach writes, “The river city of Cincinnati, which was linked to a network of canals, became an important center of pork packing beginning in the 1820’s” (Wallach 98). Although pork was abundant and flavorful, the meat lost its appeal due to the rise of cattle ranchers caused by the introduction of the refrigerated rail car in the twentieth century. Equally influential to the decline of pork were the social associations tied to this meat. Over time, pork acquired negative connotations as “the main food in the monotonous diet of poor people and pioneers” (Kiple). Wallach also underlines this association as to “most poor southerners, white and black, got most of their animal protein from cheap cuts of pork” (Wallach 191). What we can determine from the history of this ingredient is that it is a great source of protein, yet, it evolved to be associated with the poor due to the animal’s omnivorous eating habits and the perception of it being a dirty animal.

Another ingredient involved in this dish is the onion. This vegetable gives the meat spread a sweetness that balances well with the natural fats from the meats. The history of this ingredient has stood the test of time due to its resilient structure and is a commonplace in many cuisines. For the long cross-Atlantic journey, travelers needed to make conscious decisions about their food selection; readily accessible foods and food for the New World (Wallach 2). Because

of its durable nature, the onion was a staple in the new American diet. As Olver writes, “most of America’s early settlers brought with them whatever they needed to reestablish their gardens on the new continent. And they always brought onions. The bulbs were resistant to decay and could last all winter in the root cellar” (Olver). This goes to show that European settlers could rely on this important ingredient year-round because of its sustainable nature. This root vegetable also wasn’t climate and soil sensitive, which meant that they could be grown in many different regions. Onions were therefore grown in a vast majority of climates, as represented by the many varieties including, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian stock (Olver). The wide use of this ingredient was so apparent that it was a staple in many recipes of Amelia Simmons’ 1796 cookbook *American Cookery* (Wallach 49). Needless to say, the onion has been a crucial ingredient to many cultures due to its versatility. For the French Canadians, the onion represents another simple ingredient that helped tie dishes together by adding a distinct flavor to the meats.

Perhaps the most important ingredient in this dish is cloves, which ties the whole dish together to help give the spread its aromatic smell. Cloves date as far back as 226 BC when the Chinese used them as a form of ancient breath mint (Rayment). As Rayment mentions, they were native to the Malucca Islands in Indonesia and were found in trading vessels dating as far back as 1721 BC. This spice was heavily coveted during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century as control of them spurred expeditions as well as wars. At that time, cloves were worth more than their weight in gold, therefore, it sparked the Dutch to find their way to Indonesia to have a hand in the clove trade (Rayment). Rayment also notes that the Dutch were so invested in this spice that “they went about destroying clove trees that sprouted up anywhere outside their control.” This caused an uproar amongst the natives because it was tradition to plant a clove tree upon the birth of a child (Rayment). Moreover, Wallach highlights the fact that cloves were present on many of the

cross-Atlantic voyages during the seventeenth century. He writes “in addition to the staples of ship’s biscuits, salted meat, and legumes, they also would have brought some spices that may have included sugar, cinnamon, cloves, pepper, and mace” (Wallach 3). As for its name, cloves is derived from the French word “clou”, which means nail. It also ties in directly to the shape of the spice, which is a dry, unopened flower bud. This spice also has antiseptic, antibacterial, antifungal, and simulative properties, which made them a great remedy to treat many ailments (Rayment). In my grandmother’s *cretons* recipe, cloves are used to enhance the overall flavor of the dish by giving it a subtle molasses taste to it. This dish is truly incomplete without cloves.

The combination of the ingredients in this dish truly embody the melting pot of the cultural influences to French Canadian cuisine as we can link many of them to different cultures from around the world. The French inspiration to this dish can be linked to the use of cloves, as it was often used in French cooking as a seasoning. The French were also one of the few cultures to incorporate veal in their cuisine which adds to the country’s stake in this dish (Olver). As for the English, their influence can be seen throughout the meaty nature of the dish as they were a very carnivorous nation. While the components of the dish have different histories, they all have an equally important role into creating this dish.

When it comes to *cretons*, there seems to be only one person that can make the perfect batch, and that’s Mami. There’s always something missing when anyone attempts to replicate her recipe – they say it’s her added touch of love. Either way, you could tell that Mami enjoys preparing this meal as it was accustomed for women in the mid-nineteenth century (Wallach 112). During the mid-1800’s, with the emergence of work flowing back to urban cities, men left the household to find work and women found their new role in housekeeping. As Wallach remarks, “under this division of labor, one of the chief responsibilities of women remained that

of feeding their families” (Wallach 113). Meanwhile, for the hunters and fishermen of Canada, their duty was to hunt or catch food for the following day. Therefore, while they were out catching food for the next day, the women stayed home and cooked meals with ingredients their husbands had supplied. I believe the story behind the dish is what makes *cretons* special for my grandmother. There is no doubt in my mind that she gets her inspiration by her grandmother’s cooking which she then passes down to us.

As the legend goes, my grandmother would blend a mix of pork and veal together by hand. Then she would put the meat, the chopped onions, the ground cloves, salt and pepper into a pot and add water. After bringing the whole mix to a boil, she would separate the meat with a fork until the stew has a unified texture. The pot would simmer for a couple of hours until most of the liquid was evaporated. The final step is to simply transfer the meat spread to small containers and let chill overnight to set. I still remember how the house smelled with the combination of the wood fireplace and the simmering pot. This dish is winter, and winter is Canada.

As the French gourmand Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s often quoted claim states, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” (Wallach xii). I believe that this quote speaks to French Canadian cooking as it is driven by the history of its people and the proletarian lifestyle they lived. My ancestors survived upon a lifestyle that embraced the outdoors and their diets reflected that. The *trappeurs* and fishermen often consumed a breakfast that was high in calories and fat to be able to hunt and fish all day during the cold winter months. That meal was also one of the only times for the whole family to be grouped together at the table. This tradition is certainly why French Canadians value the importance of breakfast so much today – we enjoy family and a hearty meal. But to be able to understand this dish is to appreciate the sacrifices my

family made to survive. They had to adapt to Quebec's fluctuating climate and utilize the foods that were readily available to them. By blending it all together, they came up with many simple foods like *cretons*. This dish will continue to represent my family's roots for a long time as it is not only rich in taste, but in history as well.

Works Cited



Cyr, Yvon. "Acadian Genealogy Homepage; Acadian Recipes." *Acadian Genealogy Homepage; Acadian Recipes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2014.

Kiple, Kenneth F., and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas. "The Cambridge World History of Food - Hogs." *The Cambridge World History of Food*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2014.

Mélin, Laure-Lise. "Québec's Gastronomy and French Heritage." *Montréalités Eats*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2014.

Olver, Lynne. "Food Timeline FAQs: Meat & Poultry." *The Food Timeline Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2014.

Rayment, W.J. "History of Cloves." *InDepthInfo*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2014.

Siciliano-Rosen, Laura, and Scott Rosen. "Cretons - Montreal, Quebec | Local Food Guide." *Cretons - Montreal, Quebec | Local Food Guide*. Eat Your Food, n.d. Web. 19 July 2014.

Wallace, W. S. "L'Encyclopédie De L'histoire Du Québec / The Quebec History Encyclopedia." *Discovery and Exploration of Canada*. Marianopolis College, 1948. Web. 19 July 2014.

Wallach, Jennifer Jensen. *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. Print.