

Greetings from the peanut gallery

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

THE BELOVED LEGUME IS A VERSATILE, NUTRITIOUS WORLD-TRAVELER

In January 1964, the Associated Press reported that nut store clerk Gladys McKinney foiled a robbery in a truly unique way. A man came into her Kentucky shop and requested two pounds of peanut brittle. After Gladys had scooped one pound of the candy onto the scale, the man pulled out a revolver and told her to “forget the rest of the candy and open the cash register.” She responded first by throwing the remaining pound of peanut brittle in his face, and then screaming. The would-be robber fled from the scene — perhaps with a scratch or two from the sharp-edged confection.

Now, I would never suggest that one employ candy as a weapon, but self-defense is but one use of the

ubiquitous legume known variously as the peanut, groundnut, goober pea, monkey nut or earthnut.

Considering the enormous popularity of peanuts among Americans, one would think that they are indigenous to the United States. After all, who can think of a lunchbox without the quintessential American sandwich, the PB&J? A ballgame or a circus without roasted peanuts in the shell? Halloween without Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups? Never! We Americans love peanuts so much that supermarkets even sell orange-dyed, peanut-shaped marshmallows.

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Americans love their peanuts, in many forms: fresh roasted, and the all-time favorite, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. [PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]



But peanuts are not from the good old U.S.A. Why Paddington Bear's Aunt Lucy sent him all the way from "deepest, darkest Peru" to England is a mystery to me, considering all the wonderful foods that originated in that beautiful country, including the peanut.

The peanut is not a true nut, but a legume, the product of an aboveground flowering plant with underground pods that generate seeds, much like a pea or soybean. These tasty legumes originated in South America over 3,500 years ago. Archaeologist Christopher Donnan of UCLA, exploring ancient ruins in northern Peru, found evidence of peanuts from the Moche civilization, predating the Inca by 300 years. The Moche people so revered the peanut as a valuable part of their agrarian lifestyle that they fashioned artworks in its image. Among the outstanding examples of Moche craftsmanship is a striking necklace fashioned of one-half gold and one-half silver peanut beads, most likely meant to be worn by a member of the ruling class. Believing that peanuts would provide nutrition to their rulers in the afterlife, the Moche buried them with the deceased, as evidenced by fossils of peanut shells found in their tombs.

Flash forward about 750 years: When Pizarro led the Spaniards to Peru in 1532 they encountered peanuts for the first time and, after initial hesitation, tried them. They decided that they liked them and brought them back to Spain to share with their sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. From Spain they spread to the rest of Europe, and then east to Asia and south to Africa.

Portuguese traders, who had found the peanut during their forays into Brazil, introduced them to Western Africa in the early 1500s, where they thrived, as well as eastward to India. The easy-to-grow legume produces high yields and, as a bonus, generates oil for lighting and cooking.

Food researcher Andrew Smith reports that the first written reference to the peanut occurred in the early 16th century. Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdez, in his natural history



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Peanut brittle is a better snack than weapon.
[PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]

of the Indies, wrote that the peanut was commonly eaten on the island of Hispaniola in both raw and roasted form. However, as Smith notes, "True Christians did not use it unless they were unmarried males, children, slaves, or just common people, for 'it had a mediocre taste and little substance.'"

Spain's international trade began in the 1500s with routes connecting the West Coast of Mexico across the Pacific to the Philippines. Among other cargo, peanuts were onboard the ships that sailed from the port of Acapulco to Manila, China, Japan and the East Indies.

In the 1700s and 1800s, when slave traders captured Africans to bring to the United States, peanuts came along, packed into the holds of the ships along with maize and yams. Once here in America, the Africans planted the peanuts with which they were so familiar and prepared them in many ways, eating them raw, boiled, roasted, and as an ingredient in soups and stews. It is probably the association with the slaves that led many to believe that peanuts originated in Africa.

The upper classes, including slave owners, considered peanuts fit only for their livestock and the poor. Smith writes, "Peanuts were derided as 'synonyms of circus rowdiness, gallery gods' obstreperousness, and festive occasions of the proletariat.'"

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Without the peanut butter, it would just be a plain old jelly sandwich. [PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]

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But peanuts actually helped save the lives of the soldiers of the Confederacy during the Civil War. History records that when Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman marched through Georgia, his troops managed to divide the Confederate troops, leaving them without desperately needed supplies, including food. Writings from the time are replete with complaints about lack of bread and meat. However, peanuts became an important source of sustenance. Indeed, peanuts pack a potent protein punch. Today, we also know that peanuts contain fiber and heart-healthy monounsaturated fat. The peanut was so valuable in keeping the troops fed that some history books refer to Confederate soldiers from Georgia as “goober grabbers.”

Smith maintains that the peanut has suffered from an “identity crisis.” First, while it is indeed a legume, it is most often prepared and eaten as a nut. However, it is still derided as a poor cousin to “real” nuts. Second, the peanut for a long time was considered fit only for livestock and the poor, until

it proved its value during the Civil War. Finally, the peanut is only eaten cooked but never raw, even though it is edible in that state.

Peanuts have been extolled in song, from the popular, if annoying, summer camp ditty, “Had a Peanut” to the following piece composed by a Civil War soldier:

*Sitting by the roadside
On a summer's day
Chatting with my mess-mates
Passing time away
Lying in the shadows
Underneath the trees
Goodness how delicious
Eating goober peas.
Chorus:
Peas, peas, peas, peas
Eating goober peas
Goodness how delicious
Eating goober peas.
When a horse-man passes,
The soldiers have a rule
To cry out their loudest,
“Mister, here's your mule!”
But another custom,
Enchanting-er than these
Is wearing out your grinders,*

*Eating goober peas.
Chorus
Just before the battle,
The General hears a row
He says “The Yanks are coming,
I hear their rifles now.”
He looks down the roadway
And what d’you think he sees?
The Georgia Militia
Cracking goober peas.
Chorus
I think my song has lasted
Just about enough.
The subject’s interesting but
The rhymes are mighty rough.
I wish the war was over
So free from rags and fleas
We’d kiss our wives and sweethearts,
Say good-bye to goober peas.
Chorus*

After the war, Union soldiers returning home brought peanuts to share with friends and family, further enhancing the legume’s reputation. Starting around this time one could find roasted peanuts being sold in bags everywhere from street corners to the Barnum and Bailey circus. Peanuts became so popular as snacks among working-class Americans that the cheap theater seats, in which they consumed untold numbers of them, became known as the “peanut gallery.”

As for the origin of peanut butter, claims abound. Africans have ground peanuts into their stews, the Chinese have crushed peanuts into their sauces, and Civil War soldiers dined on a porridge made of peanuts. (Even today, peanut butter is a staple in U.S. Army field rations.) These versions of peanut paste, however, bore little resemblance to the peanut butter we know and love today.

As testament to the nutritious nature of peanuts, two different physicians in separate areas of this country began experimenting with ground peanuts at around the same time. One of them was Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, a health advocate in Battle Creek, Michigan. Kellogg sought a vegetarian alternative to meat for his patients. (Peanuts and peanut butter are a good source of folic acid, contain fiber, are naturally low in sodium, have no cholesterol, and

contain mostly unsaturated fat). He and his brother established the Sanitas Nut Co. to produce peanut butter commercially. Their recipe was not terribly tasty (they steamed their peanuts rather than roasting them), so in the end they turned their attention to another health food: cereal, which is how we know the Kellogg name today.

I do love the Kelloggs' application for a patent for peanut butter, submitted in 1895. In "Process of Preparing Nut Meal" they described "a pasty adhesive substance that is for convenience of distinction termed nut butter." "Adhesive?" Well, if you've ever had peanut butter stick to the roof of your mouth, you will understand the description.

A Kellogg employee named Joseph Lambert designed his own hand-operated peanut butter grinder in 1896, but it was his wife, Almeeta, who published a cookbook, "The Complete Guide to Nut Cookery in America." Unfortunately, that book is no

longer in print and not even available on internet sites. Recipes calling for peanuts had begun appearing in cookbooks in the late 19th century, after the Civil War had exposed the goober to both North and South, but Almeeta's was the first cookbook dedicated to the nut.

Although the name of the other doctor who experimented with peanut butter is lost to history, his hometown played host to the Universal Exposition of 1904. At that World's Fair, a man named C. H. Sumner sold \$705.11 worth of the treat at his concession stand (worth about \$18,000 in today's dollars), and peanut butter was on its way to becoming an American favorite. Today, supermarkets stock the Peter Pan, Skippy, Jif, Smuckers and Teddie brands, both creamy and crunchy. Proctor & Gamble alone produces almost 250,000 jars of Jif brand peanut butter every single day.

Of all the names associated with the peanut, the most prominent has to be Dr. George Washington Carver. Just a few years after Lambert, Carver began his research on the peanut at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. By the time he was finished, he had developed more than 300 uses for peanuts besides peanut butter. These included shoe polish, shaving cream, coffee, paper and axle grease. When the boll weevil destroyed the cotton crop, his work in peanut horticulture was critical in helping farmers convert their fields to a new cash crop, thereby saving the economy of the American South. Once Carver began to publicize how many ways peanuts could be used, they became extraordinarily popular.

By the way, remember the Kellogg brothers' patent application that described peanut butter as "adhesive?" Well, peanut shells are used for manufacturing mucilage — glue!



[PHOTO/ALLAN JUNG]

PAPAS CON OCOPA (POTATOES WITH SALSA)

Serves 4

In Peru, the peanut's origin, the legume is a common ingredient in that country's cuisine. The following recipe includes not one, but two native foods: peanuts and

potatoes. It results in a hot and hearty potato salad with enough protein punch to serve as a luncheon entrée. Ocopa is a traditional Andean salsa.

Ingredients:

- 4 medium potatoes
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup aji amarillo, or any other medium-spicy chili paste
- ¼ cup water
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup chunky peanut butter
- ¼ cup evaporated milk
- 2 hard boiled eggs, sliced
- Lettuce leaves

Directions:

Boil whole potatoes in salted water until tender, about 25 minutes. Drain and cool potatoes. Peel and cube.

In a skillet, sauté onions in oil until softened. Add garlic and chili paste, stirring frequently. Add water, a tablespoon at a time, to keep mixture saucy.

Add cubed potatoes and stir to combine until hot. Add salt to taste.

Stir together peanut butter and evaporated milk. Pour peanut butter mixture slowly into the potatoes, stirring constantly until all ingredients are combined.

Serve on lettuce leaves and garnish with sliced eggs. 🍴