

“How luscious lies the pea within the pod.”

Emily Dickinson

Little legumes hold historical significance, and fairy tale romance

In search of world peas

By Carol Kaufman Goodman

Legend has it that Abigail Adams served her husband, founding father John, a meal of salmon, peas and new potatoes to celebrate our new nation’s first Independence Day. Perhaps she served the peas because the veggie had been considered a sign of love for generations. After all, the term “sweet pea” is a term of endearment.

In fact, peas and their pods have been tiny symbols of love, romance and fertility for centuries. According to one 19th-century Scottish writer, David Moore, “Peas and peascods are connected with wooing the lasses.” As he noted, if peas remained in the pod after a hopeful beau had picked them, he would present the pod and its contents to his beloved.

The association with love and marriage may well be why Danish author Hans Christian Andersen chose the pea in his fairytale, “The Princess and the Pea.” You will recall that a certain prince was in search of a wife but could not find one he liked. The, one dark and stormy night, a wet and bedraggled young woman, claiming to be a princess, appeared at the castle. The prince’s mom, the queen, thought her a phony and decided to test her by placing a pea in the bed in which she was to sleep. The young woman was so sensitive that even twenty mattress and twenty eider-down quilts could not prevent the pea from thwarting her sleep.

Agronomists believe that domestication of the wild pea probably began along with that of wheat and barley, making it one of our most ancient edible plants, one of the eight so-called “founder crops.” PIXABAY

Having proof of her princess-hood, the prince then chose her as his wife.

That must have been one hard, dried pea.

But back to John and Abigail: Alas, legends being what they are, this one is false. Abigail and John were actually in different cities on that legendary Fourth of July. Food historians date the salmon-and-peas dish to the mid-1860s, making the meal more likely something served to celebrate the end of the Civil War—decades after the couple’s deaths. Regardless, it has become a traditional Fourth of July meal for New Englanders.

And here, you always thought it was hamburgers and hot dogs we crave for our annual summer barbecue.

A ‘founder crop’

But why the pairing of the fish with the pea? The most likely explanation is that salmon used to run up New England rivers at around the same time as the first harvest of peas. In the early days of our country’s history, the fish were abundant, with as many as 300,000 running upstream every year. Unfortunately, the Industrial Revolution polluted our rivers to such an extent that they have yet to recover, so these days we must rely on farm-raised salmon.

Speaking of world peas, these little legumes have traveled the globe extensively. But their origins are in the Fertile Crescent, where wild peas were part of the human diet as early as 23,000 years ago. Before domestication, these so-called field peas were probably eaten dried.

Agronomists believe that domestication of the wild pea probably began along with that of wheat and barley, making it one of our most ancient edible plants, one of the eight so-called “founder crops.” And they are an important one for health, rich in phosphorus, potassium and vitamins A, B and C, plus fiber, folic acid, amino acids and protein. So, they provided sustenance to early humans.

From the Middle East, the pea spread throughout the Mediterranean, Europe, Scandinavia, India and China. As evidence of the fruit’s globe-trotting (and they are a fruit), archaeologists digging in Sweden discovered peas they’ve dated from 10,000 BCE; in Turkey and Iraq peas from around 7,000 to 6,000 BCE; and in Switzerland from 3,000 BCE.

According to “The Encyclopedia of American Food & Drink,” Christopher Columbus brought peas with him when he traveled to the West Indies in 1492.

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But it wasn't until 1629 that colonials in Jamestown, Virginia, and our own Plymouth would try cultivating them, making peas one of the first crops planted in the New World.

It's a snap

Let's fast-forward now to the mid-20th century, when Utah plant breeder Calvin Lamborn set to work on solving the problem of twisting and buckling snow pea pods. After many years in the laboratory, in 1979 he introduced the sugar snap variety by crossing snow peas with garden peas. The new sugar snap, like its snow pea parent, was sweet and crunchy, but also still had a pesky fibrous string that had to be removed before eating. Over time, researchers have figured out a way to make the sugar snap stringless. That product is on the shelf in your grocery store.

Since we're talking about hybridizing, what's all this about "two peas in a pod"? Are they really alike? Well, if you recall junior high school biology, Gregor Mendel (of pea and fruit fly fame) discovered that peas in a pod can be similar, but they are not identical. In fact, he identified eight distinct traits among the little green orbs. Over time scientists have determined that there are even more traits.

Due to its beloved and ubiquitous presence on world menus, it's no sur-

prise that the pea has appeared in everything from legends to poetry. For example, Norse mythology tells us that when the god Thor felt that mortals had disrespected him, he decided to punish them by sending dragons to fill up their wells with peas. However, the dragons managed to drop a few peas onto the soil, where grew a wonderful new food. In thanks to Thor (and probably trying to appease him), the mortals honored Thor by eating them only on his namesake day, Thursday (Thor's Day).

According to food writer Jeri Quinzio, English lasses in Hertfordshire looking for husbands counted the peas in a pod. If there were nine, they would bury the pod with its contents under the front gate. The first man to walk through it would supposedly be Mr. Right. (Fathers and brothers were presumably relegated to the back door.)

We encounter the number nine again among the English, in the old rhyme:

"Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold,

Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old;

Some like it hot, some like it cold,

Some like it in the pot, nine days old."

As this issue goes to press, it's still officially winter out there, but since peas like cool weather, it is the ideal time to plant the first crop. A second can be planted six weeks before the first frost. ■

Pease Porridge

This dish, like a very thick split pea soup, will tick all the boxes for a cold night's midweek supper. It's easy to prepare, high in protein, and soul-warming.

2 cups dried split peas, rinsed and picked over (yellow are traditional, but green are fine)

1 large onion, diced

1 carrot, peeled and diced

1 bay leaf

salt to taste

pepper

butter

Add split peas to the pot with about 2 inches of water to cover.

Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer.

Cook, stirring occasionally, until peas are soft and mushy, about one hour.

Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Serve in individual bowls with a big dollop of butter.



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