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By Karen
Edwards

The Art
of Making
Artificial Food
for Historic
Homes

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fter leading a tour of Tudor Place Historic House and Garden—the 19th-century Georgetown residence of Martha Washington’s granddaughter, Martha Custis, and her husband Thomas Peter—a curator walked back through the rooms to lock up. In the living room, she happened to spy something that had slipped between the cushion and the frame of a chair. She lifted the cushion and found a ham biscuit that had been snatched from the dining room’s food display. Apparently, the sneaky visitor had discovered the ham biscuit was not the work of a chef. Instead, it had been prepared by artist Peter Waddell to resemble the kind of biscuit that would have been served at Tudor Place years ago.

Welcome to the world of faux food, where everything looks good enough to eat—but never is. The concept of creating fake food is said to have started in the years following World War II when Americans traveled to Japan to assist with relief efforts. They were unable to read restaurant menus, so Japanese artists and candle makers created wax displays of menu items. Visitors had only to point to the dish when they wanted to place an order.

In the United States, fake food has been around since at least the 1980s, and is frequently used in film,

television and onstage. More and more historic properties are also turning to faux food displays, not only to make rooms seem less static, but also to better illustrate the lifestyles of the people who once lived there.

“Food is a part of our social history,” explains Sandy Levins, president of the Camden County Historical Society in Camden, N.J., and owner of Historic Faux Food.

“Displays of food can tell us how plentiful or scarce food was in that time period. It tells us about the people and their tastes, what food was available in that season and location, and the socioeconomic status of the people who lived there.”

Faux food displays can also vividly recreate the holidays of the past.

For example, at Pomona Hall, the 18th-century Quaker mansion in Camden, N.J., that serves as the site of many Levins-prepared feasts, the table is overwhelmed with dishes. “We used to observe the holidays very simply, as the Quakers would have done, but visitors on our holiday tours were disappointed, so we’ve adopted a Colonial Williamsburg approach where Christmas was celebrated more lavishly,” she says. Now, a boar’s (or pig’s) head becomes the holiday table’s focal point, and so many dishes fill the table that the array of desserts is relegated to a sideboard. “It’s a sumptuous feast,” Levins says.

While the feasts could be sumptuous, Amanda Rosner, Colonial Williamsburg’s assistant curator of historic interiors, says early American holidays still were less festive than today. “Residents might hear gunfire on Christmas morning and go to church, but there were no gifts to unwrap,” she says. This was, however, a season when balls and weddings were held. The faux desserts, including a Twelfth Night cake that visitors find in the Governor’s Palace at Christmas, reflect that kind of extended hospitality, she says.



A meat course in the Tudor Place Dining Room.

A dish of broiled fish in mustard sauce prepared for George Washington’s Mount Vernon. It comes from a recipe in the 1747 edition of *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* by Hannah Glasse.



Jane Ann Hornberger, a school program guide at Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library in Wilmington, Del., has created faux food for the former du Pont home for 10 years—and during the annual Yuletide tour, she says, food displays reflecting a typical family Christmas are everywhere. “The curators come up with a different theme each year and tell me what foods they want prepared,” she says. Since rooms at this decorative arts museum reflect styles ranging from the late 1800s through the 1960s, there is a broad array of faux food to look at—from historic tea cakes to melting popsicles.

At Tudor Place, New Zealand-born artist Peter Waddell also re-creates Christmas meals that represent a span of time—from 1809 to 1986. In addition to the lifelike ham biscuits, he has also created Scotch eggs, ham, baked apples and even cheese spread on a cracker. “The family recognized from the beginning their place in history, so they kept careful records of everything that was served,” he says. Consequently, Waddell has only to dive into the notebooks of the Peter family to learn what was eaten on any special day.

Other faux-food artists, however, start every project with extensive research into what might have been served in that season and location.

At Colonial Williamsburg, Rosner says she begins her research with the archeology staff, who have dug up bones and other refuse around Williamsburg properties. The trash invariably reveals early Colonial dining habits. “They’ve found bones from squirrels and even a peacock bone,” Rosner says. Once she has an idea of what was eaten at a specific location during the season to be illustrated, she turns to period cookbooks, such as Martha Bradley’s *The British Housewife*, to see how the food might have been prepared. She also looks to Williamsburg’s food historians and cooks, who can prepare the recipe so artists or conservators who make the faux food can see what it looks like.



A boar's head is a prominent part of a 2004 Winterthur Yuletide display interpreting Christmas dinner at Bracebridge Hall, the name and setting of an episodic novel by Washington Irving. • The dining table at the Colonial Williamsburg Governor's Palace holds elaborate dessert creations, such as this display of glasses filled with jellies, stacks of ginger hearts, bowls of sweetmeats and even molded ice cream.



Holiday Faux Food Tour

During the holiday season, you can find faux food displays at many historic properties, including these:

Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Va. There are seven interiors that feature faux food displays, including the Governor's Palace, the Wythe House and the Peyton Randolph House. www.history.org

Deshler-Morris House, Philadelphia. The first summer White House of George Washington has faux uncooked food that would become meals for the first president. www.nps.gov/demo/index.htm

Historic Columbia Foundation, Columbia, S.C. Visit five historic homes spanning three centuries. The holiday tours feature faux food throughout. <http://historiccolumbia.org/site/calendar/holiday.php>

Pomona Hall, Camden, N.J. The winter holiday setting includes a roasted pig's head, in addition to other 18th-century fare. www.cchsnj.com/mansion.shtml

Tudor Place Historic House and Garden, Washington, D.C. The holiday food on display here will be exactly what was served, according to detailed notebooks kept by the family. www.tudorplace.org

Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, Wilmington, Del. The former du Pont family home and current decorative arts museum features 19th-century yuletide tables. www.winterthur.org



The Wetherburn's Tavern kitchen at Colonial Williamsburg depicts the many types of food that would have been made at a moment's notice as people came to stay at the tavern throughout the day and night. One of the most popular items was whipped syllabub, which could be made ahead of time, placed in glasses and served for days afterward.

Colonial Williamsburg displays faux food representing what people at different social levels ate, including this one-pot meal of fish and hominy, a popular dish made and eaten by slaves.



Like Rosner, Levins turns to period cookbooks she has collected, such as *The Encyclopedia of Food* and *The Martha Washington Cookbook*, for ideas on what was served at the time. She has learned, for example, that raisins, a favorite early American treat, were often made from Muscat grapes so they were larger than the raisins we enjoy today. (See sidebar on page 39 for recipes from early American cookbooks.)

Hornberger, meanwhile, has researched everything from early apples to what kind of food rationing the du Pont family may have been subject to during World War II. For information and inspiration, she says she dives into her collection of old cookery books, including *The Virginia Housewife* as well as a book of Dutch table paintings that illustrates the kind of food available in the 1800s and how it might have looked. Hornberger, like many artists, has prepared real food before attempting the faux version. "There's just no way to imagine what a 'hoe cake' looks like until you make one."

It's with that same attention to detail that these faux-food artists create their food. Levins casts much of her food in plaster from latex molds that are shaped around the actual item—a smoked fish platter, for example, was made from a variety of actual fish Levins picked up from her local fishmonger. Other food, like the roasted pig's head on the Pomona Hall Christmas table and the Victorian-



Winterthur's Georgia Dining Room shows an early effort at faux food making. The gelatin molds were made in the late 1970s by Winterthur conservators out of a resinous material.

era sausages created for Winterthur's Yuletide Tour, is sculpted from various materials. Levins has also used real oyster shells collected from a local raw bar, then sanitized and sealed to create a dish of oysters for display. (The faux oysters were made from modeling clay.)

Waddell says he also turns to a variety of materials, including plastic foam and wax, to create his dishes. "You can make a very realistic whipped cream by liquefying the wax, then letting it harden," he says. Waddell begins each project with a careful observation of the actual food, or a photograph of the food. Since meat is probably the most difficult food item to turn faux, he studies modern-day Christmas catalogs sent by meat companies to capture the right look. "The secret is texture and color," he says. He is also careful to make the food imperfect—a cake that's not evenly iced, for example. "A level of perfection denies the evidence of human hands," he says.

Once the faux food is finished, curators set the scene, including plating the food on historic china. "We use a mylar sheet between the platter and fake food," Waddell says. For Hornberger, it's hands-off once the food has been created. "The curators set up the displays," she says. One of their concerns, says Levins, is "off-gassing," a term used to describe how manmade objects can emit chemicals into

the environment that are unsafe for fine china, textiles and more. That's why Levins, Waddell and Hornberger are careful to use only certain products to create their faux food and why Colonial Williamsburg rarely buys the fake food that's available through commercial catalogues. "They're often made from materials that are harmful to the collections," explains Patricia Silence, conservator of historic interiors. Still, Williamsburg staff members regularly clean and monitor the food to ensure the collection's safety.

At some of the historic sites, faux-food displays represent all social classes. Pomona Hall, for example, while home to a wealthy family, was also a Northern plantation home, so Levins created typical remnant food, like leftover potatoes and bacon. Colonial Williamsburg displays faux food in seven of its interiors, ranging from the desserts at the Governor's Palace to more common fare at the taverns and gruel in the slave kitchens at the great plantations.

Fortunately, most faux food created by these artisans lasts a long time. "We keep it in Tupperware bins and use it as long as we can," Rosner says. At Winterthur, "The whole ninth floor is stocked with faux food from the past," Hornberger says. "We may shift an item from room to room, but we use many of the same foods over and over."

The effect of faux food tableaux on visitors is dramatic. "People, especially kids, love the foods," Levins says. After all, there is a real "yuck" factor to seeing a roasted pig's head, or beef tongue (which Levins created for Washington's summer retreat in Philadelphia). "It adds an element of surprise to the visit," Waddell says. "And people love surprises." 🍷

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SANDY LEVINS

Back to Basics

Making fake food look authentic takes a lot of work. Historians turn to period cookbooks to get a more accurate picture of what an early American dish would look like.

A Rich Cake

Take four pounds of flour dried and sifted, seven pounds of currants washed and rubbed, six pounds of the best fresh butter, two pounds of Jordon almonds blanched, and beaten with orange flower water and sack till fine; then take four pounds of eggs, put half the whites away, three pounds of double-refined sugar beaten and sifted, a quarter of an ounce of mace, the same of cloves and cinnamon, three large nutmegs, all beaten fine, a little ginger, half a pint of sack, half a pint of right French brandy, sweet-meats to your liking, they must be orange, lemon, and citron; work your butter to a cream with your hands before any of your ingredients are in; then put in your sugar, and mix all well together; let your eggs be well beat and strained through a sieve, working in your almonds first, then put in your eggs, beat them together till they look white and thick; then put in your sack, brandy and spices, shake your flour in by degrees, and when your oven is ready, put in your currants and sweet-meats as you put it in your hoop; it will take four hours baking in a quick oven: you must keep it beating with your hand all the while you are mixing it, and when your currants are well washed and cleaned, let them be kept before the fire, so that they may go warm into your cake. This quantity will bake best in two hoops.

—From *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy* by Mrs. Glasse, London, 1796

Forced Cucumbers

Choose fresh cucumbers of a middling size; cut them into halves, take out the seeds with a knife, fill the cavity with forcemeat, and bind the two halves together with strong thread. Put them in a stew pan with vinegar, salt and veal stock, a small quantity of each. Set them over a fire, simmer them till three parts done, and reduce the liquor; then add with it a strong cullis [a rich sauce or coulis made from meat juices, pureed shellfish, vegetables or fruit] put it to the cucumbers, and stew them gently till done.

—From *The Art of Cookery*, John Mollard; 1808

