

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

Pumpkin pie, an international symbol of harvest time, is a favorite dessert, especially in the United States and Canada, but also in Northern Italy, between Halloween and Christmas. Its custardy filling flavored with nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, and ginger, the pie, topped with whipped cream or a scoop of vanilla ice cream, is especially popular on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas, voted National Pumpkin Pie Day.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the name “pumpkin” originates from the Greek word for a large melon: “pepon.” The French changed “pepon” to “pompon” and the English to “pumpion” or “pompion.” An alternative derivation, which includes the letter k, is “pôhpukun meaning “grows forth round.” This term was probably used by the Wampanoag people who spoke the Wôpanâak dialect of Massachusetts. It was almost certainly this Native American tribe, which introduced pumpkins to the English pilgrims at Plymouth, although pumpkins, like other squash, originated in northeastern Mexico and in the southern United States. The oldest evidence of pumpkin fragments was found in Mexico and dates to between 7,000 and 5,500 BC. It also seems that pumpkins were one of the earliest foods that the first Spanish explorers brought back to Europe, where edible orange gourds were first mentioned in 1536 and, after a few decades, were grown regularly in England. However, there is no documentation that the Pilgrim Fathers were familiar with pumpkins before they sailed on the *Mayflower* in 1620, but they might have been.

Thus, what we do know for certain is that the first pumpkin pies, including those of our Pilgrim Fathers during the three-day harvest celebration in 1621, had no crusts. The pumpkins were either stewed like a savory soup or their hollowed-out shell was filled with “the stew,” milk, honey and spices, and everything then baked under hot ashes.

The first recipe for pumpkin pie with a crust called “*tourte de pumpkin*” was published in 1651 by the famous French chef François Pierre de la Varenne (1618-78) and author of one of the most important French cookbooks of the 17th century, *Le Vrai Cuisinier* (*The True French Cook*). It was translated and published in England as *The French Cook* two years later. By the 1670s recipes for “*pumpion pie*” with cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves began to appear in English cookbooks like Hannah Wool-

## THE HISTORY OF PUMPKIN PIE



ley’s *The Gentlewoman’s Companion* (1765). Often their recipes added apples, raisins or currants to the filling. Finally in 1796 the first American cookbook with recipes

for many foods native to the United States entitled *American Cookery by an American Orphan* named Amelia Simmons included recipes for pumpkin puddings with a crust, very similar to our present day pumpkin pies.

It wasn’t until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that pumpkin pie took on a political significance, injected into the nation’s tumultuous debate over slavery. Many of the staunchest abolitionists from New England glorified pumpkin pie as their favorite dessert and it was soon mentioned in novels, poems, and broadsides. According to the website [www.history.com/news/the-history-of-pumpkin-pie](http://www.history.com/news/the-history-of-pumpkin-pie),

“Sarah Josepha Hale, an abolitionist who worked for decades to have Thanksgiving proclaimed a national holiday, featured the pie in her 1827 anti-slavery novel, *Norwood*, describing a Thanksgiving table laden with desserts of every name and description — yet the pumpkin pie occupied the most distinguished niche.” In 1842, another abolitionist, Lydia Maria Child, wrote her famous poem about a New England Thanksgiving that began, “Over the river, and through the wood,” and ended with a shout, “Hurrah for the pumpkin pie.”

So it’s no wonder that, in 1863, Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday, in spite of Confederate protests that it was a move to impose Yankee traditions on the south, where a sweet potato pie was the tradition.

The world’s largest pumpkin pie was made on September 25, 2010, in New Bremen, Ohio, during the New Bremen Pumpkinfest. The pie consisted of 1,212 pounds of canned pumpkin, 109 gallons of evaporated milk, 2,796 eggs, 7 pounds of salt, 14.5 pounds of cinnamon, and 525 pounds of sugar. The pie weighed 3,699 pounds and measured 20 feet in diameter.

Other pumpkin facts: The Pumpkin Capital of the World is Morton, Illinois, the state that grows the most pumpkins, harvesting about 12,300 acres annually. The latest US record (2019) for the largest pumpkin ever grown weighed 2,517.5 pounds in Clarence Center, New York.

As for Italy, in Reggio Emilia a version of pumpkin pie is prepared with *amaretti* (macaroons) and raisins and in Piemonte with *Carpandù* apples and other non-sweet fruits. Although not a pie, in Mantua and Brescia the local specialty are *tortelli alla zucca* (ravioli with pumpkin filling).○

The First Thanksgiving; the frontispiece of *Le Vrai Cuisinier*; a current pumpkin pie; Sarah Josepha Hale and Lydia Maria Child

