

THE VISITOR GAZETTE

November 2008

Living historians share 17th century Virginia food

Text and photos by Bob Ruegsegger

Historical interpreters and volunteers at Jamestown Settlement go all out during their annual Foods and Feasts of Colonial Virginia event to offer visitors a memorable holiday experience.

These living historians, volunteer and professional, seem to enjoy participating in Foods and Feasts as much as visitors enjoy the annual presentation.

Cindy Daniel, an assistant interpretive site manager, began her career in living history as a volunteer interpreter at Jamestown Settlement while she was a student at the University of Virginia. She arrived at Jamestown Settlement, and immediately fell in love with the place. Currently, she supervises the outdoor living history areas and is also responsible for training and program development.

"I came specifically to cook. I'd never had the opportunity to cook over a fire," Daniel said. That first weekend veteran interpreter Sharon Walls took Daniel under her wing. She pecked, roasts and...

Wilcox portrays a farmer. He particularly enjoys sharing the poor farmer's day to day life and how he processed and preserved his food. "For me, it's all about the visitors. It's all about the educational process," said Wilcox.

Volunteers Bob and Laura Mellin of Maryland focus on how the upper crust lived in 17th century Virginia. They've been faithfully presenting an interpretation that illustrates the higher class of food that would have been available to the gentry. Through the food they exhibit in the Governor's House at James Fort, they depict how the life and circumstances of the gentlemen differed from that of the regular colonist.

Oysters, pork loin, mutton and freshly baked bread burden the groaning board. Fresh pastries made with exotic spices and fruits abound. Sweet and savory sauces for the meat and shellfish wait to tempt the 17th century palate. Hard cheeses from England and soft cheeses produced in the colony are included in the governor's fare.

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Cindy Daniel, an interpretive site manager for the Jamestown Yorktown Foundation, began as a volunteer at Jamestown Settlement. "I hit the ground in Jamestown, and I absolutely fell in love with the place," recalled Daniel.



Laura Mellin enjoys setting the governor's table for Foods & Feasts. Eccles cakes are among the delicacies she routinely prepares for the event. She has been volunteering at JTS since 1990.



over a fire," Daniel said. That first weekend veteran interpreter Sharon Walls took Daniel under her wing. She peeled carrots and cooked potage, but she finally had the opportunity to cook over a fire. Once she really started working with the coals, she finally understood how bread was baked over a fire.

"It was just a revelation," Daniel added.

"It was something that I cared about and the visitors cared about," she continued. "I really had a great time talking to people that came out to learn. It's wonderful to work in a job, even volunteer for a place, where people pay money to come and hear you talk about the thing that you love."

Once, while she was living and working in New Orleans, Daniel made the 16-hour drive back to Williamsburg because she couldn't stand the thought of missing Foods and Feasts.

"There was no question about coming," she said. "I couldn't miss it. I just couldn't sit it out."

Staff interpreters and volunteers are often indistinguishable. Many volunteers have been contributing to Foods and Feasts for fourteen or fifteen years. Some of volunteers who recruited Cindy Daniel continue to offer their services year after year.

"I've been coming to Jamestown my whole life with my family," noted Mark Wilcox. "I'm an amateur historian. Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays, and I love being here."

As far as Wilcox is concerned, history is not about the dates and names of famous people. It's more about the day to day life of ordinary people.

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"I love talking to the public. I like explaining the culture of the 17th century to people," said Laura Mellin. "The material culture of the era is interesting to people. It's what people focus on, and this is a way of tying that in to the history of the colony."

Eccles cakes are one of Laura Mellin's most tempting specialties. Pastry shells stuffed with assorted dried fruits (apples, figs, raisins, currants, and dates) and flavored with a phenomenal array of exotic spices (ginger, nutmeg, allspice, mace, ground cloves, and cinnamon) highlight class differences in food quality and manner of preparation. Mellin adds a dash of white pepper, some Marsala wine, and spoons the mixture into three inch pastry shells and bakes the flavorful desserts.

Living historian Carol Wiers demonstrates how 17th century people cooked and preserved fish. Wiers likes cooking outdoors over a fire and doing everything in 17th century fashion. Working with her hands and using only 17th century technology affords Wier an opportunity to show visitors different cooking styles and methods of food preservation.

"If you're a Powhatan, you smoke your meats and dry your vegetables to preserve them. If you're English, you dry, salt and pickle," she notes. "We show all of that coming together."

Over the fire, in Powhatan style, Wiers is smoking fish. There are sunfish, croaker and spot. Other fish on a clapboard are salted to preserve them. "If you lived in Virginia in the 17th century, you lived near the water. That's going to provide an

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Carol Wiers enjoys outdoor cooking. "We prepare some very different foods out here. We actually pickle fish (herring) so there are some similarities with today's cooking styles."

awful lot of your food."

"Foods & Feasts is our annual Thanksgiving commemoration. It's a wonderful way, especially for children, to come and see how people fed themselves in the 17th century," observed Wiers. "They learn where food came from, how it was prepared and how it was served."



Volunteer Mark Wilcox enjoys spending Thanksgiving morning at Jamestown Settlement. "I'm only giving up part of a holiday. At home, I'd just be in the way early on Thanksgiving morning."

WANT TO GO?

Jamestown Settlement has been hosting Foods and Feasts of Colonial Virginia since November 1986. Last year, approximately 10,000 visitors purchased tickets for the event over a three day period. This year's celebration is scheduled for Thursday, November 27 through Saturday, November 29, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. Food prepared for exhibits and cooked during demonstrations is not available for public consumption. For additional information call 757-253-4838 or toll free 888-593-4682.