

BREAKFAST

A HISTORY

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porridge—some with hickory nuts and meats, some with pumpkin and sugar. Dried cornmeal was such a mainstay that many Iroquois hunting parties travelled with nothing else to eat. One would simply swallow a few spoonfuls of fine, dried meal, wash it down with a draught of water, and the corn porridge would cook itself in the heat of the stomach, swelling to fill the belly completely. The Iroquois could thus abate hunger without even stopping to light a fire.

A porridge called samp had been eaten by New England colonists since shortly after they arrived in America. The dish, which gained an endorsement from 17th-century Native American language scholar Roger Williams (with a slight caveat and suggested modification to the recipe), was described as “the Indian corne, beaten and boild, and eaten hot or cold with milk or butter, which are mercies beyond the Natives plaine water, and which is a dish exceedingly wholesome for the English bodies.”¹⁰

Similar to samp, hasty pudding leftover from supper could be sliced into cakes after it congealed overnight, fried in pork drippings, and eaten with molasses or maple syrup for breakfast. This was Mary Johnson Bailey Lincoln’s suggestion, who recommended frying any of the mushes in her 1884 *Mrs. Johnson’s Boston Cook Book: What to Do and What Not to Do in Cooking*. “When eaten with bacon, they make a nice relish for breakfast.”¹¹

Another cornmeal porridge can be made by boiling stale cornbread. Cush-cush is a Louisiana breakfast dish that was standard camp fare for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War (1861–1865). Ironically, the dish likely originated in Barbados as the cornmeal mush “cou-cou” and came to America via African slaves. Cornmeal mush is still eaten for breakfast in America today, primarily in the U.S. South in the form of grits. A traditional breakfast of grits with pan-fried ham and red-eye gravy made from rendered ham drippings and brewed coffee is such an emblem of the South that in 2002, the State of Georgia declared grits its official prepared food.

Breakfast Cereal

Though hot cereals had been eaten for centuries, cold breakfast cereals, or just “cereal,” was not invented until the late 1800s. The last half of the 19th century saw a wave of morally driven health crusades that had deep implications for breakfast. The first of these, the Jacksonian-era Clean Living Movement (1830–1860), saw the birth of the Sanitarium as the cure-all, as well as a new focus on eating whole grains without chemical additives. Broadly prescribed lifestyle changes included the abstention from meat, alcohol, caffeine, tobacco,

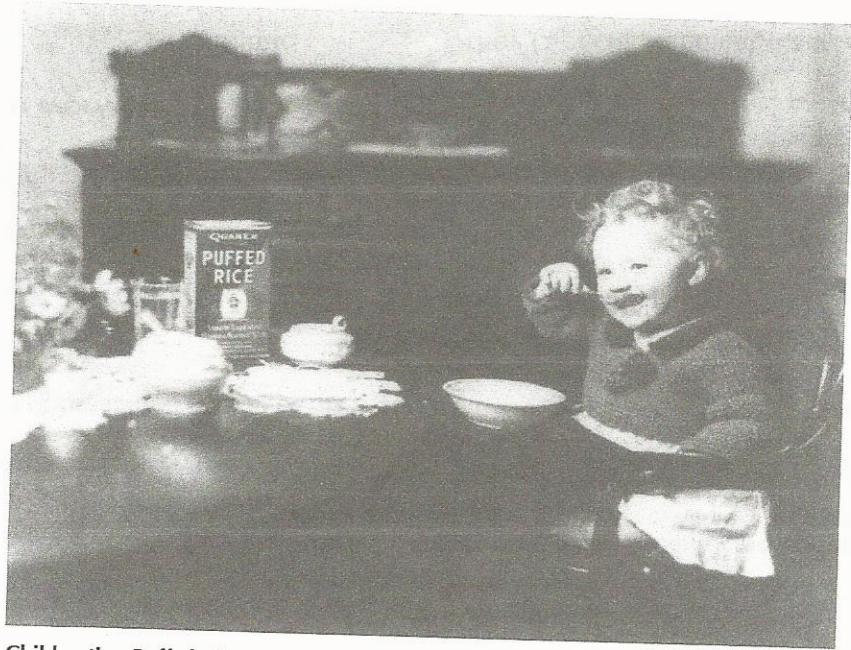
and in some cases, sex. Bacon and eggs, pancakes with syrup, and hot coffee were now considered as “injurious” to one’s health as masturbation.

One prominent figure to emerge from this movement, physician and hydropathist Sylvester Graham, advocated a shift to simple cereal-based breakfasts. Graham was particularly adamant about the risks of eating processed flours and developed his own flour made from the entire wheat seed, rather than the endosperm alone.

Dr. James Caleb Jackson, founder of the Our Home on the Hillside health spa in New York, baked small multigrain biscuits of Graham flour, oats, and cornmeal to supplement the institutional breakfast. Realizing he was on to something, Jackson reformulated his cereal, trying again by creating wafers of just Graham flour, which he crumbled and twice-baked like zwieback. These exceedingly firm nuggets, which he named Granula (but were called “wheat rocks” by some people), required an overnight soak before they were palatable; this, for many, defeated the purpose. The cries of housewives demanding the convenience of ready-to-eat cereals were evidently heard, as Jackson was able to advertise the cereal as “ready for immediate table use” by the 1880s. Among other salubrities recommended at the time, Granula was purported to be of the utmost prophylactic against disease; “a most excellent health food,” the papers called it.¹²

At the same time, John Kellogg filed the patent for “Flaked Cereals and Process of Preparing Same.”¹³ Prior to that, the well-known Adventist superintendent of the Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan had experimented with grinding his own cereals and zwiebacks into a product that could be chewed by those with dental problems (of which there were many at the time). As the story goes, in 1894, John Harvey and his brother Will Keith Kellogg accidentally invented the cereal that would make them famous when a pan of cooking wheat was forgotten on the stove. Trying to save money by not wasting product, they ran the paste of overcooked wheat through a set of steel rollers. They named the flaked cereal Granose Flakes, and marketing began in 1895. Shortly after receiving the patent, more than fifty tons of Granose cereal had been manufactured and sold, primarily through mail order.

As competition among other companies began to ramp up, the Kelloggs focused on corn, and in 1898 they released their Sanitas Toasted Corn Flakes. Due to the high fat content of corn, it was prone to going rancid quickly. Despite John’s protests, Will Kellogg added sugar—considered by John to be worse than meat for one’s health—to increase palatability and sales; being a preservative, sugar also increased shelf life. The breakfast market began to change.



Child eating Puffed Rice cereal, 1918. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

With rationing over after World War II, Kellogg's and other cereal companies began adding even more sugar to their cereals to increase their palatability to children, an emerging new market. At the same time, women were entering the workforce, and because cereal still carried the image of health (associated with sanitarium) and could be prepared by the unskilled hands of children, women were now free to leave breakfast to the kids, to whom cereal companies began advertising directly. By the end of the 1940s, the sugar content of breakfast cereals was so high they could hardly be called healthy anymore, but children—by now a clear driving force of markets—could not have been happier about it.

In the 1970s, many cereal makers came under public scrutiny as a diet high in sugar was blamed for a rising number of ailments. Sugar Crisp was renamed to Golden Crisp in the early 1980s, just as Kellogg's similar cereal Sugar Smacks were renamed to Honey Smacks, and Sugar Pops were changed to the wholesome-sounding Corn Pops. In an attempt to distance themselves from an unhealthy image, many other companies also dropped the word "sugar" from their products. This nutritional whitewashing may have been successful in sales, but the actual sugar content of these cereals has never been altered.

Some healthy cereals did become available again, in response to the health food craze of the 1960s and 1970s. Similar to Kellogg, Swiss nutritionist Bircher-Benner was a proponent of clean living, and created the cereal called Bircher müsli in 1906 to serve as a breakfast meal at his sanitarium in Zürich. The food, made of uncooked rolled oats, nuts, and dried fruit, had been inspired by a dish served to his wife while she hiked the Swiss Alps. With the addition of müsli's dried fruits and nuts to the toasted and crumbled oat and wheat cereal trademarked by Kellogg in the late 1880s, granola enjoyed a resurgence in popularity.

Though the high sugar content of cereal may undermine general health goals, cereal does provide a crucial source of vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients for many children. In the 1930s, after debilitating nutritional deficiency diseases like pellagra and rickets had plagued children for generations, the American Medical Association and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration endorsed a standardized fortification program to add niacin, thiamin, iron, and riboflavin to cereal products. In the 1940s, Vitamin D and calcium were added. Thanks to the fortification of cereals, pellagra has been eliminated in the United States. Today, more than 90 percent of American children eat cereal for breakfast.

Bread

According to recent findings, humans had been eating bread for at least 12,000 years before the domestication of cereal crops, coinciding with the birth of art and religion; some could say that humans have been eating bread for as long as they have been human.¹⁴

In ancient Greece, all meals consisted of bread and the accompaniments to bread known as "everything else" (*opson*). Rich or poor, emmer wheat bread (*artos* for the rich) or unleavened barley cakes (*maza* for the poor) were dunked into undiluted wine—*akratis*—and eaten for the morning meal, *akratisma*. Greek rhetorician Athenaeus noted that Homer used *ariston* to mean the morning meal (and not the midday meal, as it was otherwise recognized) in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Athenaeus also observed that the comic playwrights Antiphanes and Cantharus considered *akratisma* but a snack to tide one over until the cook or slaves finished preparing *ariston*, implying either that the two words were interchangeable, or that breakfast had two courses.

The Gallo-Roman historian Gregory of Tours noted in the 6th century that French peasants and laborers ate a hunk of bread soaked in wine for breakfast every morning; in another of his texts, a transient priest is offered bread for breakfast by his peasant host, who asks the priest to bestow a blessing on the