

Food Facts

This is part of a collection of little oddities about food that I have acquired during the years I worked in the food industry. Some of them are true. Others may be true. Some seem highly unlikely.

- ❖ When we hear that St. John ate Locusts in the desert he was not, in fact, eating insects but the husk of the Locust Bean which is now known as St. John's Bread (Johannesbrot). This is grown in Mediterranean countries and most of the modern crop comes from Spain and Portugal. The seed is used for the manufacture of Locust Bean Gum (also known as Carob Gum) and the husk is usually used for cattle feed. It has a sweet taste and is often given to children as a cheap treat in those countries. It is also possible to make a powder from the husk and this is used as a substitute for Cocoa Powder. Carob Gum was used in ancient Egypt for funeral bindings. Carob Seeds were also used by Arab gold traders as their standard weights and each trader would carry a pocketful of the seeds. Hence the derivation of the word "Carat" for measuring Gold.
- ❖ 181 separate constituents have been identified in Honey.
- ❖ The Lord's prayer contains 56 words, the Ten Commandments 297 and the American Declaration of Independence 300. The discovery of DNA was first described in a magazine article of 500 words. The EEC Commission Directive on the Import of Caramels and Caramel Products is 26,911 words long.
- ❖ Pliny (23 - 74 AD) describes how the Romans made a substance they called Sapa by boiling grape juice in Lead vats. The result was a very sweet syrup which they used to sweeten cooked food and improve wines. This is the first recorded use of an artificial sweetener. Roman Prostitutes were fond of Sapa because it gave them a pale complexion and acted as a contraceptive. The sweetness was, in fact, due to the formation of the Lead salts of the fruit acids. The beneficial effects noticed by the professional ladies were symptoms of Lead poisoning - Anaemia and Abortion. Several salts of Lead are sweet to those brave enough to try them and Lead ethanoate used to be known as "Sugar of Lead". An echo of these practices in more recent times is the old Vintner's dodge of improving a wine by dropping a Lead shot into the bottle before corking it.
- ❖ Fish and chips, the first modern convenience food, was invented by John Rouse of Oldham in about 1880 and rapidly became part of the British way of life. It had been made possible by the introduction of the large deep sea steam trawlers with refrigerated storage for their catches, working the waters off Iceland.
- ❖ One of the earliest forms of Indian sweet "Khandi" gave sweets their Americanised name - Candy
- ❖ Pythagoras banned the eating of beans by members of the philosophical school he founded in ancient Greece. This is one of the earliest recorded attempts to control air quality in enclosed spaces.
- ❖ Saffron is produced from the stigma of a variety of Crocus. Though it used to be grown in England (at Saffron Walden in Essex, for example) it is now grown mainly in Spain, India and Afghanistan. It is one of the highest priced food ingredients because of the enormous number of stigmas needed to make it. For every kilo of Saffron 500,000 stigmas must be

picked by hand and dried. To make matters worse the Saffron Crocus only blooms for two weeks every year.

- ❖ The first trade mark ever registered was the famous red triangle used by Bass and Co for their pale ale in 1876. Five years later the mark could be seen clearly in Manet's painting "Bar at the Folies-Bergere".
- ❖ The scientist Francis Bacon died in 1626 after conducting one of the earliest recorded experiments on preservation of food by chilling. He had stuffed a Chicken with snow and left it outside to see how long putrefaction could be delayed. Unfortunately he caught a Cold which developed into Bronchitis of which he died some weeks later.
- ❖ When Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the Moon he also took the opportunity to become the first man to eat on the Moon. The gourmet snack chosen for this momentous occasion consisted of a small collection of dried peaches.
- ❖ 1000 Kilos of Cow can produce 1 Kilo of protein per day. 1000 kilos of Soya can produce 100 kilos of protein per day. 1000 kilos of Yeast can produce 100000 kilos of protein per day. 1000 kilos of Bacteria can produce 100,000,000,000,000 kilos of protein per day.
- ❖ Potato Crisps came into being in 1853 when chef George Crum (who was, incidentally, a Red Indian Chief) was asked to prepare a dish based on very thinly sliced Potatoes for Cornelius Vanderbilt the railway magnate, when he was staying at the Moon Lake House Hotel in Saratoga Springs. They were so successful that they became a regular feature of the hotel's menu. Smith's Crisps were first made in 1920 by Frank Smith in a North London garage and delivered using a pony and trap. Within a year he was employing 12 people and had to move to larger premises. 4 tonnes of Potatoes are needed to make each tonne of crisps, mainly because of the amount of water lost during frying.
- ❖ Winston Churchill used to enjoy Bovril and Sardines as a bedtime snack.
- ❖ In the wake of the Chernobyl incident the EEC "safe" limit for radioactivity in foods was 600 Bequerels per Kilogram. A report from the Berkeley Laboratories of the CEBG has shown that the normal levels of natural radiation in Nuts is 380 beq/kg, in Tea is 430 beq/kg and in Coffee is 1640 beq/kg.
- ❖ It is customary in the Far East to cook Duck after inserting a tube through it's neck and blowing into it to increase the surface area and achieve more even cooking. A Hygiene Inspector in Hong Kong was concerned about the possibility of introducing bacteria by this technique and decided to develop a more hygienic method. He obtained a cylinder of Nitrogen and, having connected it to his test duck, turned the tap on. The duck exploded violently putting the Inspector in hospital with shock and severe bruising for several days. Nothing daunted the Inspector decided to try again on his release from hospital. This time he sought the advice of the experts and called on the British Oxygen Company who supplied the gas. They advised the use of a regulator to reduce the pressure entering the duck. Nonetheless the second test duck, while not as spirited as it's predecessor, took off upon reaching a certain pressure and flew across the room emitting noises only slightly reminiscent of those it had emitted in life. Further testing established that the ideal inflation pressure for a duck is 5 pounds per square inch. It is not recorded whether anyone in Hong Kong is actually using the technique.
- ❖ Five lumps of sugar will give you enough energy to walk one mile.""
- ❖ Even the Roman's preferred white bread, Juvenal wrote of "The tender loaf, snowy white, made from soft wheat". In 63 BC during the reign of Augustus three types of bread were described:

Panis candidus - ie white bread, considered suitable for the wealthier guest

Panis secundus - served to less well-off guests and considered fit for poets

Panis plebius or sordidus - dark bread, probably made from barley. Given to slaves and sold to plebs

- ❖ Licorice Allsorts came into being in 1899 when Bassett's salesman Charlie Thompson dropped his sample bag on the floor of a customer's office. Until then the sweets had been sold separately but when the customer saw the mixture he placed an order for boxes of the premixed sweets
- ❖ In 1983 the EEC destroyed 866lb of apples, 1648 lemons, 1358 oranges and 41 cauliflowers every minute to support the prices paid to farmers.
- ❖ Cochineal is a red colouring material used in foods. It is obtained by extracting the colour from the bodies of insects of the families Coccoidea and Apidoidea. The pigment can form up to 22% of the body weight of the insect but even so it can take up to 100,000 insects to give one kilogram of dried Cochineal. World production today is a tiny fraction of that in the 16th to 19th centuries (in 1875 the Canary islands alone produced 3000 tons) since it was so difficult and costly to produce it has largely been replaced by the artificial red colours.
- ❖ Before one gets too alarmed at the number of eggs used in Victorian recipes it is worth remembering that eggs were much smaller then. While 8 size 3 - 4 eggs weigh 1 lb today the same weight would then be made up by 12 - 18 eggs.
- ❖ The brand name "Hovis" was a result of a competition to find a name for the new bread resulting from the process patented by Richard Smith of Stoke on Trent in 1886. It was chosen from hundreds of entries and is derived from the two Latin words 'hominis' meaning man's and 'vis' meaning strength. Combined they convey the idea that bread is the staff of life.
- ❖ Millbank Gaol in London was, when it was built in 1817, the largest in Europe holding 1200 prisoners. In 1822 the lack of discipline in the prison was attributed by its governors to excessive amounts of food and rations were cut. After 6 months on reduced rations 448 out of 850 prisoners were found to be suffering from scurvy and 150 from dysentery. Even after the rations were increased typhus and scurvy continued leaving 31 dead and 400 seriously incapacitated and it was found necessary to close the prison temporarily.
- ❖ Currants derive their name from the Greek town of Corinth from where the fruit was distributed to the rest of Western Europe. In the middle ages Currants were known as 'Raisins de Corauntz'. They are the dried fruit of the grape vine *vitis vitifera*.
- ❖ The famous scientist Francis Bacon died in 1626 after conducting the earliest recorded experiment on preservation of food by chilling. He had stuffed a Chicken with snow and left it outside to see how long putrefaction could be delayed. Unfortunately he caught a Cold which developed into Bronchitis of which he died some weeks later.
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- ❖ Nescafé was first made in 1938 and sold in the UK for the first time in 1939. It was originally intended that the product would be sold as a cube but when this proved unsatisfactory the Nestle scientists settled for a powder.
- ❖ It seems most likely that cheese was an accidental discovery resulting from having carried milk in a container made from an animal's stomach. The enzymes in the animal tissue

would have caused the milk to solidify. The same effect was achieved on a controlled basis by cutting up a piece of calf stomach and putting it in the vat of milk. The enzyme responsible, called Rennet, would dissolve out of the skin into the milk and cause the curd to be formed. Later ways of extracting the Rennet from the calf stomach and using it as a liquid. In more recent times animal Rennet has been replaced to a large extent by vegetable extracts that have a similar effect.

- ❖ Coffee, Tea and Chocolate all arrived in Britain during the 17th century.
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- ❖ In the mid 19th century there were 36,000 men, women and children selling ready prepared foods on the streets of London. Since the poor had no means of cooking food they relied almost exclusively on these early fast food outlets.

The content of this page may be changed or added to occasionally - but don't count on it! - last updated 10th Jan 2001