

What if Mr. Darcy came to dinner?

An 18th Century Christmas in Odessa



Courtesy photo from the
Historic Odessa Foundation

Aimee Reichert, an Historic Odessa Foundation culinary staff member, is in costume. "A Jane Austen Christmas" is this year's Christmas in Odessa tour theme, produced by the Women's Club of Odessa and the Historic Odessa Foundation.

By Carol Child
Correspondent

What if Mary Randolph, her cousin Thomas Jefferson, Jane Austen and Mr. Darcy (the handsome, dark protagonist of Austen's "Pride and Prejudice") all gathered round your holiday table for a hearth cooked meal. Now there's a romantic notion.

What would you serve? You might try your hand at a couple of the recipes Mary Randolph created during the late 18th century. She published her recipe book, "The Virginia House-wife", in 1824, and it rarely has been out of print since. Today you can buy it at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

On your menu it would seem appropriate to serve Mrs. Randolph's "apoquiniminc cakes" and with the hors d'oeuvres you might view it sensible to ply Mr. Darcy with some "genuine British punch."

It would seem a bit of a trick getting Jane Austen out of England; even so, "A Jane Austen Christmas," is this year's Christmas in Odessa tour theme, produced by the Women's Club of Odessa and the Historic Odessa Foundation.

Some of Mary Randolph's recipes appear at table when The Historic Odessa Foundation culinary experts prepare late 18th- to early 19th-century open-hearth-cooked meals for upper level members. The Foundation gives diners the recipes afterwards.

The hearth-cooked meals typify an upper-class Odessa holiday menu of the day.

"In the eighteenth century, working class diets were plebeian – recipes were handed down by oral tradition from mother to daughter because most working class women could not read," says Deborah Buckson, Historic Odessa Foundation executive director. "It was a close-knit group."

The wealthy, well educated, had a variety of foods, even citrus, and interesting recipes and recipe books because they could afford the ingredients and could read. Most of the people in Odessa in those days were Quakers, who were well educated and drew others in by educating them. Buckson notes that even with Odessa's close ties to Philadelphia, culinary ties were and are to the South.

Johnnye Baker, Historic Odessa Foundation education curator for American culinary art, asserts that the Historic Odessa Foundation staff is thoroughly versed in early Odessa cultural customs, having spent years in training and studying historical household management and domestic sciences. Every year members attend a George Mason University course on the subject in Fairfax County, Va. Additionally, they share information with museums in the area. The Foundation has many

primary source references.

The apoquiniminc cakes recipe looks pretty good, but you have to beat the ingredients for a half hour. "We have the kids make them when the teachers bring them on educational tours," says Baker. The Historic Odessa Foundation school and educational program covers nine different workshops, giving students the experience of walking in the shoes of their 18th-century counterparts. "We have kids from barely walking to college age, coming from all over," Baker says.

The Historic Odessa Foundation keeps a food history for the region from about 1760 to 1830. Mr. Darcy might have dined on dishes familiar to us today but seasoned distinctly: "In those days their melding process of flavors was different," Buckson says. "They mixed sweet and savory foods. They served only three courses and included the puddings with the main course, rather than separately as a dessert. For example, they would serve fowl, meat, or fish with pumpkin or sweet potato pudding. They used different seasonings for the different eighteenth-century palate. They added nutmeg to foods we wouldn't think of adding it today, for instance. It was not until later in the nineteenth century that the many course meals common today became fashionable."

The time spent whisking and beating ingredients explains at least in part why you wouldn't whisk the family off to a



Courtesy photo from the Historic Odessa Foundation

Chickens roasting on the open hearth that was prepared by Historic Odessa Foundation culinary staff.

workout facility around town. As an example, Maria Eliza Rundell, in "The American Domestic Cookery" (New York: Evert Duykinck, 1823) states in her recipe To Ice a Very Large Cake, "Whisk it for three hours till the mixture is thick and white ...". (From "The Festive Tradition: Table

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Decoration and Desserts in America," 1650-1900 by Louise Condon Belden, A Winterthur Book, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983). Hmmm ... could she have meant three minutes? One would hope. Nevertheless, after all, those were the days when women scrubbed the family laundry in a washtub out on the back porch – that probably includes the table linens -- even in December. Anyone up for arthritis?

Meanwhile, back to the table with Mr. Darcy: The Virginia House-Wife is said to document cookery in the early days of the American republic. It affords superb insight into 18th- and early 19th-century Odessa tastes. In her book, Mrs. Randolph provides practical tips for the beginning housewife -- "The prosperity and happiness of a family depend greatly on the order and the regularity established in it. Management is an art that may be acquired by every woman of good sense and tolerable memory" – and recipes she served at the Randolph's Richmond home, Moldavia, where invitations were coveted, and later at her Richmond boarding house, where, according to historical accounts, "wit, humor, and good-fellowship prevailed, but excess rarely."

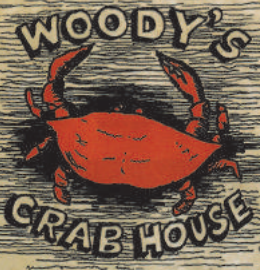
Mary Randolph developed practical specific weights and



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Brian Miller, Historic Odessa Foundation Culinary Staff Member, in costume.

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measurements that yielded recipes, calling on Virginia's bounty of fish, fowl, fruits and vegetables, simpler to follow than those in English cookbooks and especially popular in the South. She believed it better to serve a few tasty dishes than the many traditionally served on an upper-class English table.

Plantation Life at Rose Hill: The Diaries of Martha Ogle Forman, 1814-1845 (The Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, 1976) reveals an intimate look at local upper-class culinary tastes and household order of the day. In her diaries, Mrs. Forman, wife of Major General Thomas Marsh Foreman, a Revolutionary War officer, meticulously recorded daily life on the plantation -- "Dec. 26, 1817: pickled oysters today. March 30, 1838: My husband and self went to Church. Mr. Mercer and Mr. George Biddle here [travel being tedious, families commonly hosted overnight guests], the first asparagus this day. Dec. 20, 1830: We got from Baltimore 7 bushels of oysters ...".

Oysters in the region, scarce in today's market, were plentiful and common in those days, available to wealthy and working class alike at a reasonable price, Buckson states, and because Rose Hill Plantation, on the Sassafras River, is so close to Middletown/Odessa, the Historic Odessa Foundation uses Mrs. Forman's diary, a primary source document, frequently.

The Christmas in Odessa tour this year marks the grand



Courtesy photo from the Historic Odessa Foundation

LaDawn Tice, Historic Odessa Foundation culinary staff member, is pictured at the hearth.

unveiling of the National Historic Landmark, the Corbit-Sharp House. The house has been closed since January 2008 for major restoration. The tour will open the day after Thanksgiving, November 28, and run through December

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31. "A Jane Austen Christmas" will be exhibited in the Corbit-Sharp house. The Corbit-Sharp House and the Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House were placed on the National Park Service Network to Freedom this past spring. Recent research by Robin Krawitz, a historian with the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, uncovered evidence showing that both structures indeed were stops along the Underground Railroad.

And, what a drama might unfold when, just as you've passed the pumpkin pudding to Mr. Darcy, comes an urgent rapping at the back door and it's a runaway slave from a tobacco plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore needing to be hidden upstairs in the eaves behind that low door in the wall in back of the chifforobe.

The Corbit-Sharp house has just such a door. This year the new colors of this Philadelphia-style Georgian, designed by prominent Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloane, that William Corbit built in 1774, the year before Jane Austen was born, have been matched through advancements in scientific analysis to the original colors of the house. These colors are dramatically different from the colors they thought when the last study was done in the late 1970s-early 1980s, says Buckson.

Catherine Matsen, of Middletown, did the work. She is a conservator on the Winterthur staff. And since William Corbit, a tanner, was Odessa's leading citizen, you'd probably want to include the Corbits at table, especially since Jane Austen will be there.

Will Mr. Darcy be lurking in the shadows across the room? It might be worth checking out.

Author's note: Thank you to Deborah Buckson and Johnnye Baker at the Historic Odessa Foundation for graciously providing menus and recipes and suggesting primary source references.

Late 18th & Early 19th Century RECIPES

Apoquiniminc Cakes (Beaten Biscuits)

Put a little salt, one egg beaten, and four ounces of butter, in a quart of flour; make it into a paste with new milk, beat it for half an hour with a pestle, roll the paste thin, and cut it into round cakes; bake them on a gridiron and be careful not to burn them.

-- The Virginia House-wife, Mary Randolph, Virginia, 1824

* * *

Genuine British Punch (From Family Receipt Book, London, ca. 1811. Here, the Historic Odessa Foundation facilitates the recipe for use today.)



HISTORIC ODESSA FOUNDATION

NOVEMBER 28, 2008

DECEMBER 28, 2008

Join us for this year's 2008 Christmas Holiday Tours, featuring *A Jane Austen Christmas: Vignettes of Customs and Traditions*, at the newly restored Corbit-Sharp House (circa 1774).

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\$10 admission for adults/\$8 for groups/\$3 children five-11/children under five FREE.

Rub-- 1/2 lb. sugar lumps on the rind of 4 lemons and 1 orange to extract the oil
Place lumps in a 2-gallon bowl
Pare thin and add the parings of 2 lemons and 1 orange
Add—

2 cups sugar dissolved in 1 cup boiling water
Juice of above fruit
1/5 gallon Jamaica rum
1 pint brandy

Cover and allow this shrub, or sherbet, to blend for several days to improve the flavor. To serve, add as much water as conscience dictates—hot water in winter, cold in summer. Serve in wine glasses.

Celery Sauce

Wash and pare a large bunch of celery very clean, cut it into little bits, and boil it softly till it is tender. Add half a pint of cream, some mace, nutmeg, and a small piece of butter rolled in flour; then boil it gently. This is a good sauce for roasted or boiled fowls,



Courtesy photo

turkeys, partridges or any other game.

--The Virginia House-wife, Mary Randolph, Virginia, 1824

To find out more about the Historic Odessa Foundation, membership, tours, or to make reservations, visit www.historicodessa.org, fax (302) 378-4050 or phone (302) 378-4119.

Sweet Potato Pudding

Boil one pound of sweet potatoes very tender, rub them while hot through a colander, add six eggs, well beaten, three quarters of a pound sugar, three quarters of butter, and some grated nutmeg and lemon peel, with a glass of brandy; put a paste in the dish and when the pudding is done, sprinkle the top with sugar, and cover it with bits of citron. Irish potato pudding is made in the same manner, but it is not as good.



Courtesy photo

--The Virginia House-wife, Mary Randolph, Virginia, 1824.



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