

Searching for the Roots of Pumpkin and Squash in Quebec,

How did pumpkin and squash find their way onto the dinner tables of Quebec? There is no simple answer to this question. The story of pumpkin and squash illustrates, perhaps better than any other vegetables, the way our diet in the province, and indeed across north America, is the result of multiple influences, some of them with a grounding in Indigenous culture. This is certainly the case with the squash family. Squash and pumpkins were first domesticated over 10,000 years ago, mainly in what is now Mexico, although there are also examples of domestication in Central America and the Andes. It is easy to grow and highly adaptable; its seeds keep well. It was a staple food of many Indigenous cultures before Europeans ever arrived on the continent, often grown together with corn and beans – a system of companion planting known to the Iroquois as The Three Sisters.

When Jacques Cartier sailed down the St Lawrence River in 1535, he saw fields of squash, likely a variety of crookneck. Champlain, on a trip down to the New England region in 1605, wrote that he had been fed “little squashes as big as your fist, which we ate as a salad like cucumbers, and they were very good.” The thing is, both these explorers might have already been acquainted with squash, at least in the form of pumpkins. Christopher Columbus had brought back squash and pumpkin seeds after his voyage of 1492, and they spread quickly throughout Europe in the 1500s. In France, pumpkin was grown quite widely in gardens, although it likely remained a vegetable for the upper classes. A taste for pumpkin might have arrived in England via France, and a clue to this is a recipe for “Pumpion Pye” which appears in “The Compleat Cook” from the 1650s. The recipes were said to be those from the kitchens of Queen Mary, Charles I’s French queen, born Henriette Marie. The ingredients for this “pye” included the usual pumpkin spices, but also rosemary, parsley, marjoram, apples, currants and “as much Sugar as you think fit” – very different from the pie we know today.

Recipes for how to prepare pumpkin and squash turn up in Canada’s earliest writings mentioning food, and its first cookbooks. Apparently, Marie de l’Incarnation used squash to make soup, while Louis Hébert grew “sitrouilles” alongside other vegetables and herbs. A book from 1825 widely used in Quebec but printed in France, “La cuisinière bourgeoise”, does not mention

squash (“courage”, which Swedish naturalist, Pehr Kalm, had noted as abundant in new France gardens when he visited in 1749). It does, however, give a recipe for pumpkin soup (“Potage à la citrouille”) with instructions to add a piece of butter “as large as an egg,” to the cooked pumpkin along with milk and sugar. The later *Cuisinière canadienne* (1840), published in Montreal, only mentions pumpkin once, with some advice on making pumpkin preserves with either a sugar syrup or with molasses. In Canada’s first English-language cookbook, with the charming title of “A Cook Not Mad” (1831), we find the first recipes in the country for pumpkin pie and pumpkin pudding. This book was a reprint of an American cookbook printed the previous year. Less than a decade later, in 1840, “The Frugal Housewife’s Manual” appeared, thought to be the first English-language cookbook written and published in Canada (by “A.B.” from Grimsby, Ontario). While not including recipes for squash per se, the author advised on the best varieties to grow in the garden (Valparaiso, “Winter crooked-neck”. Summer “Scollop”, Summer “Crooked-neck”), adding that “the Lima Cocanut when baked in the oven is considered to be equal in taste to the Caroline Potatoe”.

A few decades later in Quebec, the cookbook “Household Recipes, or Domestic Cookery, by a Montreal Lady” (1865) featured squash and pumpkin more prominently. The author, Constance Hatton Hart, a descendant of the Harts who arrived in Trois-Rivières in 1763, suggested that cooked squash should be served simply, with butter, salt and pepper. Her pumpkin pie resembled the one we love to eat nowadays, but her recipe for Pumpkin Pudding – quite fancy – had a flavour combination that is no longer commonly used. Along with the usual pumpkin spices, the pudding was made with butter and cream....and wine, brandy, and rosewater.

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