

Peanuts

By Andrew F. Smith



When the nation celebrated its centennial in 1876, Philadelphia hosted the nation's Centennial Exposition. This fair inspired the development of the National Cookery Book by the Women's Centennial Committee. This was a professionally written cookbook, and copies sold briskly as souvenirs. A special feature of the book was that the committee addressed the question asked by foreigners about America's "national dishes" by sending a request for recipes to every "State and territory in the union." The only peanut recipe, "Groundnut Cakes," was from Philadelphia. It produced a confection that resembled small pieces of peanut brittle. According to the anonymous contributor, these "cakes" had been introduced into Philadelphia by refugees from the Haitian revolution in 1792. Whatever the source of the recipe, this "ground nut candy" was preferred to all other sweets by the 1840s, a position it held for at least the next thirty years.

Ground Nut Cakes*

Boil two pounds of light brown sugar in a preserving kettle, with enough water to wet it thoroughly, and form a syrup. Have prepared a quarter of a peck of groundnuts, roasted in the shell, and then shelled and hulled. When the sugar begins to boil, throw in the white of an egg to clear it; strain it, and try, by dropping a little of the syrup from a spoon into cold water, if it is done enough. If the sugar hardens and becomes brittle, it is sufficiently boiled, and must be taken from the fire; if not, boil it longer, and try it again. When it has become brittle in the water, remove it from the fire, and stir the nuts thoroughly through the sugar. Then wet with a brush a pasteboard or marble slab, free from all grease, and drop the hot mixture upon it from a spoon, in little lumps, which must be flattened into thin cakes, the size of a tumbler top. When cold take them off the board with a knife; the white of egg may be omitted if clearness is not desired.

*Many Philadelphians old enough to remember the days when neat colored women, in bright madras turbans, sat on low stools at the market corners, with waiters of these cakes for sale before them, may be glad to recall those memories, and perhaps to learn how the cakes so dear to their childhood were made!

Of the numerous families who fled St. Domingo during the massacre of 1791, and took refuge in our city, many brought slaves with them as nurses or attendants. It is to these women, their ready adaptation to new homes and altered circumstances, that we owe the introduction of this small traffic.

The day and generation of this people has passed away. Groundnut cakes--which the little folk call by a less dignified name--are fast becoming myths, and the bright turbans that nodded over the well-stocked waiters are seen no more.

In giving an account of these cakes, it is but fair to add, that one corner of the tempting waiter was always assigned to a collection of rough-looking little preparations called "cocoanut cakes," which no doubt had their admirers, as they were continually reproduced. They never, however, attained the fame of the groundnut cakes, though they cannot fail, thus linked with them, to be remembered affording another example among the many known in history, of mediocrity lifted into prominence by association!

Source: National Cookery Book. Philadelphia: Women's Centennial Committees, 1876. 269.

Editor's Note: For more information on peanuts, see Andrew F. Smith, *Peanuts: the Illustrious History of the Goober Pea*, University of Illinois (2002).