Dandelions for Dinner

"I'm hungry. What's for dinner?"

As a child living during the Great Depression, you would have heard many different answers to the question above. You might have eaten dandelion greens, pork belly meat, canned tomatoes, or nothing at all. One of the many problems people faced during the Depression was getting enough food: It was hard to find and expensive to buy.

With a soaring unemployment rate, many parents had no regular jobs and therefore no way to earn money to buy food for their families. Twenty percent of New York City's children were underweight; that number jumped to 90 percent in poorer sections of the country, such as Appalachia. To survive, Americans got creative as they tried to put dinner on the table.

Many families planted home gardens to provide their own vegetables. Others scavenged for rood near the places they lived. Children found berries, made salads of bitter dandelion leaves, or picked fruit from trees. Family farm animals, eventually became food, and wild rabbits were a main ingredient in stews.

Businesses offered some solutions to the problem of making do with little. Companies began publishing more cookbooks that featured interesting recipes with simple ingredients. Magazine articles and radio shows gave American women helpful advice on how to cook with what they had available. The Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air debuted on radio in 1924 as a daily broadcast and was very popular. (It ran through 1953.)

The federal government also offered assistance. In 1939, the Department of Agriculture created a food stamp program -- a system of coupons to help the poor buy surplus groceries. Cornflakes sold for eight cents a box, a can of salmon for a quarter, and ice cream cones for a nickel each. Canned foods became widely available in local stores as well. Canning preserved seasonal foods such as vegetables and fruits and made them available year-round.

For those who could afford to eat out, there were drugstores and soda fountains. Thanks to automobiles, it was easier for Americans to travel. Inexpensive, roadside family restaurants, such as Howard Johnson's, became popular.
Americans' palates also began to change during the Depression. Although many immigrant families abandoned their ethnic foods because of rising costs and inconvenience, Italians were one group who refused to do so. As a result, easy, healthful Italian dishes, such as spaghetti with tomato sauce, became standard American fare. New packaged foods that we still eat today, such as Rice Krispies, Kool-Aid, and Spare (canned precooked meat), and prepared meals like Kentucky Fried Chicken, were introduced during the Great Depression.

The saying "Necessity is the mother of invention" certainly is true regarding food during the Depression. Through the challenges people laced in finding, buying, and preparing food, they created new answers to the question What's for dinner? Next time you're hungry, consider trying an overflowing bowl of dandelion leaves. Just don't eat the flowers or stems!

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Depression-era families were encouraged to start gardens and grow their own food.

PHOTO (COLOR): Kellogg's Rice Krispies cereal and its Snap, Crackle, and Pop characters were introduced during the Great Depression.

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