

Iowa in the 1840s

Life and Diet in Iowa During the 1840s

In the 1840s, Iowa was still a frontier territory, with settlers carving out homesteads on the prairies and along rivers. Most food came from subsistence farming, hunting, and foraging. Families grew staples like potatoes, beans, squash, and corn, while raising chickens, pigs, and sometimes a cow. Wild game, including deer and turkey, was a crucial source of protein, and fishing in nearby streams supplemented the diet.

Preservation methods were rudimentary—smoking, salting, drying, and pickling were essential to survive Iowa's long winters. Sugar was scarce and expensive, so sweeteners like honey, sorghum, or homemade maple syrup were favored. Meals were hearty and simple, often cooked in cast iron over open hearths or outdoor pits. Diets were high in fat and calories to fuel the intense physical labor of pioneer life.

The early Industrial Revolution began to ripple into the Midwest in the late 1840s and 1850s, slowly transforming how people accessed goods. While Iowa remained largely agricultural, the development of steamboats, railroads, and mechanized mills made it easier to transport goods and introduced new tools, canned goods, and store-bought ingredients into local trading posts. Still, homemade meals using local ingredients remained the norm—blending ingenuity, necessity, and a strong connection to the land.

Vegetables

How about a vegetable chowder? Or zucchini bread pudding? (If this comes out sweet, you should enter it in the dessert category. It is up to you to decide.) Got any good ideas for cucumbers? Can you do something clever with a potato or a sweet potato? How about lima beans or peas? Etc...

Desserts

Let's Go Wild! Look at all those fruits and berries you could make a pie or cobbler out of. How about an upside-down cake? Or try a custard pie. Or to get really bold, how about a vinegar pie? Don't forget to check out the available nuts. How about a cake or bread pudding with a fruit sauce?

Breads

Lots here too. Yeast doughs or biscuit type, sourdough, muffins, pancakes, etc. Remember to garnish or bring butter, sauce or real maple syrup to serve with it!

Random Thoughts

Let your imagination run wild. "If they had it they used it." Not much went to waste. Search through any old or new cookbooks or magazines or use an old family favorite recipe. Try substitutes for ingredients in the recipes if the ones they call for were not available during our time period. Remember people worked very hard physically and were not real concerned about fats in their diets. If a recipe used canned mushroom soup for example try

using cream, sliced mushrooms and a little salt. Instead of Cake mix, bring flour, sugar and baking powder. Butter can be used liberally. Bacon as a seasoning is common.

NOTE: Processed foods are not allowed (i.e. creamed soups, ketchup, tomato sauce, tomato paste, tomato soup, etc.)

Ingredients Available on the Iowa Frontier in the 1840s

MEATS & FISH

Beef	Fish (local)	Pork	Turkey
Chicken	Goat	Salt Pork/Beef	Wild Game

VEGETABLES

Carrots	Parsnips	Squash	Acorn Squash
Asparagus	Peas	Crookneck Squash	Beans
Cauliflower	Potatoes	Hubbard Squash	Celery
Corn			

MORE VEGETABLES

Kidney Beans	Cucumbers	Radishes	Summer Squash
Pole Beans	Garlic	Salsify	Turban Squash
Lima Beans	Lettuce	Spinach	Sweet Potatoes
String Beans	Mushrooms (local)	Tomatoes	Beets
Broccoli	Onions	Turnips	Cabbage

FRUITS & BERRIES

Apples	Currants	Muskmelon	Raspberries
Blackberries	Elderberries	Peaches	Rhubarb
Cherries	Gooseberries	Plums	Strawberries
Citron Melons	Grapes	Prunes	Watermelon
Crab Apples	Pecans	Raisins	

VERY EXPENSIVE FRUITS

Apples (dried)

Lemons

Oranges

SPICES AND CONDIMENTS

Allspice

Cloves

Horseradish

Parsley

Bay Leaves

Coriander

Nutmeg

Pepper

Caraway

Cumin

Mace

Peppermint

Cayenne Pepper

Curry Powder

Mustard

Marjoram

Cilantro

Garlic

Mustard Seed

Sage

Cinnamon

Ginger

Paprika

Spearmint

BAKER'S SUNDRIES

Alum

Flour

Rolled Oats

Tapioca

Bacon Fat

Honey

Rye

Vanilla

Baking Powder

Lard (no
shortening)

Salt Springs

Vinegar

Barley

Maple - cut loaf

Sea Salt

Wheat

Buckwheat

Maple - granulated

Soda

Wild Rice

Butter

Maple Sugar

Soda Crackers

Yeast

Cheese

Maple Syrup

Saltpeter

Chocolate

Molasses

Sorghum

Coconut

Olive Oil

Sugar - brown
Golden C, refined

Corn Starch

Rice

Sugar - crushed

Cream of Tarter

Rock Salt

Sugar - powdered

Eggs

NUTS

Butternuts

Hazelnuts

Hickory Nuts

Walnuts

