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CHRISTMAS DINNER AT SUTTER'S FORT IN 1845



MERRY CHRISTMAS

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COVER ARTWORK BY ROBIN HOLMES

CHRISTMAS DINNER AT SUTTER'S FORT IN 1845

"One of the most interesting recollections of my life was a Christmas dinner which was eaten at Sutter's Fort in 1845. On the occasion referred to there were present besides myself Captain Sutter, John Bidwell, P. B. Reading, S. J. Hensley, and two or three others who I do not now recall. I was then acting as assistant clerk at the fort and had determined to essay a Christmas dinner.

"The cook was an English cockney, but a good fellow withal who, when approached upon the subject, declared that he could get up a menu which would rival Delmonico's best efforts, if I would only leave the whole matter in his hands. I agreed to his terms, but did not quite see how he could do it, as our commissariat consisted wholly of beef, frijoles (brown beans), unbolted flour, Mexican panoche sugar, about the color of natural beeswax and of about the same consistency, with an abundance of chile colorado (red peppers), plenty of salt and black pepper with coffee and tea. There were no vegetables, butter, or milk, but he was so confident I let him have his own way.

"He also promised to top off the whole with a dessert consisting of a real John Bull plum pudding. I again became a little

incredulous, for the only ingredients at hand necessary to construct the delectable dish was some unbolted black flour and panoche sugar; no spices, butter, milk, eggs, or raisins. To be sure the river was lined with a profusion of a small black, wild grape, a little more sour than concentrated vinegar. He went to work, but kept his doings so secret that we were utterly conjectureless as to what might be the result of his culinary machinations,

“Well, to abbreviate, the day and hour at last arrived and we were ushered into the dining room in the building, only the ruins of which are now standing at that place . . .

“We took our seats at the table with expectancy and no little curiosity. The first course was beef soup, garnished with frijoles, chile colorado, and garlic; the second course was roast beef; the third course was baked beef pie; the fourth course was stewed beef; and the fifth course was fried beef, accompanied with black, unbolted flour bread. All these dishes were garnished with the same condiments as the first, but the chile colorado dominated over all the others, and our bodies were aglow with heat, and our stomachs were like a boiling cauldron. We were all very anxious for the plum pudding, to counteract the artificial heat created by the red peppers. He soon brought it in with an air of self-gratulation. And such a pudding! It is doubtful if another, to compare with it, has ever been or ever will be concocted. In its construction the cook had used common beef tallow liberally, and filled it with the aforesaid sour grapes, and seasoned it unsparingly with chile colorado, black pepper, salt, and garlic. He also made a sort of sauce with the panoche sugar and tallow, and had also dosed that liberally with chile and black peppers. He said he had been in the country sometime, and had learned the Mexican way of cooking, which he pronounced the most healthy and delicious in the world, and that having no spices he used the same condiments in all his dishes.

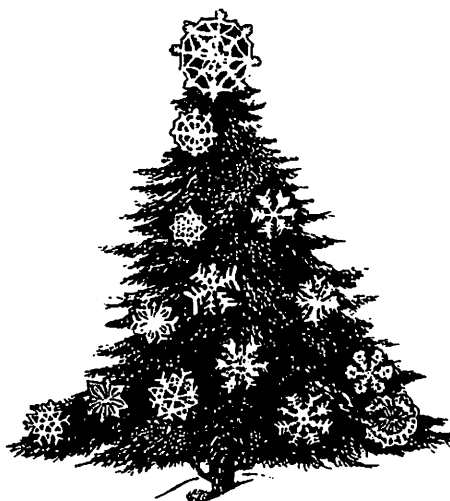
“Captain Sutter was a singular man about his food. He would partake of anything set before him without a remark, but this dish bothered him. He ate it, however, without saying a word, although his manner betrayed some curiosity as to its construction. As he would gulp it down he would look around at us, with a sort of dazed and helpless look, evidently to see if we were really eating it, and how the thing was affecting us. But he was too well bred and dignified in his manners to say a word. We had all been helped plentifully to the dish, but after taking a mouthful or two we were as perplexed as the captain, and gazed at each other and at the dish in silent astonishment, until Reading broke the silence by asking:

“Cook, what is it?”

“Why, sir,’ replied the cook, ‘it is a regular Christmas plum pudding, Mexican style.’”

“We soon concluded it was a little too rich for our American palates, and as we moved back from the table Captain Sutter looked up with a sigh of relief. From politeness he had continued trying to eat of this wonderful production so long as he thought we were doing so. And thus ended our Christmas dinner at Sutter’s Fort in 1845.”





**SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P. O. BOX 1175
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA 95806**