Popcorn in American History

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C&T 5520: Writer’s Craft
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Popcorn! Popcorn!

Light, fluffy, crunchy, and delicious popcorn. It may be just another familiar snack food to you, but this popular treat is one of the oldest snacks known to mankind. When you crunch on a delicious morsel of popcorn you are actually eating a snack thousands of years old. Archeologists found popcorn in a bat cave over 5,000 years ago. In Peru, scientists found un-popped kernels over 1,000 years old. Surprisingly, the kernels still popped! Not only is it the oldest snack to date but it also plays a unique role in the history of the American movie industry. From ancient history to modern day, popcorn remains one of our favorite snacks at the movies and at home.
The Unique Characteristics of Popcorn

The next time you go to the movies, take a closer look at your popcorn before you eat it. Though it seems like an ordinary snack, the science and unique structure of a popcorn kernel is actually quite extraordinary. The unique structure of the popcorn kernel lies in its tough outer shell, or hull. It is impenetrable, except to high heat. The inside of the kernel, or endosperm, is a dense little package of starch. Inside the kernel has a bit of water (14% is ideal for popping) and when heated at high temperatures, the kernel acts like a pressure cooker. Like a volcano, the inside when heated, becomes a molten version of starch and it erupts and breaks the shell to make the delicious white puff that we know as popcorn. When the starch rapidly cools, no two kernels are exactly alike. There are two types of popcorn shapes: Butterfly and Mushroom. The butterfly flakes have an irregular shape with “wings”. Mushroom flakes are ball-shaped with few wings.

(On L) Mushroom flakes are less fragile and therefore commonly used for caramel corn or prepackaged popcorn. (On R) Butterfly flakes have “wings” and generally are considered fluffier with a better texture.
Popcorn’s Rise to Popularity

In 1893 Charles Cretors invented the first mobile popcorn machine and presented it at the Columbian Expo in Chicago. It was a simple steam engine that attached to a peanut cart in a mixture of butter and lard. It was a huge success and with this invention, popcorn’s mobility and reach spread to all types of Americana recreational activities—carnivals, baseball games, parks, and circuses. At this same expo, FW Rueckheim introduced a molasses flavored “Candied Popcorn with Peanuts” Though it was quite sticky and initially was not quite successful, he would later in 1896, work with his brother Louis Rueckheim to alter the recipe and package it as Cracker Jack. With these two inventions, popcorn became the go to snack in American culture and could be found everywhere…except the movie theatres.

Cracker Jack was often associated with Baseball games and is even mentioned in the American classic song, “Take me out to the Ballgame.”

Charles Cretor’s popcorn machine-first introduced at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893.
Movie Palaces vs. Movie Theatres

Today popcorn is synonymous with the movie theatre experience but it was not always this way. In the early 1900s, some movie theatres were trying to appeal to the taste of the upper class by imitating the theatre going experiences and calling their venues “movie palaces”. Movie palaces were fancy theatres with crystal chandeliers and red, velvet carpet. The owners of these movie palaces wanted to recreate the experience of going to a real theatre. Owners of the movie palaces didn't want to see commonplace and messy snacks like popcorn so they were never sold in these palaces. If you wanted to eat popcorn you wouldn’t find it at the movies.

Owners of Movie Palaces like the one pictured above didn’t want to deal with the mess or the “low brow” stigma attached to popcorn.
How Popcorn Survived The Great Depression

However, during the Great Depression, movie palaces took a big financial hit and many went bankrupt. A few vendors began selling popcorn stands outside of these movie palaces. Popcorn was affordable and cheap to produce and amazingly the theatres with popcorn stands not only survived the Great Depression but actually thrived. Popcorn was a small luxury people could still afford.

Movie theatre chains on the East coast experimented with the popcorn business. Some theatres sold popcorn and some did not. Those that did sell popcorn did not go bankrupt, while those that did not sell popcorn went bankrupt. Many struggling farmers sold popcorn as their main source of income during the depression. Orville Redenbacher, now the most widely recognized brand of popcorn, started his popcorn business by selling bags of popcorn out of his car trunk. One businessman during this era remarked, "Find a good place to sell popcorn and then build a theatre around it."

Orville Redenbacher made his fortune selling popcorn from the trunk of his car.
Kemmons Wilson-A Popcorn Success Story

Another example of a popcorn success story is Kemmons Wilson. At the age of seventeen, Kemmons Wilson dropped out of high school to help support his family in 1930. Like many others during the Great Depression his father lost his job and Kemmons picked up small jobs here and there such as working as a soda jerk and newspaper delivery boy. He eventually made a deal with a movie theatre to sell popcorn outside of the theatre. He bought a popcorn machine for $50 and began selling bags of popcorn for 5 cents each. Soon Wilson was making about $40-$50 dollars a week. By comparison, the theatre was struggling to make $25 dollars a week. The manager forced Wilson out and went into the popcorn vending business himself. Wilson later on would make his own fortune by owning his own theatre and then eventually founded the hotel chain, “Holiday Inn”.

Before his success as CEO of Holiday Inn, Kemmons Wilson, was a successful popcorn vendor. His bags of popcorn sold outside the movie theatre earned more money than movie theatre sold in tickets.
How to Pop Your Own Popcorn at Home

Popping your own popcorn at home is surprisingly simple. With just a few ingredients you’re in for a delicious and fun treat.

Ingredients:

- ¼ cup cooking oil
- ½ cup popcorn kernels
- Optional: butter, salt (or other condiments for added deliciousness!)

Steps:

1. Heat a 3-quart saucepan over high heat for about two minutes. *Tip-make sure it has a cover!
2. Pour about ¼ cup cooking oil into the pan. Make sure it coats the bottom.
3. Lower heat to medium high.
4. Add 3-4 kernels. When they pop, add just enough popcorn to cover the bottom of the pan.
5. Lower the heat, cover the pan and shake.
6. When popping stops, pour into a bowl.
7. Add melted butter and salt. Some additional delicious flavors can include garlic salt, Siracha sauce, cinnamon and sugar, or lime and cilantro. You can get creative.
8. Enjoy!
Resources

The Popcorn Book by Tomie de Paola

“Why did we eat popcorn at the Theatres?” Smithsonian.com

The Snack that Saved the Movies-Filmmaker IQ

“Kemmons Wilson, 90, Dies-Founder of Holiday Inn.” NYtimes.com

The Great Drepression-Wikipedia.com
Popcorn-The Superior Snack?

Imagine it’s a Friday night and your family is getting ready for a movie night. You can’t wait to snuggle in your pajamas on the couch and watch a movie with your loved ones. The last touch you need for the perfect evening is a snack to enjoy. Did you mind go to popcorn? For many Americans popcorn is the obvious choice. I believe that popcorn is a superior snack because it is delicious and healthy, because it is affordable, and most of all because the history of popcorn has a special role in American culture.

Popcorn is delicious and healthy. Sometimes you can be in the mood for a salty snack or sometimes you can be in the mood for a sweet snack. Sometimes you can be in the mood for a sweet and savory combo. Popcorn is one of the few snacks on the market that has the flavors for both. Will you ever find potato chips that offer all three of these combinations? Probably not. Popcorn is delicious because you can make your own popcorn. Rarely do people make their own potato chips but making your own popcorn is easy and delicious. When you make your own popcorn you can control how healthy you want to make it. If you want to keep it healthy, you can add less butter and salt and even experiment with healthy alternatives like cinnamon, or lime and cilantro. Food scientists have discovered that popcorn has an abundant source of fiber and some vitamin B minerals like magnesium and iron. Because popcorn has a higher volume per teaspoon of kernels, you feel like you are eating a satisfying amount when you snack on popcorn. Unlike other snacks, popcorn increases in volume when heated. Think about it—the calories of four cups of popcorn is equivalent to ¼ cup of Raisinettes! Or the number of calories in four cups of popcorn is equivalent to 1 cup of potato chips.

Popcorn is affordable. A bag of chips can cost up to $4.00. With the same cost, a microwave, and regular brown paper lunch bag you can pop over four cups of popcorn. A 4 pound bag of popcorn kernels sell for $3.50 on amazon. With four pounds you can make roughly 96 servings of popcorn! Think about it. For the cost of 1 bag of chips you can make 96 servings of popcorn! Popcorn kernels have an extra long shelf life as well so you do not need worry about your popcorn kernels spoiling.

Most of all, popcorn is superior because it has a special role in our history and culture. When you’re eating popcorn, you’re not just eating any ordinary snack. You are eating a part of history since popcorn dates back to over 5,000 years ago! Also, popcorn was the one snack Americans could still afford during the Great Depression. This small, humble snack saved many movie theatres from bankruptcy. Even today, movie theatres make 50% of their profits from the concession stands, which help keep the costs of the actual movie ticket lower. Perhaps if popcorn didn’t find its place in American culture, the movie theatres as we know it wouldn’t exist today. That is why popcorn is the superior snack.
## Popcorn vs. The Potato Chip

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popcorn</th>
<th>The Potato Chip</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Popcorn Image]</td>
<td>![Potato Chip Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The invention of the popcorn cart allowed for greater mobility, thus making it the number one snack at outdoor, recreational events.</td>
<td>The potato chip has no mobile equivalent. It requires a full kitchen to prepare the snack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very little preparation is needed to make popcorn.</td>
<td>The potato chip requires more preparation (washing, slicing, preparing the oil), time and space to make.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popcorn kernels are affordable.</td>
<td>Potatoes are more costly than popcorn kernels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Popcorn can be prepared both salty and sweet, appealing to salty and sweet palates.</td>
<td>Potato chips are usually prepared only with salty flavors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popcorn has greater volume per teaspoon of kernels when popped. While most food shrink in size and volume when heated, popcorn expands.</td>
<td>The Potato Chip shrinks when fried thus requiring more potatoes to make a sizable amount.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Popcorn kernels last a long time and can be stored without refrigeration.</td>
<td>Potatoes have a short shelf life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popcorn saved the movie industry from bankruptcy during the Great Depression.</td>
<td>The potato chip has no such record of assisting other industries from bankruptcy.</td>
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