

The History of Popcorn Poppers

Popcorn has been known for at least 5,000 years. South American Indians ate it, made beer with it, and created a god to worship for its continued blessings upon them. It was a staple of the Native Americans' diet, as well as an ornament for the distinguished lady's hair. American colonists made soup from popcorn, and no Victorian Christmas tree was truly decorated without strands and strands of popcorn adorning it. Baseball games, county fairs and circuses couldn't function without the sales of the hot, fluffy kernels. During World War II, sugar rationing caused popcorn to become the nation's substitute for sweet treats, causing it to be consumed at three times the rate it had been before the War began. And a trip to the movies wouldn't be complete without a tub of popcorn's buttery goodness to accompany the film. Popcorn has become such a part of our cultural history that school children have Popcorn Day to celebrate its long and illustrious history. Still, history tends to focus on the ones making and eating popcorn (or decorating their hair or Christmas trees with it) than on the technology that brought about the change from dried kernel of grain to fluffy, fantastic treat. The first popcorn makers were hot rocks, heated at the fire's edge till they glowed. The popcorn would be thrown on top of these stones and then fly off as it popped. The people would have to run and try to catch it. If you were successful, your reward was getting to eat the kernels you caught. The Mohica's, a Pre-Incan society on the north coast of Peru, used primitive clay pots, shallow with narrow top openings and a single handle, to pop their corn. These pots were highly decorated with motifs, and were sometimes sculpted into the shape of an animal, such as a cat. The cook would add heated sand and then the kernels would be placed on top. In this way, the hot sand would cause the kernels to pop, but you didn't have to run around trying to catch them as they burst. Around 300, the Zapotecs of Mexico were decorating their clay popcorn pots with figures of a god wearing popcorn in his hair and around his neck. Popcorn had gone heavenly. By the time of the Spanish conquistadors, nearly 700 different kinds of popcorn were being grown and popped from the coasts of South America to the Great Lakes and Canada. Most Natives used some sort of small clay pot, but one South American tribe preferred large shallow pots, some as much as 8 feet across, to the small, family size. Talk about a popcorn party! The English colonists at Plymouth Plantation were treated to popcorn by the Wampanoag at the "first Thanksgiving." They may have been the first to throw some kernels of popcorn into a heated iron pot and then quickly throw the lid on to stop it from popping out. We may never really know, but what we do know is that by the time of the American Revolution, this was the accepted way for popcorn to be popped in the "civilized" world. Someone, somewhere, discovered that adding a little oil or fat to the pot kept the popcorn from scorching so much. This made it ideal for the colonists' favorite recipe, fluffy white popcorn with sugar and milk for breakfast. The first mention of popcorn in a cookbook in 1846, speaks of popping the corn in a kettle or a "basket." The basket being referred to was probably one of the crudely made affairs that blacksmiths and tinkers were manufacturing by the scores. These were tightly spaced wire or metal mesh, with a long handle that could be held over the fire from a distance, so as not to scorch the popper's clothing or burn their fingers. Throughout much of the 1800's, the long-handled basket evolved into a long handled pan or box, made of tin or copper. This is how the Victorians popped the mounds and mounds of popcorn needed for their holiday festooning. In 1890's peanut vendors began experimenting with large-scale commercial poppers. The first were unreliable steam-driven affairs that were little more than large versions of the home popper - a large tin or copper pan with a lid held over the steam. The temperature and amount of the steam spelled success or failure, and new and improved ways were sought. In 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Charles Cretors unveiled his steam driven combination peanut roaster and popcorn machine. His machine kept the steam temperature consistent and was capable of roasting 20 pounds of peanuts while it popped the corn. Street vendors soon took notice and popcorn became a popular treat available all across the country. By 1900, Cretors was selling popcorn wagons - large horse drawn affairs that popped and stored the corn, roasted the peanuts and brought their owner/operators a profit of 70 cents on the dollar. Popcorn had become big money to the little guy. Electric popcorn machines came into being between 1910 and 1920. Electricity was quieter, cleaner and made for a lighter machine. (Some of the steam carts weighed as much as 500 pounds!) With the advent of the moving picture show in 1917, many a popcorn and peanut vendor could be found on the sidewalks in front of the cinema, hawking their wares to the crowds going in. It wasn't long before movie house owners realized the money to be made by having their own popcorn machines inside the cinemas. By the 1930's a machine 2/3 the size of the street vendor's cart and able to store the popped corn as well as just make it was a staple on every movie house concession stand counter. In 1941, World War II regulations ended the production of popcorn machines for the "duration." The manufacturers retooled and turned to making airplane parts and other "essential to the war effort" products. Materiel shortages at war's end saw popcorn machines with all-wood cabinetry, harking back to the days of the wooden street vendor. After the war, popcorn saw a decline in its popularity, as television took over as the major form of entertainment for much of the population. Movie house popcorn makers weren't in much demand, and many manufacturers did little in the way of innovation or redesign. Cretors called in the designer of the Studebaker automobile to give their new line of popcorn machines a more streamlined, space-age look. Production switched from smaller models better suited to lunch counters and small cinemas, to larger, mass-popping models for drive-in theaters, stadium concessions stands and the growing-in-popularity multiplex movie houses. The 60's and 70's saw popcorn machines enter homes and dorm rooms, with the advent of the hot air popper. This new technology allowed smaller and smaller appliances to be made. Popcorn had come home! Recently, popcorn machines have once again embraced the newest in technology - computerization. You can now buy a popcorn popper that automatically measures and dispenses the butter and other seasoning to your specifications. Movie theaters and other commercial venues can purchase machines that allow for the making of caramel corn, cheese corn and other popcorn treats. Popcorn may just be the oldest snack in history. Popcorn makers have come a long way from heated rocks by the fireside. Over the centuries, they have evolved and adapted to the newest and best technology had to offer. It's certain that the future of popcorn is assured, and so is the future of newer and better popcorn machines.

About the Author

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