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IN OUR SCHOOLS

Staten Island youngsters learn butter doesn't always come from the supermarket

by DIANE LORE

With Thanksgiving on the horizon, some of Staten Island's littlest learners got a first-hand lesson about one of the key ingredients used in preparing the modern Thanksgiving meal: Butter.

According to Smithsonian magazine's website, the Pilgrims couldn't "pass the butter" around the first Thanksgiving table because that was a foodstuff that hadn't made its way north to New England in the New World by 1621. Even if it had, it surely wouldn't have come from a supermarket, as these sharp 3 and 4 year olds found out.

Dressed in a white cap and colonial-period shift, Lorraine Danichewski, an instructor at the Wagner College Early Childhood Center, commanded the rapt attention of about two dozen pre-schoolers gathered around.

"Does anyone know where you can find cream?" asked Mrs. Danichewski.

"You get the cream out of an Oreo!" offered a 3 year old in the audience.

The group laughed.

Mrs. Danichewski admitted that in lieu of the actual cow in the back yard, she picked up a pint of cream from the supermarket on her way into school. From that container she could make whipped topping for, say, pumpkin pie. And, if she churned long enough, Mrs. Danichewski said, she would produce butter and eventually cheese.

"Cheese doesn't just come out of a cow," Mrs. Danichewski said, adding with a broad smile, "You have to do something to it first."

You've got to work the cream — seriously work it.

Mrs. Danichewski picked up her dasher, a stick with a wooden "x" at the base, and mashed the liquid in a ceramic jug. Every student took a turn.

Slosh. Swish. Slosh.

"Churning butter was the children's chore," explained Pam Dicke, director of Wagner's Early Childhood Center.

In American colonial times, the tedious process traditionally accompanied a simple, but catchy song, she said.

"Singing makes the butter come faster," cheered Mrs. Danichewski.

"Come, butter! Come, butter!" chanted the children. "Peter stands at the gate, waiting for his butter cake! Come, butter, come. Come, butter, come."

Each time they sang, the children clapped or raised their hands in the air. The song went faster and faster.

Finally, the cream stopped sloshing. Butter had formed. After about 30 minutes, Mrs. Danichewski poured the contents of the jug onto a slotted metal spoon. Buttermilk, the liquid which separated from the cream, spilled into a bowl. Butter remained on the spoon.

“You have to wash the butter,” said Mrs. Danichewski. She bathed it with water — which acts as a preservative — then used a wooden paddle to shape it into block. She pressed a smiley face into the surface.

Instructors spread butter on some crackers. The children crunched into them. They liked the results.

“Mmmm” and “yummy” came from the crowd.

Here’s a recipe for parents and children who want to try making butter together at home:

You’ll need two cups of heavy whipping cream, which should yield one cup of butter. Add cream to the bowl of a food processor. Blend for about 10 minutes. The cream will separate and leave buttermilk behind. Discard the liquid. Rinse with water. Fit into a bowl or form into butter sticks or patties. Spread or use immediately, or refrigerate.

Thanks to my colleague, Advance food editor and mom Pam Silvestri, who contributed the information for this article, and Happy Thanksgiving to all!