

Before the mid-nineteenth century, people in the United States ate most foods only in season.

Drying, smoking, and salting could preserve meat for a short time, but the availability of fresh meat, like that of fresh milk, was very limited; there was no way to prevent spoilage.

But in 1810 a French inventor named Nicolas Appert developed the cooking-and-sealing process of canning.

And in the 1850's an American named Gail Borden developed a means of condensing and preserving milk.

Canned goods and condensed milk became more common during the 1860's, but supplies remained low because cans had to be made by hand.

By 1880, however, inventors had fashioned stamping and soldering machines that mass-produced cans from tinplate.

Suddenly all kinds of food could be preserved and bought at all times of the year.

Other trends and inventions had also helped make it possible for Americans to vary their daily diets.

Growing urban populations created demand that encouraged fruit and vegetable farmers to raise more produce.

Railroad refrigerator cars enabled growers and meat packers to ship perishables great distances and to preserve them for longer periods.

Thus, by the 1890's, northern city dwellers could enjoy southern and western strawberries, grapes, and tomatoes, previously available for a month at most, for up to six months of the year.

In addition, increased use of iceboxes enabled families to store perishables.

An easy means of producing ice commercially had been invented in the 1870's, and by 1900 the nation had more than two thousand commercial ice plants, most of which made home deliveries.

The icebox became a fixture in most homes and remained so until the mechanized refrigerator replaced it in the 1920's and 1930's.

Almost everyone now had a more diversified diet.

Some people continued to eat mainly foods that were heavy in starches or carbohydrates, and not everyone could afford meat.

Nevertheless, many families could take advantage of previously unavailable fruits, vegetables, and dairy products to achieve more varied fare.