As far as iconic Canadian foods go, pralines don’t spring to mind as immediately as poutine, maple syrup, or tourtière. Nowadays, the term is mostly associated with France or New Orleans\(^1\). But it was not always so. In early 18th century, an original confection also termed praline emerged from the cultural encounter of First Nations people and voyageurs. This frontier food remained iconic for roughly a century, as noted by various contemporary observers, such as missionary Joseph-François Lafitau and trader François-Victor Malhiot\(^2\). In this article, we review the spread of the original pralines from France to England and then to North America in order to contextualize the development of what we term *pralines des voyageurs*, and attempt to reconstruct their recipe.

**Pralines in France and England**

Pralines originally referred to almonds coated in sugar, in a manner devised by a sommelier of Maréchal du Plessis-Praslin, after whom the 1630s confection is said to be named\(^3\). Although a 1650 account largely supports this origin story\(^4\), many of its colorful details remain unsubstantiated\(^5\). What is clear is that by the middle of the 17th century recipes for pralines appeared broadly in print, which surely helped spark their dissemination. *Prasline d'amandes* is, for instance, found in *L'Escole parfaite des
officiers de bouche (1662)\textsuperscript{6}, which sources it from *Le Confiturier de la Cour*, itself initially published as part of *Le Maître d’Hôtel* (1659)\textsuperscript{7}. Other versions followed, although with the same basic construction\textsuperscript{8}. Within twenty years, Richelet could thus formally define the term as “amandes qu’on fait bouillir dans du sucre jusqu’à ce qu’elles soient un peu sèches et qu’elles craquent sous la dent”\textsuperscript{9}.

Pralines crossed the Channel before the end of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, but their English name remained in flux. While the two main French-English dictionaries of that epoch\textsuperscript{10} – Miège’s *Great French Dictionary* of 1688\textsuperscript{11} and Boyer’s *The Royal Dictionary* of 1699\textsuperscript{12} – propose crisp almonds, the English version of *L’Escole parfaite…* preserves “à la praline”\textsuperscript{13}. Throughout the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, variants such as prawlins, proalins, and prawlongs, along with fry’d, parch’d, and burnt almonds also appear, but the original French vocable also persists\textsuperscript{14}. The London-based confectioner Borella\textsuperscript{15}, in his influential *Court and Country Confectioner* (1770)\textsuperscript{16}, in particular, uses “the words praline, and to praline, praliné, […] as there is no English word to express the real idea of the French in this sort of preserving of almond”\textsuperscript{17}. Whatever the “real idea” behind the term might be, Borella’s preference for the French locution highlights its persistence in the English language throughout the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

**Pralines in North America**

Whichever name *amandes à la praline* were given, the confection was known in both France and England by the start of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Therefore, at least some of the North American colonists must have been acquainted with the delicacy, especially considering the European diet was then largely favored\textsuperscript{18}. However, because cookbooks
and dictionaries written in North America only appeared around 1800\textsuperscript{19}, we must track cognizance of pralines through other means.

In New France, Mother Marie-Andrée Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène, who spent her childhood in Paris and then years in Québec city’s fashionable society before joining the Hospitaller of the Hôtel-Dieu of Québec\textsuperscript{20}, referred to the enjoyment of eating pralines to explain the popularity of popcorn to her French correspondent: \textit{“nos Canadiennes sont friandes de [maïs fleuri], et en mangent comme des pralines.”}\textsuperscript{21} Going beyond metaphors, Antoine Simone Le Page du Pratz, a French-trained engineer who worked as a Louisiana planter from 1718 to 1734\textsuperscript{22}, reports that pecans were then used to make \textit{“prâlines aussi bonnes que celles des amandes”}\textsuperscript{23}, maybe inspired by the metropolitan confectioners who were by then similarly substituting pistachios for almonds\textsuperscript{24}. These references to pralines in contemporary sources attest of how well-known they were in Europe, and reveal that eating habits were gradually adapting to local ingredients.

In British Canada, however, pralines were not commonly mentioned. Confectioners and other merchants of Québec City and Montréal, for instance, do not use the term in their adverts. James Cockburn, Québec surgeon and pharmacist\textsuperscript{25}, sells sweet almonds, not pralines\textsuperscript{26}, as does the Montreal-based tradesman James Ellice Campbell.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, the estate of Québec confectioner Richard Shephard lists burnt almonds, which gets back-translated as \textit{amandes brûlées}\textsuperscript{28} (Fig. 1). Even French Canadian newspapers rarely use the term. When they do, it is usually in reference to European concerns: \textit{fumier praliné} designates Paris\textsuperscript{29}, and praline-making is said to please Spain’s regent\textsuperscript{30}. 

3
By contrast, in Philadelphia and New York, where a number of French-born confectioners toiled at that same epoch, pralines were advertised. Joseph Delacroix, a merchant first in Philadelphia and then in New York where he eventually opened the famous Vauxhall Garden, lists “prolines” [sic] for sale in 1784, shortly after immigrating to the continent\(^3\). Although he subsequently dropped the term in favor of burnt almonds\(^3\)—likely reflecting local usage, his son Clément Joseph knew to use the term to target the French-American community decades later\(^3\). Maximillien-Michel-Cyrille-Auguste Lannuier also lists “prolines” [sic] for sale in 180\(3\), more than ten years after arriving in New York\(^3\). A couple of decades later, pralines proper appear in ads by the famed confectioners Henrion & Chauveau in Philadelphia\(^3\) and Weller & Thompson in New York\(^3\).
Despite the relative absence of the term pralines from the Canadian commercial sphere, the word did not altogether disappear. Many of the imported French and British cookbooks available in British North America used it. Barbeau reports that various
religious congregations in Québec city owned\textsuperscript{37} La Varenne’s \textit{École des Ragoûts}\textsuperscript{38}, Menon’s \textit{La science du maître d’hôtel, confiseur}\textsuperscript{39}, Nutt’s \textit{Complete Confectioner}, and Utrecht-Friedle’s \textit{Le Confiseur royal}\textsuperscript{40}, all of which contain recipes for pralines. This last book is even listed in the 1819 catalogue of the Montreal importers Maison Bossange & Papineau\textsuperscript{41}, and an earlier edition, \textit{Le Confiseur impérial}, appears in the 1811 catalogue of Québec city printer-bookseller John Neilson\textsuperscript{42}. As further evidence for the persistence of the term, the Ursulines record eating them as part of a 1813 holiday feast\textsuperscript{37}, and a maple-syrup based recipe for almond \textit{plarines} [sic] appears in a mid-19th century manuscript of the Augustines\textsuperscript{43}.

\textit{Pralines des Voyageurs}

The above survey highlights that from early 18th to mid-19th century an important subset of North American French and English speakers were not only aware of pralines, but also knew of it under its original French name. The stage is thus set for considering the emergence of a purely North American version of the confection early in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. \textit{Pralines des voyageurs}, made from corn and maple sugar and then simply designated as pralines, appeared at the cultural interface between French colonists and First Nations people, mostly Iroquois. Because both ingredients are indigenous to North America, this delicacy was necessarily a local creation. And because the production of maple sugar is thought to have followed French contact\textsuperscript{44}, it seemingly \textit{results} from this contact. In any event, the analogy between \textit{amandes à la pralines} and corn coated in maple sugar is unambiguously a colonial construction. According to Gilles Havard, such “analogies entre aliments nouveaux et traditionnels [rend] plus acceptable la créolisation des goûts.”\textsuperscript{45} by giving the Europeans a point of reference. The confection’s
persistence suggests that the underlying culinary metaphor resonated strongly. Because this cultural space left little to no paper trail, however, we mostly know of these pralines through the writings of external observers.

Pralines des voyageur first appear in Joseph François Lafitau’s ethnographic writings about the Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawks) of Sault-Saint-Louis (Kahnawake), *Mœurs des sauvages amériquains*... (1724)⁴⁶. The Bordeaux-born Jesuit missionary reports that Indigenous women “*font cuire leur blé d’Inde en guise de Pralines dans leur syrop d’érable*”⁴⁷. In 1744, Pierre Potier, a Belgium-born Jesuit, then serving at the Huron mission of l’Île au Bois Blanc in current-day Michigan, notes that pralines refer to “*blé d’inde grâlé [grillé] à la poêle dans la graisse*”⁴⁸. The cooking liquid here differs from Lafitau’s description. Were this accurate, the resulting corn would have been fried, an outcome quite distinct from praliner. A possible explanation for the discrepancy is that even though Father Potier had a strong ethnolinguistic interest, he likely had little cooking experience. His personal library, for instance, does not contain a single cookbook⁴⁹.

The consistency of ingredients in subsequent reports supports this interpretation. In his *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the years 1760 and 1776*, Alexander Henry the Elder⁵⁰, relates having traveled to the prairies with a “small quantity of pralines, made of roasted maize, made palatable with sugar”⁵¹. The fur trader famous for his facile interactions with both his French and First Nations peers thus learned both of the confection and its descriptor. A French Canadian fur trader for the North West Company, François-Victor Malhiot⁵², similarly reports in his journal for
June 5, 1804 “nous mangeons ce soir nos dernières pralines et, demain midi, nous espérons nous rendre au bout du portage”\textsuperscript{53}. Praline here clearly refers to the corn-based delicacy, as an anonymous English translator recognized a century later, describing them as “corn cakes”\textsuperscript{54}. A biography of explorer and ethnographer Charles Christopher Trowbridge makes the ingredients even more explicit: “This was not the sugared almond, but parched corn, pounded and mixed with maple sugar, and in the absence of other food it formed our pièce de resistance”\textsuperscript{55}. As a further evidence for the ubiquity of this frontier confection, a trace of it can be found in a 19th century Kanyen’kéha: (Mohawk) dictionary. Jean-André Cuoq’s \textit{Lexique de la langue iroquoise}, which builds on his missionary work at the Sulpician mission of Lac-des-Deux-Montagnes\textsuperscript{56} and on Joseph Marcoux’ priestly work at Kahnawake\textsuperscript{57}, indeed reports that \textit{okwitsera} refers to corn that is “brûlé et broyé pour faire des pralines”\textsuperscript{58}.

These last two descriptions, however, give corn ground to a fine meal, in contrast to the earlier descriptions of whole corn kernels being used. Malhiot, without explicitly describing the confection, syntactically presents pralines as countable, as kernels would be but not flour. The use of sweetened, pounded corn as traveling food—historically known as rockahominy—was common to many Iroquois communities\textsuperscript{59}, but does not naturally match the analogy with \textit{amandes à la praline}. Hence, either the meaning of pralines had by then drifted, or Trowbridge and Cuoq confused the two corn and maple sugar-based travel foods. Pehr Kalm’s description of \textit{quitzera} as an Iroquois word that designates a variety of concentrated travel foods based on corn—in different forms, optionally mixed with sugar—favors the former\textsuperscript{60}. All that was \textit{quitzera} has, with time, seemingly become pralines.
In any case, at some point during the first half of the 19th century the New World confection disappeared. The emergence and efficiency of pemmican as an energy-rich travel food then broadly displaced corn-based equivalents\textsuperscript{61}, seemingly even sugar-enriched ones. The subsequent decline of fur trading for sure put an end to the practice. By the late 19th century, Harvard ethnographer Lucien Carr\textsuperscript{62} writes about the confection as a thing of the past\textsuperscript{63}. Even sweetened rockahominy was considered ancient by the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, as was blé d\'inde lessivé sweetened with maple syrup by the 1940s\textsuperscript{64}.

**Reconstructed Pralines des Voyageurs**

![Figure 2 Reconstructed Pralines des Voyageurs, Justine de Valicourt, Private archives.]

What did pralines des voyageurs look and taste like? Contemporary North American cookbooks did not document the practice. Hints come from Pehr Kalm’s description that “[t]he outer hulls are removed with lye and the grains are dried.” From confectionery insight, we here propose to fill the historical void with a recipe for Reconstructed Pralines des Voyageurs (Table 1).

Most likely, the recipe started from dried corn, which could be kept for months. In order to make kernels chewable and more digestible, they were nixtamalized by soaking in...
alkaline water. Only then would the corn be *praliné*. Because technical requirements for that operation are akin to those for maple sugar making, this method was well within reach of late 17th century North Americans.

From our experience with the reconstructed recipe, the result is highly palatable. Being made from two highly caloric ingredients—corn and sugar—it is also densely nutritious, thus making it an ideal travel food (see Fig. 2).

Table 1: Recipe for Reconstructed *Pralines des Voyageurs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parching:</th>
<th>Pralinage:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soak 100 g of dry corn kernels in 1.5L of water, and add 120ml of sieved ashes.</td>
<td>Mix 50g of white sugar, 50g of brown sugar and 50g of water. Add corn. Heat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring to a boil. Simmer for 45 min.</td>
<td>Stir until sugar crystallizes on corn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerate corn in alkaline water overnight.</td>
<td>Remove from heat and spread on parchment paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinse corn with water until it comes out clean.</td>
<td>Cool before eating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry lightly on parchment paper in an oven at minimal temperature for 1-2h.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conclusion

Pralines, in one form or another, have been part of North American culinary culture for the last 300 years. While the iconic status of the New Orleans’ version has been
extensively discussed, its putative connection to *amandes à la praline* remains debated. Here, we have argued that *pralines des voyageurs* were iconic to the frontier experience for over a century, and that their name was directly derived from the French confection. Standard references deserve an update.

We thank Paola Bianchi, Robert Charbonneau, Yvon Desloges, Rien Fertel, Michel Lambert, Jocelyne Mathieu, Karin Michelson, Benoît Thériault, and Matt Thomas for documentary help and stimulating discussions. P.C. acknowledges support from the National Science Foundation Grant No. NSF DMR-1749374.

**Notes**


Pierre Richelet, Dictionnaire François (Genève: J.-H. Widerhold, 1680), 203.


A Perfect School of Instructions for the Officers of the Mouth: Shewing the Whole Art of a Master of the Household, a Master Carver, a Master Butler, a Master Confectioner, a Master Cook, a Master Pastryman (London: R. Bentley and M. Magnes, 1682), 228.


Little is known about Borella, other than he was a foreigner living in London in 1770, and that around 1772 he became head confectioner to the Spanish ambassador in that city. From 1763 to 1777, Filippo Vittorio Ferrero di Fiesci, Prince of Masserano, a Piedmontese nobleman, held that diplomatic position. Filippo Vittorio’s father had uprooted his family to Spain, but was said to have remained particularly fond of his cultural heritage. Borella, whose patronym is common in the Piedmont and is thus likely originally from there, might have been hired by the ambassador for that reason. The cultural and geographic proximity between the Piedmont and France could also explain why Borella was familiar with pralines and attached to their original name. The 1790 Piedmontese cookbook Il Confetturiere Piemontese Che Insegna la Maniera di Confettare Frutti in Diverse Maniere indeed reports a recipe for Mandorle alla Pralina. Further information about Borella and his relation to the prince of Masserano might be available in the family archive of the Ferrero di Fieschi, at the Archivio di Stato di Torino, as well as at the institutional repository of the Archivos General del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (Madrid) and the Archivos General de Simancas (Simancas), but this possibility has not yet been explored. See: Didier Ozanam, Les Diplomates Espagnols du XVIIIe siècle: Introduction et Répertoire Biographique (1700-1808) (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1998), 186-187.


24 François Massialot, Nouvelle Instruction pour les Confitures (Paris: Claude Prudhomme, 1708), 45-46.
27 James Ellice Campbell (1778-1860) was the son of the Scotland-born loyalist from the New York colony, Alexander Campbell, who moved his family to Canada in 1778. He served for the corps of voyageurs during the American war of 1812, and then settled in Montreal, where he eventually became a prominent lumber merchant and ship owner. See: Robert Campbell, A history of the Scotch Presbyterian Church, St. Gabriel Street, Montreal (Montreal: W. Drysdale, 1887), 268-269. James K. McDonell and Robert Bennett Campbell, Lords of the North (Renfrew: General Store Publishing House, 1997), 61-62. A list of goods sold at his Montreal retail store appears in The Montreal Herald, July 20, 1812: 4.
28 Richard Shephard (1789-1817), confectioner, married Hannah Walter (1794-?), the daughter of Jacob Walter and Hannah Needham, in 1812 in Québec city. Shephard’s origin and training as confectioner are unknown. By 1815, he held shop on de Buade Street in Québec City, where he was assisted by at least one indentured servant. His professional equipment and supplies were liquidated upon his death in 1817. See: Greffe du notaire William Fisher Scott, April 5, 1812, Fonds Cour supérieure, District judiciaire de Québec, Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec, CN301, S253. Fonds de la paroisse catholique Notre-Dame (Québec, Québec), Library and Archives Canada, C-2897. The Quebec Mercury, April 4, 1817 (suppl.): 1; Personnes incarcérées dans les prisons de Québec au 19e siècle, No 340, accessed March 19, 2021, https://applications.banq.qc.ca/apex/f?p=134:11::NO::P11_CLE:353. Amandes brûlées figure in the list of goods of this sale advertised in The Quebec Mercury, April 27 1819: 1.
29 Le Canadien, July 13, 1838: 1.
30 Le Canadien, March 17, 1845: 3.
32 Daily Advertiser, December 24, 1794.


46 Ibid. 1209-1230.


60 Father Jacques Bruyas, a 17th Century Jesuit missionary to Kahnawake reports a related Kanyen’kéha: (Mohawk) word: Onnong8itsera, or ‘farine espaisse’. Yet the root of both French words is clearly distinct from that of flour, which is based on that for ‘to pound’, for example, othé-tsi’i in Oneida. A complete list of cognates of the Iroquois word (Table 2). The term instead derives seemingly from the word for grits, which was common to the Five Nations, and formed the basis of rockahominy (or sagamité, in French).

Table 2: Iroquois languages cognates for ground corn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Word: definition</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oneida</td>
<td>1st half of 20th C</td>
<td>Ono’okhwi’sa: corn, parched and cooked corn, gruel made from corn</td>
<td>Abbott, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oneida</td>
<td>2nd half of 20th C</td>
<td>Ono’ókhwa: corn, coarse ground corn, grits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seneca</td>
<td>2nd half of 20th C</td>
<td>‘tongóʔkhwishe: a sweetened corn preparation</td>
<td>Chafe, 1967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onondaga</td>
<td>2nd half of 20th C</td>
<td>Onó’okha: ground corn</td>
<td>Mithun, 1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>17th C</td>
<td><strong>Quitzer</strong>: Some people take the coarsest part of the ground maize and put it in a sack for themselves and eat it mixed with fat. People of quality mix maize flour or grits with [maple] sugar, but this is chiefly a food used by the wealthy on journeys. Those who cannot afford sugar use only maize for a concentrated food. The outer hulls are removed with lye and the grains are dried. These grains are taken on journeys. They are cooked in a pail or kettle; a little fat, such as one can obtain on a journey, is added, either of bear, deer, or something else. Then it becomes a very good food. This concentrated food, which the savages first invented, is called Quitzer by the Iroquois.</td>
<td>Kalm, 1752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>18-19th C</td>
<td>Okwitsera: blé d’inde brûlé et broyé pour faire des pralines</td>
<td>Cuoq, 1882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2nd half of 20th C</td>
<td>Ono’kwitsher: boiled and sweetened corn</td>
<td>Michelson, 1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>2nd half of 20th C</td>
<td>Okwit:thera: scorched corn that is ground into meal</td>
<td>Maracle, 1990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


