The Kitchen in the Time of the Middle Ages

Serving as the social setting where the rhythm of life was marked by the meal, the kitchen represented a place of major activity during the Middle Ages.
The number of meals varied according to status: three meals a day, the moralists claimed, were meant for animals.
Peasants, craftsmen and workers ate breakfast upon waking, then had a mid-morning snack, but the leisure class and nobles were expected to abstain from all food, fasting until after morning mass. They ate their dinner late in the morning and their supper at the end of the afternoon. But all did not subscribe to this ideal routine, and cooks in general arose to feed their hungry guests.
Never did food consumption attain such heights as in the 14th and 15th centuries: a daily ration of 500 grams of meat (approx. one lbs.) and a kilo of bread (2.2 lbs.) per person was an everyday practice. This appetite for earthly food found abundant sources.

The Texts

The first cookbooks date only from the end of the 13th century, however recipes from the proceeding century were from collections of dried plants, and books about the physical body: essays by Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Medicinal Herbs* by Platearius, *Body Conditions* by Aldebrandin of Sienna. The "encyclopedias" – as represented in *The Book of Properties of Things* by Barthélemy the English, and essays about agronomy in *The Book of Country Profits* by Pierre of Crescens, gave information about cooking and preserving techniques.

The Objects

Archeologists have found millions of food-related artifacts in the form of bones, shells, pot fragments, seeds, nuts, and fruit stones, carbon-preserved in the ashes of houses or absorbed by latrines. Rich with information on eating practices, the fragments reveal illnesses from freshly-eaten meat not sufficiently boiled, and how the curing of meat did not eradicate parasites in larvae form; tapeworm and intestinal worms were present everywhere.
Chemical evidence on affected bones and teeth also reveal eating habits.

Pictures

Illustrations by the thousands, and resulting receipts, have put “flesh on the bones” …bearing witness to the pleasures of eating and the importance of food. Represented abundantly in paintings are foods, kitchens, tables, and every utensil.

The Words, Expressions and Proverbs

Numerous expressions related to food have lingered from medieval times: “to eat with relish”, “to have enough on one’s plate,” “to have eyes bigger than one’s stomach.” Many proverbs now forgotten were related to meal preparation; some bring on smiles: *He who holds the pan turns it when he wants to; he who wishes to eat with the devil should have a long spoon; clever women can make something out of nothing.*

A few proverbs spoke to the importance of food in a society that had fear of shortages. *Bread is good for hunger. Warm bread is only three-quarters of a loaf and hard bread a fourth of it.* Others revealed dietetic considerations, in use from the 13th century: *Wine is good who takes it with reason* or *It is good to fast after eating.* Some expressions merged well with religious thought: *A good wine makes all religions agree.*
One thought testified to table manners: *to have a friend means sharing your bread.*

Kitchens and Annexes

Basic provisions were bread and wine. In both town and countryside, bakers raised chickens and pigs and grew fruits and vegetables. A city distribution area was indispensable for feeding city dwellers -- like the many living in apartments who were unable to cook or store food, and included taverns, bakeries, even community kitchens with a pastry cook on site, and especially street vendors who could offer workers a quick snack at noon.

“Green Belt” Food

Garden belts, fields of turnips, radishes, cabbages, grains, lentils, peas, beans, and vineyards that fed city folks encircled medieval cities.

If the least well off living in rental apartments were forced to buy vegetables sold by peasants door to door, or at the market, the lord or lady of the manor, and middle class home owners, had at their command a garden plot to raise their own crops.

Flourishing Markets

Cooks and those who liked to eat gave the greatest attention to quality. Cookbooks, sometimes literary texts, told readers where to buy the best products: olive oil from Majorca, enjoyed as far as England; shrimp and carp from the Marne; bread from Corbeil, butter and mussels from Normandy… Produce grown throughout all of France was plentiful at Les Halles in Paris, the major marketplace.

Meat on the Hoof

Cattle were raised in town, and were slaughtered and gutted on site by butchers. In Paris in 1393, the weekly consumption of meat (not counting the ducal courts and royalty) was 3,080 sheep, 512 cows, 538 pigs and 210 veal calves.

Fear of Shortage

An expected military uprising or a famine due to bad weather triggered high prices from one month to the next, often increasing the cost of food products by more than 16 times. Thus, families were forced to stockpile enough provisions to forestall such potential hazards. As a result, the kitchen and food storage areas were sometimes larger than those devoted to lodging.

Storage Places

Preserving food, then, played an essential role in medieval life.

In a peasant house of two rooms, like at Dracy (Côte d'Or)), residents had a cooking corner, while the adjacent corner functioned as a tool shed and storeroom or cellar: casks or sacks held seeds, oils, wines and fruits.
In the city, vaulted caves and underground storage, sometimes on three levels like at Laon, played the same role. In a well-built house, the total area from attic storage to the basement could be dedicated to the kitchen and its requirements for food preparation; only the floor above the kitchen (and warmed by it) was reserved for living. In a powerful fortress like Château-Thierry (Aisne), the cooking complex was nearly 3000 square meters.

The Monastery Kitchen

In the Monk's Office

No kitchen was better equipped than that of the monastery: sinks, wells, canals of running water, immense wall chimney or vast central hearth outfitted the place.
Sometimes monumental and isolated from the conventional buildings, sometimes built in a corner of the cloister with a service window that opened onto the dining hall, the kitchen often looked out onto the food crops and the storeroom.
Granaries, silos, gardens, fisheries, windmills, bakeries, breweries, stables, chicken coops…nothing was lacking in nourishing the monks and their hosts, who sometimes acquired a second kitchen. The abbey was intended to be, in effect, self-sufficient.

A Monastic Feeding/Food Store

In the ideal monastery, food was all about austerity, plain and sparse: bread, wine, vegetables and fish made up the daily diet. But in reality, borne out by writings and archeology, it was completely otherwise. With nearly 80 feast days a year, monks were not always thin, and their portions reached 6,000—even 8,000 calories a day!

Fast Food – Catering

Food, a Future Career

Not everyone had a kitchen: in the city, poor people lived in apartments too small to store food or to have a corner kitchen. Many widowers renounced cooking and most young singles –students or workers, did not own any cooking equipment and did not have the time, as wage earners, to return home at noon to cook.

Travelers, pilgrims, and merchants, very numerous in medieval cities, ate their dinner at an inn.

"Fast Food"

All these diners ate in small cafés or bars or bought food from traders who sold cooked meals on doorsteps or directly in the street, with the help of mobile ovens that sat on pushcarts. Other food professionals, specialized artisans, such as the tripe butcher, "skin cookers" who sold sausages, the waffle seller and other "stomach artists" who offered cakes and cookies, installed several tables in their shops to feed customers.

Caterers prepared a pâté of meat or fish, shellfish or turtle from their slow-burning ovens, according to demand.

In the Cook's Den

Every kitchen had a fireplace, but not all fireplaces were equipped with andirons, pot hangers, a broiler, and a spit, like in the homes of the middle class and aristocrats.

No roasting or grilling or waffle irons for the poor or country folk. The majority of peasants cooked in clay pots, set on a simple tripod, preparing dishes that were not flavorless for all the effort. But no one ate better than the castle-dweller.

The Brigade

In a prince's castle, a squad assured meal preparation under the authority of a master chef, a gentleman of high rank charged with managing, stocking and policing the kitchen.

More than 70 people, all men, worked there. Several women served as their assistants, picking, sorting and washing herbs and plants.

Useful Position

In the kitchen the head cook reigned, and his responsibilities increased according to services rendered. He established the ordering of supplies, processed the buying from merchants, and wrote the menus.
From the height of his chair, like a university teacher, he used his squint to evaluate staff performance and to chide his kitchen boys or errand boys.

Chefs Taille-vent and Rince-pot

The names of chefs evoked their professions, like that of Taillevent (quick trimming/cutting), chef to Charles V, then to Charles VI, and perhaps to Laillot, head cook for Jean the Fearless. Children had to excel in chopping, slicing, trimming, mixing, stirring, and tossing the garlic sauce.
Many of these highly favored nicknames are still used: Poire-molle-(spineless), Anguillette (fishy), Le Gonlu (glutton, greedy), Rince-pot (pot washer), Gratte-pot (pot scrubber) ….

Well-Equipped

Kitchen Equipment

To carry out the wide range of cooking duties, the ordinary manager used utensils that included clay pots, a small caldron, a frying pan, and a casserole dish.
The head cook himself had available a complete set of cookware in clay, iron, copper, bronze, stone, wood, and even cloth. Bronze boilers, iron cauldrons in various forms, flat plates or tripods were used to prepare meats; clay pots worked better for stocks and milk products.

Ceramic Pots

The cook oversaw all preparations in a series of clay pots set either on hot ashes, against the burning fire back of the fireplace, or elevated on a three-

legged stool above glowing embers, all according to the degree of temperature needed and the type of food prepared.

Frying Pans and Casseroles

Also used were handheld frying pans and cast iron or copper pans to brown meat and fish with onions, to make boiled eggs, crepes and omelets, or even gruel for children living in the castle.

The Spoon in Hand

In order to prepare dishes, the chef used wooden spoons, one or two bowls of a spoon, hooks to remove meat from boiling liquid to keep from burning himself, some metal slicing knives to score the meat, others with a round end to scrape the skin of fish, a wooden mallet to tenderize a piece of meat, soup ladles and skimming ladles.

Mortars and Dripping Pans

Kitchen aides, seated astride on benches, did the mashing of dried kidney beans and lentils, using stone, wood, or clay mortars. They reduced toasted bread to crumbs before adding it to stock and spices, crushed black grapes for a sauce to accompany capon, mashed cooked livers and lungs to make sauce of hare, mixed puréed squash with a little fruit juice.

Dripping pans collected cooking juices from roasted meats. Grills and waffle irons were indispensable-- like trapdoors, level for making cakes and crusts.

Clean Hands

Kitchen Hygiene

The kitchen was often set up for disposing of water carried by hand, with an adjoining well and a stone sink; wooden pails full of water were lined up in a corner, as well as basins to wash the plates.

Strong water carriers were needed in order to furnish the kitchen with clean water for rinsing salt, intestines, vegetables and seeds.

All utensils were carefully scoured. Most kitchens, among the leisure classes, were tiled or paved for easier maintenance.

But dropped food scraps received a single sweeping only at the end of the day, and pictures show dogs and cats licking plates sitting on the floor. Kitchen boys ate foods from the kitchen, then wiped their hands on the dish towels.

Knowing How to Split the Pear

Word Sense – Meaning of Words

If gestures or kitchen objects have remained unchanged from medieval times, many words related to cooking have changed in meaning. A potage (soup) was everything that was cooked in a pot, even meats. Soup was a rich wine stock topped with soaked crusts of bread. A stew was made with rabbit, and also with eggs.

Recipes with Greedy Names

Among forgotten dishes, sweets had evocative names: the "papa" was a child's gruel, the "forgotten" a dry biscuit, and a "stuffed sampling" (*dégustée fourrée*) was a cream-filled wafer. The "pipefarce" (stuffed pipe) was a fritter, same as the "mistembec" (to "put in the mouth"), but bathed in sugar syrup.

The names of dishes took certain liberties. For example, omelets called *ruffians* (panderer) or *ribaudes* (debauched person) made with oranges -- very expensive during the Middle Ages, were meant for well-to-do lords and not for common mortals, who did not have the means for such feasts.

Seasonal Cycles

Medieval man was dependant on nature. A bad season put him in danger of starvation. Fresh produce, fruits, vegetables, even meats were only available in season. If anticipation was part of the pleasure, anxiety was also part of the calendar cycle. It was why the big moments of the year -- harvests and religious feats, were occasions for food orgies and for special foods, such as the Three Kings almond cake (galette) for Epiphany, and eggs and lamb for Easter.

Meats & Fish

Meats

Meat supplies did not come from hunting but from raising livestock.
Cows furnished the most meat: the Manager of Paris advised using the loin of veal, the sirloin, brisket and hocks, which made the best beef stock.
Next came pork and the flock animals (sheep and goats), favored by the leisure class.
All social classes ate meat, but different cuts were available according to livelihood: for simple folk, the giblets and butchered pork meats were especially eaten; at nobles' tables, there was poultry, including peacock and swan.
The choice cuts were in demand according to season: fresh pork meat was available in November and December, though lamb appeared at butcher's stalls only in March, and vanished in June. Archeologists show that, at the end of the Middle Ages, more elaborate cuts of meat played a big role in recipes, and as a consequence, in eating.

Seafood

The church proscribed that every third day should be a meatless meal, which resulted in large consummation of sea or river produce. More than 50 types of ocean fish were eaten during the Middle Ages. The main commercialized seafoods in Europe were herring and cod, eaten smoked and salted.
Flatfish (plaice), halibut, dab (flounder), sole, turbot, and carp – a king's dish, crayfish, shellfish, and dolphin were also enjoyed.

Butter, Eggs, Cheeses

Eggs were used for making many convenient recipes, even dishes like stuffed eggs for noblemen's tables. Eating milk products was judged essential: goat milk was easy for children to digest, and cow's milk was used for making pies and with wheat products.
Milk and honey were also a favored jam. Food was to be made without skimming the cream off the milk and without water -- a classic fraud.
Butter that was not fatty was preferred, according to those from Holland and Brittany. Parisians used butter in smaller and smaller doses: one lump at the bottom of a bowl for puréed vegetables, or spread on a little warm bread for the sick.

Cheese was used often in recipes, fresh or dry, grated or cut in thin slices or cubes. Cheese was stuffed inside waffles and fritters, in eel pâté, and eaten with bacon and dried fruit.

A Bouquet of Herbs and Vegetables

Aromas and Condiments

Plants were in the majority of cooking compositions and even drinks: sage flavored white wine, and the hop, emblematic of John the Fearless, flavored beer.

Chervil, basil, celery, and purslain enriched the flavors of cooking stocks and sauces, just as wild herbs flavored salads. Parsley, ever abundant, was used in purées and in sauces accompanying meats.

Making Yourself Green

Plant life made up the base of certain recipes: peas with bacon, lentils with eggs and cheese (a Tuscany recipe), puréed beets and spinach, herbed soup in thick stock….

Parsnips were cooked in a pie with fish, and honeyed turnip compote was a choice dish. Herbs and vegetables allowed a cook to elaborate, making complex and expensive dishes such as layered meat pie, egg and salted bacon, stuffed overripe fruit, and spinach made with mint or parsley.

Some Bread on a Board

Forms and Colors

The cook did not make bread but instead received his daily ration from the baker.

Unsalted bread went by many names and shapes, according to its region of origin: it was a round loaf in France and Flanders (Netherlands), and knotted bread and pretzels in Germanic countries. There was also light bread, white, yellow, grayish, hammered, even armed – heavy black bread, not to forget “dog” bread, made from barley. Their names described them as well as their shapes.

Quality Bread

Based on bread ingredients (black or white flour), the weight was calculated per pound (about 500 grams), ranging from a half pound to 4 kilos (8.5 lbs). Each baker marked his bread with a distinct symbol: cross, fleur-de-lis, star, crescent, etc. White bread, from wheat, was reserved for the leisure class, while others ate bread of rye or of maslin (a mixture of half wheat/half rye). In time of famine, bread was made at home from acorns, beans or chestnuts, and cooked under ashes.

Places of Grains

Grains served as the foundations of food; they figured also in the makeup of gruel (baby food), of drinks (beer and barley beer), cakes and gingerbread. Pâtes in crusts, pies, galettes - cakes –were plentiful in French cooking, and pizzas (white or enhanced crusts), lasagnas, sweetened ravioli and other crusts were eaten, especially in Italy.

Fruits and Flowers

Raw Fruits

Fruits from the garden were rarely eaten raw. Nevertheless, one ate cherries as an appetizer and pears at the end of the meal, before the cheese course. Dried fruits, served for dessert, were eaten plain or in a layered pie, each layer of crust holding a type of fruit: almonds, walnuts, raisins or dates.

Flowers

Even flowers were eaten: distilled rose petals were used in meats and fish sauces. Flowers from peaches, hawthorn, elder, and woodruff were used to flavor wine. In France, the cook added leaves of violets to omelets, and in Italy, he put flowers of violets in salads.

Small sachets, good spices

Used since ancient times, spices became more diverse in cooking during the Carolingian era. If the average citizen was content to season the gruel with

mustard, ground pepper, a little salt, and especially garden herbs, nobles bought spices at great expense.

Spice Route

Medieval consumers liked rare spices from distant lands, such as the long pepper, brought from southeast India and the Indian Islands. The best sugar, Arab sugar, came from the Babylon cities of Cairo or Alexandria.

Multiple Virtues

Herbs and spices were used for their flavors, their nutritional qualities and chemistry (mustard tenderized meat), or for their medicinal virtues, such as aiding digestion. Never were they used to mask the taste of meat that was too gamey, or to disguise meat that was banned from consumption.

Eat to Live…or Live to Eat?

Beginning in the 13th century, new rules were added to dietary principles that had been in existence since Antiquity.

This new science was founded on the ancient theory of temperament. If religion imposed fasting or observances such as Lent, doctors espoused the practice of using common sense when eating and drinking to maintain good health. It was important, above all, to be neither obese nor skinny, two problems already solved by appropriate diet.

Food Security

The awareness of sanitary risks was very acute in the Middle Ages, even if the motivations of cooks and diners were not always “scientific”: suggestion played an important role in the eating or the rejection of certain species. Thus, mushrooms and some wild strawberries were avoided because they grew close to the ground.

Fresh Produce

Product freshness was in demand, especially concerning original animal products. One had to know how to select fresh fish by color and touch, and to verify that they came from safe water, first tracing the source of rivers and seas.

Drinkable Water

People were warned about food safety in cookbooks and through numerous municipal ordinances to not use polluted water for cooking. But often, consumers did not seem aware of all the risks; people from Avignon continued to drink water from the Rhône and Parisians used water from the Seine to make their nougat.

Long "Shelf-Life" Label

The Salt of Life

The technique of preserving food was not limited to salting. Meats and fish were salted or smoked. Fruits and vegetables, especially, were stored raw on floors, in silos, in barrels and pots when they were not immersed in vinegar or in honey.

Thus handled, most food was long lasting: macaroni and beans lasted two or three years, millet grass seed lasted 20 years, beef tongues lasted10 years and dried cod 12 years. As for herring, once smoked over beech wood, it was nonperishable.

Fireplace Aroma

The salting process was often brief: one day for sliced meat, three days and three nights for ham or goose.

The use of salt, vinegar, and smoking changed the taste of meat, causing the cook to soak it a long time to rid it, more or less, of any undesirable taste.

Medical Aims

Good and Bad Moods

For the medieval man, blood makeup resulted from the food he digested. Blood types were classified in categories of "warm" or "cold," "dry" or "wet", which

were also divided into four stages or degrees. One could improve these characteristics by way of a cooking method or through use of condiments. Beef, for example, was warm and dry, and one ate it most often as boiled meat. By comparison, fish, cold and wet, was grilled. Pepper, at stage four on the heat scale, offset cold foods. Much of the seasoning with spices was motivated by medical explanation.

A Daily Diet

The cook combined ingredients according to the diner and the season; older individuals were fed warm food when outdoor temperatures were cold. Sugar and honey were given to children, but never when temperatures were warm; sugary foods were to be avoided!

Food was to be eaten in an order that facilitated digestion, first by “opening up” the appetite, the meaning of the word “appetizer.” Then, foods that took a long time to digest were served after light dishes. The meal ended with heavy food, like cheese, that pushed the meal to the bottom of the stomach. By its weight alone, it helped the digestion.

Usages and the Rule

Hesitations about food did not comply with rules but to the sensitivity of the times. Without exception, one did not eat dogs, cats, horses, or animals that were family pets.

Fasting

The church imposed food restrictions at certain times of the year. “No meat” was the rule for all fasting days -- a minimum of 100 days a year. Whale meat replaced bacon. Religion dictated abstinence, or at least the practice of refusing the most delectable of foods.

The Delights of Fasting

The rules had many exemptions, however, for children, the sick, and laborers. Even during Lent, cooks considered it their duty to satisfy noble taste buds with oyster stew, puréed watercress, stuffed fish and chestnut croquettes, breaded

porpoise, pickled seafood in vinegar…even birds, if they were waterfowl. And if a guest was nostalgic for meat, the head cook made fish to look like it… sturgeon disguised as veal!

Pleasures of the Flesh

Satisfying the taste buds often trumped rules of health, and taste overrode dietary principles.

Bitter foods, especially despised, were sweetened with sugar, which became available at the end of the 14th century in the kitchens of aristocrats. One tried to balance sweet and sour flavors, such as vinegar with fruit-juices. But these ingredients were believed to act as stimulants.

A Sexual Appetite

When the stomach is swollen with food and filled with drink, sexual pleasure then follows, said Défensor of Ligugé, a 7th century monk. Because of this prevalent notion, young girls and widows were considered to be at high risk, and were counseled to avoid foods that could stimulate their desires, such as poultry, leeks, beans, and spices, especially saffron.

Forbidden Fruits

Many food metaphors related to sexuality. A sex-starved woman was considered "hot like soup" or " ate flesh with two mouths." Thighs were compared to hams, breasts were like apples and their whiteness like flour, their softness like fresh cheese. The female anatomy was compared to a fig; and the male anatomy to a large sausage. Even cooking utensils evoked sexual acts: to grind with the mortar, and to beat butter were representations of sexual intercourse.

The Cooking Fireplace

The medieval cook knew how to make good use of all-natural food colorants. Beautiful colors stimulated the appetite, and the preferred colors in those days were green, symbol of youngness, red – symbol of courage, and gold – symbol of both earthly power and divine power.

In order to please noble clients, painters and cooks, with their unlimited imaginations, worked at preserving their art. Their inventions sometimes resulted in bad taste: they went so far as to disguise live chickens, plucked and resting on platters like roasted chickens that came alive at knife point at the table!

Matters of Added Flavors

From Materials to Added Flavor

To control heat temperatures and not spoil the taste of food during the process of cooking, the cook used kindling, which was easy to douse, and coal, which did not give off smoke.
He was aware of how wood could change the taste of food, and therefore used juniper spits to roast chicken, walnut twigs to flavor meatballs, and even damp hay to grill fish.

Wood, Living Matter

The cook's plant knowledge was also used for cold food preparation. He knew that a wood container could change the taste and color of its contents, like water, or improve it, like wine. Spices were preserved in yew boxes, milk was measured out in wood containers, plums were stored in barrels, salted quail and smoked herring, in large casks.

Earthen Pot Versus Iron Pot

Just like storage containers, cooking vessels, depending on the material used to make them, responded in the same unpredictable way when they came in contact with food or flavorings. Glass surfaces, those dull like terra cotta, were judged safe for health reasons and for giving better taste to food, whether for a sweet flavor, a musty taste for sauces, or for jelled foods, and in the preparation of certain foods like intestines, purées and soups. The cook knew from experience that he should put fermented foods in wooden or clay pots, never in bronze or iron. Milk was soured in lead pots containing ample tin. Without exception, the good manager used metal equipment with care, especially copper, fearing harmful effects.

In the Pot and Roasting: Styles of Cooking

From Various Concoctions

The secret to medieval cooking resided in the succession of cooking /cooling the food, and in the number of ingredients used in preparation, which allowed for many combinations.

Cooking quantity was, in general doubled, even tripled: cooks scalded the food in clay pots or in cauldrons before grilling it or frying it, as was the case with sausages and rabbit, first boiled, then browned with onions. Other meats were put on the spit or grilled before being boiled.

Time of Prayer and of Cooking

Without an hourglass, cooks calculated the time to prepare food according to prayer time. They timed the meal from the "hour of vespers until the evening;" they boiled meat ravioli according to the time it took to say two *Pater nosters*; other foods such as chestnuts, boiled to remove bitterness, needed an additional *Miserere*, or three *Ave Marias*. Medieval kitchens no doubt hummed with the prayers uttered by kitchen boys!

Art of Cooking (Art)

In the kitchens of noblemen, art and taste made such an ideal match that painters and cooks worked often to combine them.

A Palette of Colors

Medieval "tastemakers" created many colorful dishes: pink stew, white tarts, caramel-colored sauces (the color of camel's hair), or a green sauce that accompanied fried fish. Aesthetics was not their only motivation – and color not only a thing of taste: it stirred the appetite and appealed to some symbolic need; thus white food was affective in pleasing the sick.

The cook also went to great lengths to apply seasonal colors: in winter, tripe soup was brown, but was yellow in summer. Across the range of colored foods, the medieval imagination in all forms was expressed.

The cook was a chemist beyond comparison. He knew how to mix dark colors (jade green for herbed flank steak) and rare tints (like the Italian summer blue sky), and how to change colors: the alkanet plant (bugloss) could be red or blue, or mixed with saffron, it was green. Green was the predominant color because so many herbs were used in cooking.

Toast and Creamed Onions

Food colorants also imitated earthy colors.
Cooks used fried bacon to color vegetable purées and bread for sauces; those tints, according to what was toasted, browned or singed, ranged from light caramel to shaded black; light black chicken ragout was tinted by scorched bread. A somber black color resulted from crushed mulberries.
Nutmeg and cinnamon gave off a brown color, and heating onions in fat made a brown flour paste (roux).
Red was as admired in paintings as it was in cooking, notably in garlic sauce, colored with the help of crushed cherries and black grape seeds.

From Gold Fingertips

Because it looked like gold, yellow was used often to color food in the kitchens of nobles. One spoke of "gilt" goat heads and golden jelly, aspic painted or dusted with gold sprinkles. The color was sometimes achieved by mixing in gold leaf. On feast days in Avignon, the pope ate golden communion wafers.

Palace Kitchen

The taste for heraldry (shields) applied even to soups: the cook sprinkled diced parley or cinnamon and powdered sugar to create bi-colored dishes that resembled the divided insignias on the knights' costumes. He also painted his lordship's coat of arms on aspics, and cooked tarts in the shape of chessboards. And he copied the floral decorations that illustrated manuscripts by spreading violets, silver-gilt dragée candies, and pomegranate seeds on his dishes; he garnished fish and rabbit aspic with laurel leaves.

Disguised Food

Using pictures of the grotesque found in manuscripts, the cook took it upon himself to construct "monsters" by sewing together two different animals to make humorous scenes, such as a helmeted rooster disguised as a knight, mounted on a suckling pig. These "between acts" were part of theatrical settings that showcased large castle-shaped pies, or thickets, that released children or small birds when the top of the crust was removed.

In a display of cruelty, the cook would concoct the head of a Moor from blackened animal bellies and stuff them with pork fat. Craftily, he also disguised meatballs to look like red and yellow apples, cows to look like bears, pigs to resemble boar, and chicks to appear as partridges. As a practical joke, he transformed white wine into red by tossing in flowers of niello (comcockle). Such were the tastes of aristocrats.

At the palace, medieval cooking was an art entirely unlike any other, even if some of its practices were short-lived.

Translation by Peggy Linrud

July 2010