

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

by Francesca Marchetti and Lorenzo Battioni

During the Middle Ages England had several famines and a lot of people died. Generally speaking the most common food was boiled bacon, rye bread and peas.

RHYTHMS OF FOOD

People ate twice a day. People did not normally have breakfast, apart from a few high status individuals. The main meal of the day was dinner between 10 and 11 o'clock in the morning. It was followed by supper in the late afternoon between four and five. Not so much meat was eaten as the Church forbade it on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday plus Lent and Advent. The diet depended on seasonal availability. It included the consumption of fish, meat, vegetables and fruit depending on the seasons.

PEASANT HOUSEHOLDS

In the 14th Century the most common food for peasants was bread in two different types: dark bread, known as maslin; white bread which was eaten only in special days. Its price was controlled by law (the Assize of Bread). The rival to bread was pottage. Its most basic ingredients were meat, herbs, oats and salt, but almost anything could go in. Vegetables came from the peasant's gardens. They had no ornamental function and they were very rich of fruits and vegetables. Meat was the food of the rich and it was a status symbol. Drinking water could cause diseases and so peasants drank ale. Water (preferably rainwater) was drunk only by single labourers and widows. While milk was used for cooking and for old women and children. In western

countries cider and perry were drunk instead of ale because it was quite cheap.

TOWNS AND CITIES

In poor houses people ate like peasants. In rich houses the food was much richer: you might drink red wine and eat beef, lamb, and taste wafers and sweetmeats. People who had enough money could buy what they needed in the markets where you could obtain many things in the late 14th century: sugar, wine, almonds, liquorice, sweetmeats, pepper, ginger, salt, rice, etc. Sugar was available in many different forms and it was not used as sweetener but as spice in sauces. A major difference between dining in the country and in a town was the access to different sort of drinks, especially wine: red wine came from France, sweet wines from Greece, Crete and Cyprus. The cheapest of all was the English wine, which was normally white. In London the price of wines was fixed by the authorities.

NOBLE HOUSEHOLDS

The very best cuisine and the greatest variety is served directly to the lord himself at dinner. In 1363 even a lord was limited by law to five dishes at any meal and the gentlemen to three dishes. Damsons, cherries and grapes were served before dinner to whet the appetite. The first course normally consisted of boiled and baked meats in sauces. After the first course there was an interlude of fruit. The second course consisted of roast flesh that was exotic meats delicately carved. At the end there was a cheese course. When it was not allowed to eat meat (Advent, Lent,...) the diet switched to fish. On a fish day for the first course you might be served lampreys; for the second course:

herrings, salmon, halibut, trout, all of them cooked with sauces, for the third course really special fish are served such as sturgeon. Accompanying all this meat and fish there was an array of vegetable and herbs which were mainly served in sauces. With regard to bread, the lord and his guests were given white bread. The range of wines available in a nobleman's cellar was far greater than you could buy in any tavern. The servants ate the remains of the lord, brown bread and ale.

MONASTERIES

Each member of a religious community had an allocation of a gallon of ale each day. Monasteries brew very fine ale indeed. A few monasteries also had their own vineyards and make their own wine, but the majority imported the wines from France. Wine was drunk only on saints' days and fortunately for the monks there were sixty or seventy of these festivities in the year. Nobody had breakfast apart from the abbot and the principal officers who were allowed to eat bread and cheese in the morning. The first meal of the day was dinner. It started with a pottage. Thereafter, depending on whether it was a fish day or not, you might be served sheep cooked in ale, chopped meat, eggs and milk or a rich cheese flan. When they could eat meat they ate also veal, mutton, pork, goose. Many species of fish appeared in a monastic diet: fried, baked and roast fish served at dinner. The abbot might eat more expensive seawater fish like turbot and salmon. He could eat like a lord.

Bibliography

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