

Food in Northern Europe (1350) or What are we eating at Living History Events

This is by necessity an overview class of a huge subject that we could literally talk about (and write about) all day. Please see the bibliography for more readings on the subject. At the moment, (which I realize is subject to change) the Wikipedia entry on "Medieval Cuisine" is very good, covering most of the high points well and including some pictures. I thought about just teaching from that, but it is 31 pages (with foot notes) and I thought that would be excessive when you can just read it online.

I am going to start with some lists of things that were available to people in northern Europe (France and England, as that is that I have the most info for) between 1200 and 1400 (approximately). This is a big area, and obviously some things will grow better in some places than others. Some things would be imported from the Mediterranean basin and points east (particularly spices). Not everything would be available at all times of the year- their diet was more seasonal than ours by necessity. And of course what a peasant ate would be different from what a noble ate, and town and country diets would likely be different too.

These first lists are taken from what we use at the summer demos, where we display baskets of produce for people to see what we are eating. (Picture on page 8)

Leafy Greens

A wide variety of leafy greens were eaten in the middle ages. It seems that strongly flavoured leaves were preferred, perhaps because the bulk of the population would have limited access to spices. The greens from root vegetables were often eaten too. Some types include:

Chard

Kale

Spinach

Cress (water and garden types)

Cabbage

Lettuce

Endive

Vegetables

Many of the vegetables that we know now were still "under development" from a wild form to a domesticated form. Shapes, sizes and colours were quite variable and were often quite different than the ones we know now. Known vegetables that are not displayed include: Squash, cucumbers, brussels sprouts, celery

On display here:

Asparagus

Beets (usually long and "carrot" shaped)

Carrots (usually white, yellow or purple. First orange carrots: Netherlands ~1500)

Parsnips

Turnips

Peas in pods

Fennel

Mushrooms

Radishes

Herbs

Herbs were used to 'spice' dishes, particularly in households that could not afford imported spices. The range of pot herbs used in the middle ages was more extensive than what we use now- including flowers as well! John of Garland (1250 Paris, *Dictionarius*) describes potherbs in a Parisian garden: Sage, parsley, dittany, hyssop, celandine, fennel, pellitory, columbine, rose, lily, violet, nettle, holy thistle.

On display here:

Sage

Basil

Rosemary

Marjoram

Thyme

Fennel

Fruit

Like vegetables, many fruits were not yet in their modern form. And there were a number of varieties were common in the middle ages that are hard to find now. John of Garland (1250 Paris, *Dictionarius*) describes fruit and nut trees in a Parisian garden: Cherries, pears, apples, plums, quince, medlars, peaches, chestnuts, walnuts, filberts, figs. Mentioned in a book of medieval Parisian street cries: melons, red apples, pears, (several varieties), medlars, peaches, cherries, plums, sorb-apples, service berries, sloe berries, rose hips, walnuts, hazelnuts. The *Menagier de Paris* give instructions for growing raspberries and currants as well as cherries, plums and grapes. Fruits could be served raw, or cooked in pies, compotes, dried, or candied

Grapevines were grown wherever they would survive, even in England. These grapes were usually quite sour grapes, used primarily for wine and vinegar making, not for table use. Grapes were also dried for raisins, which would keep longer.

On display here:

Apples

Pears

Cherries

Strawberries

Grapes

Nuts

According to Scully they "played an enormous role in the medieval diet", certainly in the kitchens of the wealthier person. Almonds were grown all around the Mediterranean basin and widely imported to England and France. They were ground and soaked in liquid to create almond 'milk' which could create a creamy base or thickener for sauces, stews, soups and desserts. Other nuts were eaten out of hand, made into candy or pressed for their oil.

Walnuts

Filberts/Hazelnuts

Pistachios

Chestnuts

Pine Nuts

Almonds

The Onion family

Many types of onions were grown and used in the middle ages. These include:

Leeks
Green Onions/ Scallions
Onions
Chives
Garlic

Legumes:

These, along with grains, formed the backbone of the medieval diet. They provided an important source of protein for all classes, particularly on days when eating meat was not permitted. They are enjoyed fresh, but they were also dried at harvest so they could be used year round in soups and pottages.

Pease (Pisum sativum)
Lentils/pulse (Lens esculenta)
Fava Beans (Vicia faba)

Grains

A wide variety of grains were available at this time. They would be used separately or in combination when making breads and porrages. Finer breads and wafers would be made from pure wheat flour, course breads would combine wheat with 1-2 other grain flours and sometimes ground legumes or nuts. Grains for porrage were sometimes roasted and partly ground before cooking in water, broth or milk. Rice was grown in Italy, as well as being imported from the middle east

Wheat
Millet
Barley
Oats
Rye
Buckwheat
Sorghum
Spelt
Rice

Meat

Animals were raised for meat and milk, and wild animals were hunted as well. Animals would be slaughtered as needed- butchers in towns were required to kill the animals in front of their shops so that the shoppers would know that the meat was fresh. All parts of the animal were used, including heads, organs and intestines, feet, tails etc. Pork was frequently salted and or smoked for later use.

Beef: Cows, Oxen, Veal
Pork: Domestic pigs and wild boar
Sheep: Ewes, lambs, withers (castrated rams- apparently rams were not good for you)
Rabbits, Hares
Deer

Dairy

When we think of milk today we automatically think of cows. Depending on where you lived in the middle ages you were more likely to think of sheep, or possibly goats. Milk does not keep or travel well, so you milked the milk bearing creature that you had close to hand. Many recipe collections warn that you should only use milk that comes quite directly from the cow. All milks could be made into butter or cheese (of many types) for later consumption.

Poultry:

Some birds were raised domestically for meat and for eggs, and wild birds were caught as well. Again, they would be slaughtered as needed. Game birds included: Pheasant, partridge, quail, mallard, stork, heron, crane, bittern, bustard, cormorant, spoonbill,, teal as well as "small birds".

Raised birds include:

Chickens, Capons (Castrated roosters), pullets,

Ducks

Geese

Pigeons

Doves

Fish

Fish were eaten extensively in the middle ages on the many days that they were not permitted to eat meat. They were caught in the wild as well as in maintained fishponds. They were eaten fresh when possible in a wide variety of preparations. If they needed to be stored they could be jellied (to keep up to a week) or dried and salted.

The Viandier of Taillevent lists separate recipes for the following fish: Pike, pickerel, barbel, bass, carp, perch, tench, bream, roach, loach, chub, eel, trout, pimprnel, waymel, small fry, lamprill, lampern, bleak, crayfish, fresh water shad, dace, gardon, porpoise, gurnard, conger, whiting, dogfish, mackerel, salmon, grey mullet, cod, haddock, whale, garfish, brett, coal fish, salmon trout, sea shad, seal, smelt, sturgeon, cuttlefish, oysters, cockles, mussels, lobster, lamprey, red gurnard. Also known were Skate, plaice, sole, ray fish, turbot, hake, and flounder. (Scully p 75)

Spices

Spices were expensive and would therefore be used only by the wealthier classes. The most popular spices in the middle ages were cinnamon, pepper and ginger. They were imported from the far east where they were grown, and ground into powder in the kitchens of Europe. Other spices include: cloves, nutmeg/mace, galingale, cumin, mustard seed, mastic, cardamom, cubeb, caraway, and anise. Scully includes a list of imported goods from handbook of Balducci Pegolotti, Florentine traveller and merchant, 1315-40 (Page 21). He imports spices including: Anise, Pepper (White, black, and long), Ginger (6 different kinds!), turmeric, cinnamon, cassia buds, cassia, caraway, grains of paradise, sugars, (Cairo, Damascus, loaf sugar, powdered sugar, candied sugar, refined sugar, rose sugar, violet sugar), alum, mastic, zedoary, cloves, clove stalks, clove leaves, nutmegs, cubebs, cardamoms, galengale, mace, cumin, carobs, aloes, saffron.

Foods that they didn't have

Vegetables: Potatoes, yams, artichokes, green peas, green beans, "indian' corn (the white, yellow or brown kernels growing on large cobs), the red green and yellow peppers, chillies, and tomatoes.

Fruits: from the tropics: Sweet oranges (they had bitter oranges, sweet weren't developed yet), Bananas (known about, but still exotic), pineapples, kiwi, lychee, etc.

Any named variety of apple, pear, cherry, etc as they had not been developed yet, though of course there were many different types of all these fruits.

Spices: Allspice, vanilla.

Peanuts

Turkey

Coffee and tea

Cocoa/Chocolate

Humour theory

Shamelessly stolen from Wikipedia: Humorism

Essentially, this theory holds that the human body was filled with four basic substances, called humours, which are in balance when a person is healthy. All diseases and disabilities resulted from an excess or deficit of one of these four humours. These deficits could be caused by vapours that were inhaled or absorbed by the body. The four humours were black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood. Greeks and Romans, and the later Muslim and Western European medical establishments that adopted and adapted classical medical philosophy, believed that each of these humours would wax and wane in the body, depending on diet and activity. When a patient was suffering from a surplus or imbalance of one fluid, then his or her personality and physical health would be affected. This theory was closely related to the theory of the four elements: earth, fire, water and air; earth predominantly present in the black bile, fire in the yellow bile, water in the phlegm, and all four elements present in the blood.[2]

Paired qualities were associated with each humour and its season. The word humour is a translation of Greek χυμός,[3] chymos (literally juice or sap, metaphorically flavor). At around the same time, ancient Indian Ayurveda medicine had developed a theory of three humours, which they linked with the five Hindu elements.[4]

The four humours, their corresponding elements, seasons, sites of formation, and resulting temperaments alongside their modern equivalents are:[5]

Humour	Season	Element	Organ	Qualities	Ancient name	Modern	MBTI	Ancient characteristics
Blood	spring	air	liver	warm & moist	sanguine	artisan	SP	courageous, hopeful, amorous
Yellow bile	summer	fire	spleen	warm & dry	choleric	idealist	NF	easily angered, bad tempered
Black bile	autumn	earth	gall bladder	cold & dry	melancholic	guardian	SJ	despondent, sleepless, irritable
Phlegm	winter	water	brain/lungs	cold & moist	phlegmatic	rational	NT	calm, unemotional

Now me:

Humans were considered to be basically slightly warm and slightly moist.

Each person would deviate from this somewhat, causing personality, but going too far from this norm caused illness, and was therefore to be guarded against.

Everything (foods, activities, seasons, even the wind) was considered to be a combination of hot or cold and wet or dry. For good health all these things must be made to balance. The professional cook in a noble house would be expected to know how to prepare foods that were suitable for his master and his household to suit both their temperaments and the time of year and the foods available.

Manuscripts known as Tacuinum Sanitatis were written and illustrated during the late 1300s and early 1400s. These books describe various things and show their benefits and disadvantages, as well as rating them for their humoural temperament. They also show how to make things safer.

104. CELERY (*APIUM*)

Nature: Warm and dry in the first degree. *Optimum:* The garden variety. *Usefulness:* Removes obstructions. *Dangers:* Causes headaches. *Neutralization of the Dangers:* With lettuce. *Effects:* It is moderately nourishing and is good for cold temperaments, for old people, in Winter, and in cold regions. (Vienna, f. 30)



Much of medieval cookery was an effort to make balance the ingredients and cooking methods in a dish so that the resulting combination would be healthful for the eater. Roasting and frying warms and dries a food well, while baking warms moderately and dries only moderately (baking in a pastry shell protects a food's moisture). Boiling warms a food gently, and moistens it.

When combining foods it was sometimes necessary to mix them as closely as possible, therefore they would be ground up in a mortar and pestle. This could be done to form a sauce, or broth, or to form the whole dish (pottages, pates).

Here is a chart that has some common foods and how they can be balanced using humour theory

Food	It's basic temperament	Cooking method	Combine it with
Beef	tending to dry	Boil	Onion
Pork	Moist	Roast	"dry" herbs, salt
Fishes	Cool and moist	Fry or roast	warm dry spices
Vegetables (most)	Dry (of the earth)	Boil	oil/fat
Onions	Very moist	Fry	beef
Fruit (most)	very moist	Roasted, baked	'dry' herbs
Deer, rabbit	quite Dry,	Larded and boiled	onions
Chicken, pheasant	Slightly warm, slightly moist	Any method, since they are close to 'perfect'	herbs/spices to suit cooking method
New cheese	cold and moist	baked (pies etc)	or wait for it to age.
Salt	very warm, very dry		wet food, or for preservation

Dry herbs : Chervil, sage, mint, parsley

Meats: Their temperament was altered by many factors: Age of the animal (older animals are dryer); Wild are warmer and dryer than domestic; Castrated animals keep their moisture; Female animals are moister than male animals.

Fish: So called 'Bestial' fish (those that the medievals felt were most like land animals) were considered the best to eat: Porpoise, shark, dolphin and cod. Many of the other fishes listed above follow. Least recommended were Salmon, turbot, mackerel, and conger, because they were felt to be excessively moist (Scully, p49)

Sweet and sour

The sweet and sour flavour combination was a popular one in the middle ages. Vinegar was cold in the first degree and dry in the third degree, which would make it unfit for consumption on its own. However sugar is warm in the first degree and moist in the second, making it one of the safest foods for a person. In combination these foods neutralized each other, and tasted good too. There were many recipes with variations on the name "Egerdouce" (sour and sweet) that combined vinegar with sugar, or sugar and fruits like raisins and currants.

Religious Strictures

Christian thinkers had long felt that food affects the persons body, and therefore their soul. Eating meat (in particular) was thought to "heat" the body, which breeds the lust of the flesh, and every vice. Naturally then, meat should be avoided, at least occasionally, for the good of one's soul. The Christian calendar includes a number of special days that one should prepare for in mind and body, through fasting (not eating at all) or at least abstaining from meat. The one we still hear about is Lent, with it's Fat Tuesday at the beginning to use up the things you would not be permitted to eat for the next forty days. Depending on where and when you were, even when it was not a special time like Lent, there might be up to four days a week where you were expected to refrain from eating meat (generally falling on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday). Between regular days and special weeks of fasting, about one half of your meals each year would be meatless.

Which is not to say they did not eat well on "lean" days. They were permitted all the fish they wanted, in any method of preparation. In a few places and times poultry, eggs and dairy were permitted as well. Where they were not, substitutions could be made: The Viandier (recipe 152) is for "flans and tarts in Lent which will taste like cheese". Rather than a cheese custard tart, however, the cook used fish roe and milt along with almond milk! (Scully p90) The Menagier of Paris notes that lobster meat will substitute well for animal flesh in some dishes.



So how do we apply all of this at the demos?

Last year we displayed labeled baskets of green grocery that showed what sorts of fruits, vegetables and herbs were used around 1340 in England and France. We also had a mancala board (with twelve little cups) that held grains, dried foods, and spices. Everything except the spices were things that we, as lower class folks, could have eaten (though not all at the same time of the year since we had strawberries, cherries and pears all in the same basket!).

We made fresh ricotta cheese over the fire in a clay pot for lunch, as well as fresh bread baked flat on a cast iron griddle (they did not have cast iron of course, they could have used stone, or a clay griddle.).

We were feeding 12-25 hungry archers and dancers for three days, all of whom had a modern appetite at lunch and certain expectations of what "lunch" means! So instead of a water based bean and vegetable soup that might have been a mid-day meal for poor people, we prepared a noble dish from one of the medieval cookbooks (see bibliography) to serve with our bread and cheese.

Most days it was based on chicken, the most healthful of meats, and also the meat most likely to be available to the lower classes who could raise a few in their yard for meat and eggs. The chickens and onions were fried and then stewed in a sauce so that it could all be ready at one time. One recipe was from a cookbook from 1467 for rabbit (or chicken) stewed with onions and wine, one was Chicken in Cumin (and beer!) sauce from a 1381 cookbook. For ease of use I used the redactions found in Pleyne Delit (see Bibliography). On the third day we would try different things, usually involving pork or beef, that had mixed success, partly due to choice of recipe, and partly due to factors somewhat out of our control (weather, staffing, distractions).

So our mornings were spent reasonably authentically- a quick breakfast of oatmeal early in the morning, setting out the days produce (for display), and then all morning cooking over the fire, talking to people visiting the demo, and preparing lunch. If all went well and we didn't get too distracted, lunch would be ready around 12:30 or 1 pm. Then there were the inevitable dishes from lunch- we were trying to 'keep medieval' and use wooden bowls instead of disposables, plus all the equipment from making lunch. And then we would start to prepare dinner!

Dinner was usually a large roast over the fire (very upper class), some sort of starch (usually rice or barley), and boiled and fried green veggies with herbs (any class) to use up the now wilted green grocery on the display table along with some fresher veggies from the cooler. We would use the mortar and pestles to make a variety of sauces (upper class again) to go with the nights roast and serve the remaining cheese with left over bread either from our lunch or the UCV bakery (every class) if we could get some.

A leisurely dinner was followed by dishes, which were all too quickly followed by the call of our beds- Being Medieval is fun, but hard work! Being able to sleep at the demo in our tents was very convenient though. We got to keep an eye on our belongings (though both camps were quite secure), and the commute time was non-existent. Despite being "open to the public" because wefoo weren't in the cars all weekend you really felt a lot more like being a 'real medieval person' doing medieval things- even more so than at an SCA event where meals are more casual and cars get driven around, or people are changing kit all the time and talking about mundane life.

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