

## Introduction to Medieval European Cooking

Lady Ysabel de la Oya

In the middle ages most people lived in simple homes. The kitchen, as we know it, didn't exist in the homes of a common villager. Most cooking was done on a hearth made of stones with venting in the roof. Most people would only have a few (or one) pots or skillets and therefore stews or puddings (wrapped in a cloth and cooked in a liquid) would be quite common. A stew, or pottage, would be the most economical in both foodstuff and fuel. Food would also be fried in skillets or meat cooked on a spit. Ovens were available, but usually they would be communal or commercial where people would pay to have their prepared breads or pies cooked.

People of higher income or status, may have a hearth that looked much like a chimney, drawing smoke out of the home. Moving up the class scale, larger homes, manors, and castles would have their own kitchens with ovens, stove areas, and great spits where meat would be roasted.

Pottage and bread were some of the mainstays of the time for the average person. If a commoner could afford it, meat and dairy was eaten as well.

Villagers would pay for grain to be ground at the mill (or ground themselves in a quern, then may have to pay again for the bread to be baked. Bread would often be made of barley, oat, and rye in addition to wheat. The poor ate a simple brown bread, with a variety grains that were more roughly ground. As you moved up the socioeconomic scale, the more refined bread you would get, with the top eating fine white, or manchet, bread.

Dairy products, especially cheese, was also an important source of food. Cheese could be preserved, which was very important in a world without refrigeration. Dairy was also a good source of animal fats and protein for those who could not afford meat.

Simply, a pottage is a stew or soup cooked in a pot and could be made from pretty much anything edible that you could get your hands on. It could be very thick, very thin, or anywhere in between. The basis of a pottage would a bit of meat, or a meat bone (on days it was allowed), salted fish, stock, vegetables, beans, some type of thickener (often breadcrumbs, grains or ground almonds), some herbs, and salt. However, not all pottages had all elements. The more money you had, the more meat and spices you put in your pot.

The produce that would be grown would change through the year a great deal. What is in your pot at the beginning of the season would change slowly through the weeks as different produce was ready in the garden. In fall and winter (and early spring), for example, turnips, apples, and cabbages would be available and at their peak, while radishes and spinach were available in full spring and early summer. Foods like asparagus start to be available in summer and broad beans in summer and early fall. To make cheese, rennet must be made from the stomach of a lamb not yet weaned, so a lamb needed to be slaughtered in the spring. Due to the hardship and expense of keeping animals over the winter, many would be slaughtered in November, adding more available meat to the pottage mix.

The church was also a huge influence on the daily diet of the period. The church banned eating meat for a full half of the calendar. In addition to Lent and Advent, meat consumption was forbidden on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Allowed on most fast days, eggs were also banned during Lent. At the time, the laws of the church were taken very seriously, and anyone caught eating meat on a fast day, would find themselves in legal trouble, not to mention the peril to their immortal soul. As a result, what was in your pottage greatly depended on what day of the year it was.

Procuring fish could be difficult as well for the poor. While fish was allowed on fast days, fresh fish was not accessible to most common people. The commoners were not allowed to fish in bodies of water near their homes, as they would be owned by the church, or gentry and nobility. Some lakes and rivers were open to fishing, if you paid rights to the owner. This was a costly prospect that many could not afford. What was on for offer, however, was salted, preserved fish. Eels, being abundant in rivers, could also be a relatively inexpensive option. As a result, while the upper and monastic classes ate fresh fish, the middle and lower classes ate salt fish or eels.

The higher class you were, the more access to meat and fish you would you have. At the top the nobility, gentry, and church officials

For a villager or farmer, if an animal such as a cow, ox, or sheep was owned, it would be so valuable as a working animal, fiber, or milk producer. Meat at market would be expensive. These animals would only be slaughtered at the end of their lives, and would produce a tougher meat. Often, wild game was limited to commoners as the upper classes owned the forests the game within them. Poultry, also, were of a much higher value laying eggs and would also only be eaten at the ends of their lives. Such tough meat, from older, working animals and poultry, work perfectly in a long, slow cooking method such as stewing in a pottage. Pigs, however, were common enough in towns and villages. Since they could eat scraps, pigs could be fed cheaply and raised for meat.

For the gentry and nobility, however, eating meat would be quite common.

Also influencing what was in your meal were the prevailing health theories of the day. At this time Western Society believed that health was influenced by four humors, or fluids, that made up the body. This system of scientific belief had been in existence since 400 BCE, having been put forth by Hippocrates. The liquids consisted of blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Each liquid had a corresponding quality, blood was sanguine, phlegm was phlegmatic, black bile was melancholy, and yellow bile was choleric. In 14th century medicine, any illness was due to an imbalance of these humors.

Each humor had properties that could be combated or aided by properties in food. Blood (sanguine) was hot and moist, phlegm (phlegmatic) was cold and moist, black bile (melancholy) was cold and dry, and yellow bile (choleric) was hot and dry. You could judge what humor was not in balance based on a person's behavior. Someone suffering from too much black bile, for example, would suffer from an excess of sadness or be delusional.

For another example, cabbage was considered warm and dry. It would be used to combat a wet illness, and could "remove obstructions", but was considered bad for the intestine. Fennel, also warm and dry, was thought to help with eyesight and fever, but causes problems with menstrual flow. Cucumbers, on the other hand, were cold and wet, and helped with hot fevers but causes pain in the groin.

Most existing recipes from period were meant for the rich and important. The common person would not be able to afford nearly as much meat or spices that many surviving recipes call for. It was also very likely they couldn't read the recipe as well.

Recipes were often vague and didn't give exact amounts and cooking times. For example, a recipe for gingerbread reads

Take good honey & clarify it on the fire, & take bread or leftover bread & add it to the boiling honey, & stir it well so it doesn't burn, & take it off the heat and add ginger, long pepper & sandalwood, & mix it well & then put it in a flat pan & sprinkle with sugar, & put cloves round about by the edge and in the middle if it please you (modern translation)

The recipe writer assumes the cook preparing the meal would have a solid culinary base.

If they could be afforded, spices were used. Black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, cloves, cumin, and salt were the most common spices used. You will see saffron also called for in a lot of recipes; however, it was very expensive then (as it still is now). Salt was perhaps the most important spice. It was instrumental in preserving food.

Almonds were also ubiquitous, often used as a thickener or ground into a powder to make almond milk in soups or stews.

Breakfast was not common, although not unknown, as it was viewed as being gluttonous. Breakfast was tolerated for children, the sick, elderly, and pregnant women. Men who performed manual labor would often need to eat breakfast, but the morning meal was still seen as a sin by many. The main meal of the day would be eaten around early midday and a lighter meal would be served in the evening. It was widely believed that eating a large meal near the end of the day was very bad for digestion.

In Europe, in the middle ages many of the foods we eat today were simply not available, or not widely available. The following foods were either unknown, too expensive for transport from the New World to Europe, thought to be toxic, or exceedingly rare. As we move to Tudor/Elizabethan times, some of these foods start to become available.

Yams	Bell peppers	Iceberg lettuce
Artichokes	Chilies	Chocolate
Green beans	Tomatoes	Bananas
Standard corn	Coffee	Peanuts
Pineapple	Allspice	Broccoli
Cranberries	Shortening	Rhubarb
Turkey	Vanilla	Tea

For more information on period cooking a great resource is Goode Cookery at <http://www.godecookery.com>

My period cooking blog (mostly containing my documentation from past cooking Arts and Sciences entries) is at <http://ysabeldelaoya.weebly.com>