



MEDIEVAL CUISINE

Food as a Cultural Identity



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When reflecting upon the Middle Ages, there are many views that might come to one's mind. One may think of Christian writings or holy warriors on crusade. Perhaps another might envision knights bedecked in heavy armor seeking honorable combat or perhaps an image of cities devastated by plague. Yet few would think of the Middle Ages in terms of cuisine.

Cuisine in this time period can be approached in a variety of ways, but for many, the mere mention of food would provoke images of opulent feasts, of foods of luxury. David Waines takes this approach when looking at how medieval Islamic societies approached the idea of luxury foods. Waines begins with the idea invoked above, that a luxury food was one which was "expensive, pleasurable and unnecessary."¹ But, Waines goes on to ask, could not luxury also be considered a dish, no matter how humble the origin, whose preparation was so exquisite that it was beyond compare?² While challenging the traditional thinking in regards to how one views cuisine, it must be noted that Waines' focus is upon luxury foods. Whether prohibitively expensive or expertly prepared, such dishes would only be available to a very select elite.

Another common method for looking at the role food played in medieval life is to look at the relationship between food and the economy. This relationship occurred in both local and international trade. Derek Keene investigates how cities "profoundly influenced the economies... of their hinterlands" by examining the relationship between the city of London and the area surrounding the city.³ Keene demonstrates that a network of ringed zones worked outward from the city, each with a specific support function. Starting in the city itself, one would likely find

¹ David Waines. "Luxury Foods' in Medieval Islamic Societies," *World Archaeology* 34, no. 3 (February 2003): 571.

² *Ibid.*, 574-575.

³ Derek Keene. "Medieval London and its Supply Hinterlands," *Regional Environmental Change* 12, no. 2 (June 2012): 263

small urban gardens growing herbs and small vegetables.⁴ In some yards throughout the city, but more commonly just outside the city gates, one would find pens for swine and goats.⁵ The next ring would contain corn based agriculture centered on the production of wheat, barley, and oats.⁶ The furthest ring supporting the city was devoted to livestock grazing with an emphasis on cattle, but also including sheep.⁷ Finally, intermixed among all these zones were various fisheries.⁸

Yet, as Richard Hoffman examines, during the Middle Ages Europeans began “feeding beyond the bounds of natural local ecosystems.”⁹ Here Hoffman points out that European cities were increasingly importing food resources from frontiers on the periphery of civilization. Hoffman begins with the well documented trade of cereals from agriculturally fertile areas which could produce an abundance of crops to support cities and lands where lands were less arable.¹⁰ Hoffman also examines the expanding cattle trade where herds were grazed in pastoral regions such as present day Poland, Ukraine, Denmark, and Northern England, then driven overland to urban consumers.¹¹ Finally, Hoffman describes how beginning in the Twelfth Century “merchants carried preserved marine fishes from Europe’s maritime frontiers on the Atlantic and the North, Baltic, and Mediterranean Seas to consumers in inland and eventually deep interior Europe.”¹² Alexandra Livarda also examined the import of foodstuffs, but chose to focus her studies on exotic plants. Using recent archaeobotany research, Livarda explores how spices such as black pepper, cumin, nutmeg, and sesame, and fruits like apricots, peaches, and melons found

⁴ Keene, 272-273

⁵ Ibid., 275.

⁶ Ibid., 266-272.

⁷ Ibid., 273-275.

⁸ Ibid., 275.

⁹ Richard C. Hoffman, “Frontier Foods for Late Medieval Consumers: Culture, Economy, Ecology,” *Regional Environmental Change* 7, no. 2 (June 2012): 133.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134-136

¹¹ Ibid., 137-139

¹² Ibid., 140.

their way on to tables throughout Europe.¹³ Through the import of fruits and spices Europeans were providing foodstuffs that would otherwise be unattainable.

One final approach which can be taken in regards to food consumption in the Middle Ages is to look at the nutritional value of the medieval diet. Kathy Pearson does just this, looking at the different types of foods that were available in the common food groupings. These include grains in the form of breads, beers, and gruels;¹⁴ proteins in the forms of meats, nuts, and eggs;¹⁵ fruits and vegetables grown in orchards and gardens;¹⁶ as well as dairy products and fats.¹⁷ Pearson then looks at records and archaeological evidence to calculate an estimate for average yields from agriculture and husbandry. This yield is compared with the rations given to the medieval peasant, records for the monks residing in monasteries, and records of consumption of nobility to determine the average caloric intake and overall nutrition of the diets based on the types and amounts of foods consumed thus quantifying the nutritional value of the medieval diet.

While looking at food in terms of luxury, economy, and diet can reveal a wealth of information about food consumption in the Middle Ages, there remains an area which remains unexplored: food as an identity. Even though foodstuffs were being shipped across the continent, people within similar geographic areas were beginning to create dishes unique to their area and to their people. This paper will explore recipes preserved from England, France, and Italy to show how Europeans in the Middle Ages were creating the foundations of cuisines which would come to form part of their cultural identity.

¹³ Alexandra Livarda. "Spicing Up Life in Northwestern Europe: Exotic Food Plant Imports in the Roman and Medieval World," *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 20, no. 2 (March 2011): 144.

¹⁴ Kathy Pearson. "Nutrition and the Early-Medieval Diet," *Speculum* 72, no. 1 (January 1997): 3-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

England

I begin with the English cuisine because its dishes, when compared with some of the dishes of other cultures that follow later in this paper, seem somewhat more rustic, more simplistic. Much of this had to do with the resources available to England during the Middle Ages. The English diet was comprised primarily of grains, substituted occasionally by fish, sheep, and small game. For the more fortunate, pork and beef might be a possibility.

More than any other element, the table of the English would be dominated by grains. For the poor, both urban and rural, grains would comprise the bulk of their diet with very rare additions.¹⁸ It has been estimated that over seventy percent of the daily calories consumed by Fourteenth Century Londoners came from grains, most commonly consumed as breads and ales.¹⁹ While the modern reader may readily associate bread with wheat, the medieval community could not rely solely on wheat to support them. Not only was the crop more labor intensive than other grains, but it was also more susceptible to minor variations of climate, and in some locales nearly impossible to cultivate.²⁰ As a result the English grain diet was diverse and comprised of breads from not only wheat, but oats and barley as well.²¹ So ubiquitous was bread in the English diet that many English cookbooks do not even include a recipe.²² Yet grains were not solely consumed in breads and ales.

Another common use for grains was their use as dough from which to bake pies. The English cuisine contains a wide variety of pies, especially those containing meats, which harken

¹⁸ Hoffman, 134.

¹⁹ Keene, 266.

²⁰ Pearson, 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Not listed in *The Forme of Cury, Liber Cúre Cocorum*, nor a 14th Century Manuscript -*MS Royal 12.C.xii*.

back to the medieval diet. One such recipe for “Flesh pyes of capon or pessand” is the medieval equivalent of a chicken pot pie using capon,²³ pheasant, “or other wilde foule” combined with, “hard yolks of egges and strawe on clowes maces dates mynced raissins of corrans quybibes,” all of which are placed in a “coffyne”²⁴ then covered, secured, and baked.²⁵ Other recipes call for “buttes of pork and buttes of vele,”²⁶ or in an extravagant case capon, minced beef with verjuice, and mallard.²⁷ The meats of these pies varied to fit what was available locally, while the stuffing ingredients remained the same throughout each recipe: eggs, cloves, saffron, dates, and raisins. Of these only the date was likely required to be imported.²⁸ By relying on the local supplies, the food retained an English flair and becoming associated with English cuisine.

Perhaps more than any other dish, haggis can be viewed as the most easily recognizable of the English cuisine. While tradition holds that the dish is Scottish in origin, historical evidence cannot support this claim. What is clear, however, is that the first known written recipe appears around 1430 in the English cookbook *Liber Cure Cocorum*:

Pe hert of schepe, þe nere þou take, Po bowel noþ þou shalle forsake,
On þe turbilen made, and boyled wele, Hacke alle togeder with gode persole,
Isop, saveray, þou schalle take þen, And suet of schepe take in, I ken,
With powder of peper and egges gode wonne, And sethe hit wele and serve hit þenne,
Loke hit be saltyd for gode menne.²⁹

²³ A rooster which has been neutered in order to improve the quality of its flesh for consumption.

²⁴ The well or dish portion of a pie which has not been covered.

²⁵ *A Noble Boke of Cookry*, 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁷ “For a pye,” *Liber Cure Cocorum*.

²⁸ *Livarda*, 144.

²⁹ “For haggese,” *Liber Cure Concorum*.

Just as with the pies, the ingredients called for are all available in England. Furthermore, the dish ensures that all the parts of a slaughtered animal are used, rather than thrown to waste. This dish might also suggest a means which those of lower stature could at least obtain some form of meat in their diet. Regardless of how the recipe came about, it remains an icon of the English culinary cuisine.

France

Unlike the more rustic dishes of the English, the dishes of French cuisine are often viewed as complex and a pinnacle of fine dining. It was during the medieval period that one begins to see some of the elements that one would consider French, particularly the development of a wide range of sauces.

While each French cookbook viewed for this paper differed slightly on the emphasis of its contents, each book contained a section devoted for sauces. Descriptions could be simple such as white fish sauce, black pepper sauce, or sturgeon sauce, with a brief list of ingredients following the title,³⁰ or the descriptions could be more specific, like the following recipe for a *sauce râpées*:

“Scald three or four bunches of verjuice, then crush part of them and remove the residue of this verjuice: and then grind ginger and mix with this verjuice and put in a bowl; then grind the verjuice skins previously crushed, and moisten with white verjuice and strain; and put it all in the bowl and stir it all together, then sieve and sprinkle grain on top.”³¹

³⁰ Guenièvre de Monmarché, J. Soucey, trans. *Le Recueil de Riom*. 1466.

³¹ Jerome Pichon, Janet Hinson, David Friedman and Elizabeth Cook, trans. *Le Managier de Paris*. 1392.

Le Viandier de Taillevent has two chapters dedicated to boiled and un-boiled sauces, but sauces were not limited to these sections alone. In many instances sauces were included with the recipes for specific dishes. The sheer variety of sauces shows their importance within the French cuisine.

While sauces may be an important component of the French cuisine, sauces on their own are nothing exceptional. There are dishes, however, which one can categorically point to as conclusively French. Ironically, two of the most well-known of French dishes appear back to back in *Le Ménagier De Paris*: Frog legs and Escargot.

“FROGS: ...take the two thighs of these same frogs, cut off the feet, and skin the thighs raw, then have cold water and wash them; and if the thighs stay overnight in cold water, they will be better and more tender. And after thus rinsing them, they should be washed in warm water, then take and dry in a cloth; the thighs, thus washed and dried, should be rolled in flour, that is floured, and then fried in oil, fat or other liquid, and put in a bowl and powdered spices on them.”

SNAILS KNOWN AS ESCARGOTS, should be taken in the morning. Take young, small snails, with dark shells, among the vines and shrubs, then wash them in plenty of water until there is no more scum: then wash them once in salt and vinegar and put them on to cook, in water. Then you should drag the snails out of their shells with the end of a pin or needle, and then you should remove their tails...then wash, and cook and boil in water, and then take them out and put them on a dish or in a bowl, to be eaten with bread.”

Here in this Fourteenth Century book, the recipes for these two dishes appear much as they are prepared today. Their presence in *Le Ménagier* also speaks to their popularity, as the book was a

woman's guidebook, not just solely a cookbook. The incorporation of such items into the French cuisine also speaks to medieval mindset that anything could be a potential food source. With fewer grazing lands to support livestock and only a limited portion of the country having access to fish and other seafood, it is easy to see how items such as snails or frogs could be brought into the diet. Regardless of how or why these items came into the diet, frog legs and escargot remain easily identifiable as an element of French cuisine.

Italy

During the medieval period, the Italian peninsula was at the top of the European culinary world. Much of what would become Italy's success was due in large part to its prime location. The Italian peninsula was surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea which provided better access to ample fisheries. The Mediterranean location also provided a better climate for growing grains for breads which found their way into the Italian diet. Finally, the peninsula's location allowed it easier access to both overland and maritime trade with the spice trades making their way west from Constantinople.

Perhaps more so than England and France, Italy benefited from the robust offshore fisheries. The shape of a long, thin land-mass protruding into the sea also meant that inland cities still had access to fresh fish which could be transported from the seaports to inland markets before spoiling. This regular supply provided an alternative for meat, not just during Lent and days of fasting, but a supply which was consumed throughout the year.³² Of the one hundred and twenty-eight recipes listed in the Fifteenth Century Italian cookbook *Due Libri di Cucina*, twelve of the recipes utilized some form of seafood comprising roughly ten percent of the entries.³³

³² Hoffman, 143.

³³ Ingemar Boström, ed., R. Friedman, trans. "Libro B" from *Due Libri di Cucina*. c. 1400

The beautiful Mediterranean climate allowed Italian farmers to grow grains, especially wheat, much more easily than many of their Western European neighbors. With an abundance of grain, Italians were able to not only bake breads and pastries, but also able to develop additional uses. Chief among these culinary developments would come that distinctly Italian food: pasta.

“He who wants to make lasagna, take good white flour and boil it in capon broth. If it is not so much, put in some other water, and put in some salt to boil with it, and dump it in a broad, flat bowl, and put in enough cheese, and throw over it the cuttings of the fat of the capon.”³⁴

“If you want to make ravioli, take the cheese and take of it the salt, and add dry grated cheese, and boil asopere.”³⁵

These recipes from *Due Libri di Cucina* are for lasagna and ravioli, which are very similar to their modern equivalents. The modern reader should have no difficulty in associating these dishes with the Italian cuisine.

The Italian Peninsula’s location at the center of the European continent made it an ideal location for conducting trade. The Italian cuisine would benefit from this geographical center incorporating many spices into their cuisine. The following recipe for a tart sauce shows the wide variety of spices that would find their way into the Italian cuisine.

“If you want to make tart sauce, take cloves and fine cinamon [sic] and ginger and a little cardamom and small nuts and almonds in hot cinders with a little bread crust without the center, and let it be of tallow of the sugar, and crush these things a little. Then grind them

³⁴ *Due Libri di Cucina*, LXVII

³⁵ *Due Libri di Cucina*, LXXXV

with vinegar and with wine, if vinegar doesn't taste good to the signore. And this is good with whatever roast you wish, and let it be good.”³⁶

Here one finds a wide range of spices being utilized, among these cinnamon, ginger, and cardamom all of which had been brought from the Far East. Furthermore, one can compare the prevalence of the spices appearing within the Italian cuisine, to the limited appearance of similar spices in both the French and English cuisines to see how important Italy's position was in developing the identity of their cuisine.

Conclusion

Throughout the Middle Ages, the peoples of England, France, and the Italian peninsula were developing cuisines which would come to be synonymous with their culture. In England, one saw the development of meat pies and that most well-known of English dishes: haggis. Across the Channel, the French developed a wide variety of sauces to pair with nearly any entrée, and would prepare more “exotic” dishes such as frog legs and escargot that would also become an identity of their cuisine. Finally, the people of the Italian peninsula greatly benefited from their geography incorporating a wide variety of spices from eastern trade into their cuisine, as well as taking benefit from their abundant agriculture to utilize grains into the development of pastas. In each instance, what people were eating would become something more than a simple dish; some of the dishes would go on to represent their people and their culture as a whole.

³⁶ *Due Libri di Cucina*, XVIII

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