

THE MIDDLE AGES

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Viking

MEDIEVAL FOOD



The diet of medieval people was very different from ours today. Most country people grew their own food, and were sometimes in danger of starvation. The diet of the wealthy was more varied. Feasts were an important part of people's social life.



This picture shows medieval kitchen equipment. Meat was roasted on a spit, and pots were hung over the fire to boil meat, vegetables, and other foods.

The kitchen of a great castle. By modern standards it was probably none too clean, had its share of bad smells, and was a hot and noisy place to work.

WHAT DID THEY EAT?

Archaeologists can provide us with evidence about health and diet in the Middle Ages, and some recipe books survive from this time. Paintings, letters, and written accounts also tell us about the period.

Medieval people used many strongly flavored herbs and spices in their cooking, partly to help disguise the taste of food that was going bad. These included pepper, saffron, cinnamon, and cumin. Such spices were brought to Europe by merchants from the East and were very expensive. There were few easy ways of preserving food, so it was always possible that meat or dairy foods would grow moldy. Wine often went bad, and so was sometimes served with spices like ginger or with honey.



Pudding of Porpoise:
Take the blood of the porpoise and the fat, and oatmeal, salt, pepper, and ginger and mix these well and put these in the gut of the porpoise. Then let the porpoise cook, and serve it.

Fifteenth-century recipe

Many different animals were hunted for food. A medieval banquet for the wealthy might include delicacies such as swan, heron, peacock, whale, porpoise, or small birds.

Peasants had much less variety in their diet. For them, many meals consisted of cabbage, leeks, onions, or other vegetables, oatmeal porridge, and dark bread.

FOOD AND FAMINE

Peasants had to grow their own food. Many also had to provide food for the lord of the manor on whose land they lived. This was a sort of rent, paid in goods rather than money. Peasant farmers had many problems growing enough food. The winter was a particularly hard time and their supplies sometimes ran out. An English poet named William Langland described the conditions in which peasants lived. His account explained how they tried to survive through the winter on bread made out of beans and oats, vegetables, and, occasionally, on an egg and some cheese.

Sometimes there was famine. At the start of the fourteenth century there was severe weather, and a series of bad harvests followed. Outbreaks of disease among sheep and cattle took place and the living conditions for many poor people became very bad. Resistance to illness was lowered, and many died from lack of food and from disease.

FEASTS

Feasting was an important part of medieval life. Feasts were given to reward the peasants who worked to get in the harvest each year.



A pestle and mortar. The pestle was used to mash ingredients inside the mortar to prepare them for cooking. All wealthy medieval households would have needed a pestle and mortar in the kitchen.

Sometimes the lord of the manor also provided a meal for the workers at other times. This might be bread and ale, or a dish of meat and peas. Great feasts were also a regular part of the life of the castle. Here, elaborate ceremonies were an important feature. It was a common custom for a trumpeter to play to announce the start of the meal. The guests were given places at table according to their social importance. They were served in pairs, with food for each couple set down in one dish and shared.

FOOD AND FAITH

Monks and nuns tried to eat a very simple diet and give up rich foods as a sign that they were not interested in everyday matters. A famous Cistercian monk named Bernard of Clairvaux, living in France in the twelfth century, wrote a letter describing the foods he thought monks should live on. These were vegetables, beans, bread, and water.

Medieval people sometimes changed their diet for religious reasons. They occasionally went without food, fasting as a mark of devotion to God. The Catholic Church directed that everyone should give up meat on Fridays as a religious gesture. Many people ate fish instead.

A banquet at the castle. The lord and lady of the castle sat at the top table with important guests.

