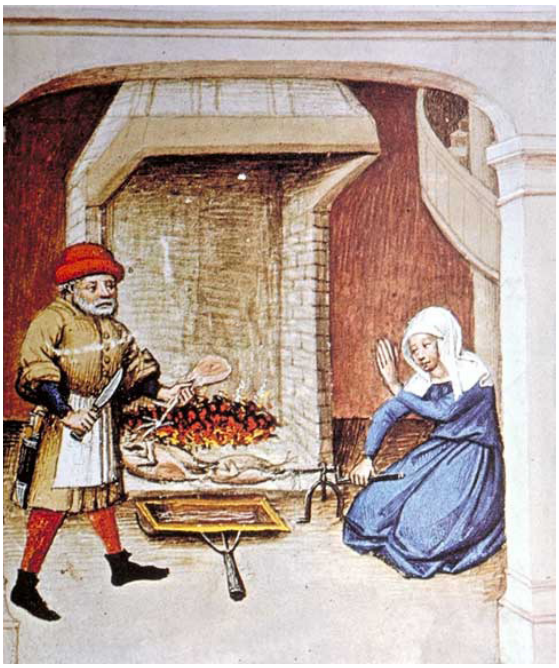
ROSSLYN CHAPEL 1446

Diet and Drink in the Middle Ages

Food and drink are not simply consumed for nourishment but may reflect the preferences, resources and indulgences of a group of people. Much of the information we have regarding the medieval diet comes from archaeological discoveries. Seeds, animal bones, shells and pollen found in middens – rubbish pits – can reveal much about the kinds of foods eaten by folk in the Middle Ages. Information can also be gleaned from surviving mercantile records and household accounts that list foods bought, traded and sold. Not least, works of literature that discuss celebratory feasts can offer an insight into the luxury foods of the day.

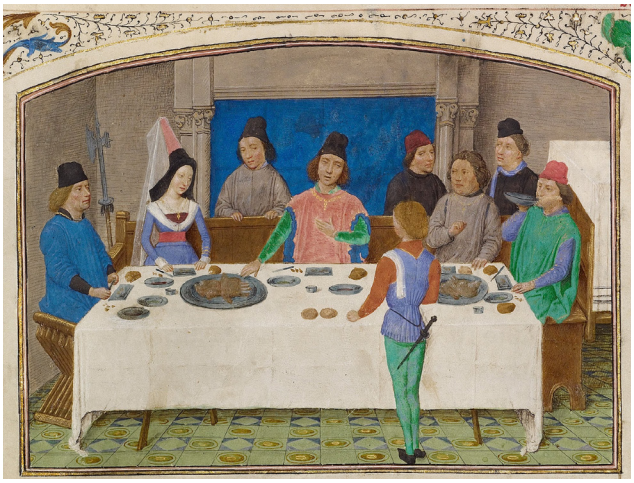
The Peasant Diet



A couple roasting poultry on a spit over an open fire, 1432.

The typical peasant ate a grain-based diet that was supplemented with fruit and vegetables and, when possible, with meat, poultry and fish. Artisans, fishermen, tanners and other skilled workers generally enjoyed a more varied diet than the poorer fieldworkers. Fish was pickled, salted, smoked or dried. Many urban dwellers would have kept a cow or goat in their home and had a garden to grow fruit and vegetables such as onions, leeks, apples, pear, berries, peas, beans, and leafy greens. This produce was either eaten by the family or sold. Berries and nuts were collected seasonally. Meat was more readily available in the cities where the animals were slaughtered. Whilst the best cuts went to the elite, meat was also enjoyed by those of lower rank. Poorer folk ate frumenty which was wheat porridge made with milk and served with meat. Bannock – a form of flat bread – was a common source of carbohydrate along with oatcakes. The poor made their bread from barley, oats, peas and beans. The diet of the poor improved as a direct consequence of the Black Death that ravished Europe in the fourteenth century. With fewer mouths to feed there was now more food available per capita – and more meat was eaten by the wider public.

A Rich Man's Diet

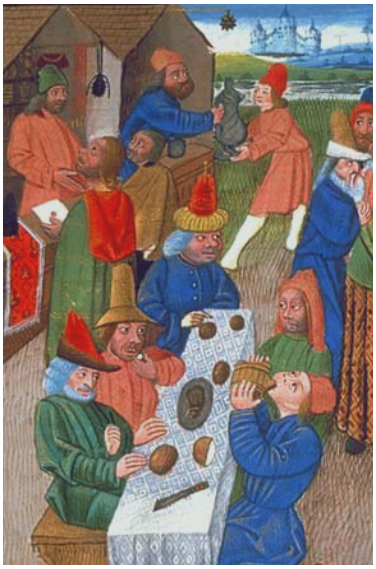


The wealthy enjoyed a more varied diet. This illustration dates from 1475.

Despite these changes the diet of the wealthy remained more diverse and exotic than that of the poor. The nobility would drink imported wine from France and later, when trade opened up with the East, they enjoyed pepper, spices and other luxuries. Those who could afford it would eat white bread made with refined wheat, and they generally enjoyed fresh fish and pork whilst the less well-off ate preserved versions of these meats – ham and bacon. But most people in the Middle Ages ate with the seasons and thus had rabbit in winter, lamb in spring and doves from April to November.

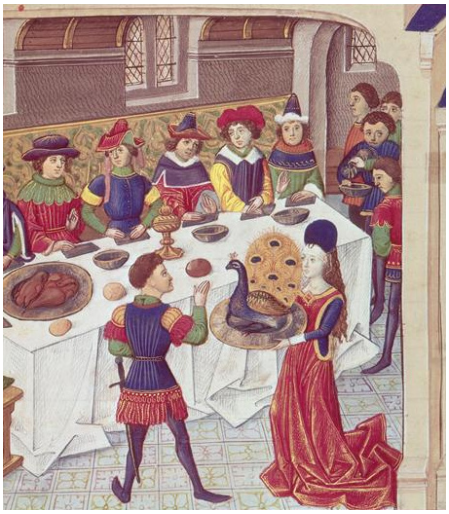
Other Cases

In towns and cities it was not always possible for folk to cook for themselves. Living quarters were cramped and the poorest people did not have the facilities for baking and cooking. In larger cities such as London there might be a public kitchen selling warm meals to travelers and soldiers as well as those who could not afford their own hearth – an early form of the take-away! The most impoverished people and lepers might receive food as alms at the gate of the monastery or at a hospital on the edge of the town or city. Meat considered unfit for sale at market might be given to lepers, presumably as it was held that as they were already diseased they would be unaffected by the rotten flesh.



Medieval peasants eating and drinking outdoors, from 15th century.

Dining and Feasting



A medieval banquet, complete with peacock, mid 15th century.

Eating habits were not only dictated by season and economic standing but by the Church calendar with its periods of feasting and fasting. For instance, during Lent fish was substituted for all forms of meat and a greater variety of fish was eaten. For the aristocracy dining was not simply to nourish but to entertain and impress. Dining in the Middle Ages was charged with formality. Seating was arranged according to hierarchy with the most important person placed to the right of the host. Everyone would face the highest ranking members of the party and turn their backs to those of lower standing. Each diner would bring his or her own knife and sharpen it against a whetstone at the entrance to the room; hence the phrase 'to whet your appetite'. Diners were seated in pairs and the lower ranking of the two would cut the meat for the other. This meant that women would often cut the meat for their male companions. A variety of meats and fish would be

offered to a guest. Meat was served on a trencher, a piece of bread or wood that soaked up the juices and could be given to the poor – or dogs – after the meal. Cooks in wealthy households would display fowl as if it were alive. For instance, a swan might be skinned and cooked after which the skin would be carefully replaced on the cooked meat. The neck would be propped to give the bird the illusion of life. Diners were expected to act with a certain level of decorum. Diners were warned not to place their elbows on the table, to chew with their mouth closed and not to pick their teeth at the table. However belching was allowed and even encouraged although diners were advised to look at the ceiling when doing so.

Drinking

Along with food, medieval men and women also enjoyed their drink. Ale was traditionally brewed by women, often to supplement the family income. Ale was a popular drink for hydration because water was often unsafe to drink. It was brewed from barley and the final product was thick and often chewy. Ale cunners – town officials who tasted the ale – set the prices for each establishment. Taverns were forced to sell at those prices or face punishment. Customers were aware of whether the brewster was cheating them out of money as the ale cunner chalked the price outside each tavern. Hopped beer was introduced to England from the Netherlands in the late thirteenth century but was not widely drunk until the fifteenth century. It had a longer shelf life than ale and was more palatable, but ale remained popular. *Aqua vive* or 'live water' was referenced as a Highland brew made with local herbs comparable to whisky.

This monk tastes wine, stored in barrels in the monastery cellar, late 13th century.

In addition to recreational drinking, taverns were the sites of business meetings; many agreements were made over a pint of ale. Ale lawings followed a verbal contract; these drinking parties solidified the agreement. Taverns were also used for enforcing the law. Often a local court would order a dispute to be resolved through a public apology and the sharing of a drink.

Guide researched and written by Meredith Johnson and Fiona Rogan

Useful Reading

Ewan, E 2011, 'Hamperit in ane hony came Sights, Sounds and Smells of a Medieval Town' in *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000-1600*, eds E J Cowan & L Henderson, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh

Jackson, S 2005, *The Medieval Christmas*, The History Press, Gloucestershire

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