

Feasts of Shakespearean Britain

Shakespeare and his contemporaries were familiar with a wide range of foodstuffs and seasonings and had strong opinions about the flavour and quality of what they ate. The changing seasons gave them greens, roots, herbs, fruits, and nuts, many of which were gathered in hedgerows, fields, and forests, as well as in kitchen gardens. People enjoyed breads made from a variety of flours, ate every part of the animals that came their way, and used clever tricks to trap birds, feeding them with aromatic herbs to flavour their meat. The diet of sixteenth-century English men and women varied with the seasons, and their foods provided medicine as well as sustenance. While some foods were imported from the Continent, the average diet was biased toward local specialties.

By the end of the seventeenth century, new developments in agriculture, imported foods, beverages, and seasonings, and a palate that had shifted from sweet to salty had changed the way the English ate. Books on herbs and medicine, laws governing the baking of bread and the importing of spices, household accounts, gardening journals, and even student plays, as well as printed and manuscript recipe books, permit us to see into the gardens, kitchens, butteries, and cellars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and to experience some of the food grown, prepared, and stored there.

The large number of health manuals published for home use by 1675 suggests the complex relationship that was perceived to exist between foods and medicine. The humoral theory, based on the writings of Hippocrates (c. 460-377 BC), was used throughout the seventeenth century and later to explain and to treat illness. In each person's character, one of four humors was believed to dominate: Bile, Blood, Choler, or Melancholy. Just as individuals were characterized by one temperament, so too were individual meats, spices, wines, and other foods. Illness, therefore, resulted from unbalanced humors, and home remedies used garden herbs, vegetables, and spices to restore balance. Diet, according to Thomas Moffett, ought to be an orderly course of nourishment "for the preservation recovery or continuance of the health of mankind."

Pottage and bread formed the core of the Tudor diet for all classes of society. Many printed menus include dishes of buttered loaves, while pottage recipes call for bread as a thickener and as an accompaniment. Bread flours milled from wheat, rye, or barley was baked into loaves whose weight and appearance were regulated by the 'Assise of Bread'¹. The type of bread consumed reflected the social position of the consumer. At the main midday meal, pottage might be flavoured with bacon, thickened with jelly or eggs, and served with buttered loaves. Many pottage recipes used peas, spinach, and sorrel to give green colour and nutritive value to the soup.

¹ **Bakery regulations: a source for Shakespeare.** 1608

The woodcuts in this official government text that regulated the work of bakers show the work of kitchens with which Shakespeare would have been familiar. In his plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Coriolanus* and *The Comedy of Errors*, there are servants preparing meals, or serving at feasts, while they comment on the action of their masters: 'The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit; the clock hath struck twelve upon the bell, my mistress... is so hot because the meat is cold; the meat is cold because you come not home...' (*Comedy of Errors*, 1,2, lines 43-52).

See: *Coriolanus*, 4,5, lines 176-235; *Romeo and Juliet*, 1,5, lines 1-15.

Full title: *The Assise of Bread, newly corrected and enlarged together with sondry good and needful ordinances, for Bakers, Brewers, Inholders, Victuallers, Vintners, and Butchers; and also other Assises in weightes and measures, etc.* [revised by John Powell], London, printed by John Windet and sold by Edward White, 1608.

Shakespeare's contemporaries knew many flours. In lean times, flours of beans, peas, oats, and even acorns and lentils were used. The Assise specified the weights and types of bread that could be made: Simnel (a bread first boiled then baked), white, wheaten, household (brown), and horse bread² (from bean and bran flour and fed to horses). It also required each baker to mark his loaves with a seal. Spice breads and other special breads could be made only for funerals, on Good Friday, and at Christmas. Imported sugar and spices, especially pepper, cloves, and cinnamon, accounted for the sweet/spicy flavour of much English and European cookery before 1700. A legacy of the Crusaders' exposure to Near Eastern cookery, combinations of cinnamon, ginger, cloves, raisins, and sugar were a preference rather than a disguise for spoiled foods. The spicy/sweet palate that was used to flavour meats, vegetables, and even green "sallets" was gradually replaced by 1700 with a preference for salty/tangy foods familiar to modern diners. Despite the preference for sweet flavours, salt was used as a seasoning in pottages and in tarts and was used to preserve a variety of foods. Salted meats and fish were generally rinsed in several changes of liquid before they were added to a dish

As with all foods, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages were valued for their medicinal properties as well as for their pleasant taste. Many wines and beers had a very low alcohol content and were consumed at each meal. Dairy products added protein to the diet on fasting days. For household distilling and brewing, good water supplies were important. William Harrison's wife preferred Thames river water. Increased cultivation of fruit trees and beehives provided farmers with the raw materials for cider, perry (from pears), and honey-based drinks such as mead, and according to authors like John Worlidge, made land more productive. Most households quenched their thirsts with ale or beer. Ales were brewed with malt and water, while beer contained hops that imparted a bitter flavour. Many housewives added other flavours as well, such as bayberries, orris³, or long pepper. Consumption of weak, low-alcohol drinks at this time has been estimated at around one gallon per person per day.

Drinking a hot liquid was a new experience for most Englishmen. Coffee, tea, and chocolate were imported luxuries and, unlike ale and beer, were prepared with specialised equipment and consumed at leisure. First introduced into England as medicines, coffee and chocolate were thought to have dry humors and were recommended as stimulants, especially for those studying or working long hours. Tea was introduced by Jesuit missionaries who had served in the Far East and who attributed the health and long lives of the Chinese to their drinking of tea. While the coffeehouse became a fixture in towns all over England, home consumption was limited to the well to do until the late eighteenth century. Coffee had a reputation in medical circles for preventing drowsiness, but it was also considered so drying that the result was impotence. To make it cacao-nut paste, sugar, and pepper were mixed, and then heated in water and drunk.

Improvements in the care of plants, animals, and soil meant more varieties of produce and more efficient use of lands. Planting new vegetable crops (such as cabbage and carrots) introduced into England by Dutch farmers, cultivating fruit and nut orchards, and using improved ploughs were a few of the techniques that farmers employed to increase their yield.

In the early seventeenth century, serious gentlemen farmers turned to fruit orchards to improve their lands and took great pride in what they produced. Following strategies established by classical authors and herbalists, William Lawson wrote guides for effective fruit, garden, and bee cultivation. Numerous varieties of apples, pears, cherries, as well as strawberries, cucumbers, and melons were among the fruitage planted

² **Horsebread** was a type of bread commonly consumed in medieval Europe. This bread was a low-quality bread, made from legumes as well as, or instead of grains, and was one of the cheapest breads available. It was fed to horses but also eaten by the indigent and those who could not afford white bread (which was the most expensive bread) or other breads. The husks of the wheat were not removed before grinding the flour, and sometimes peas and root vegetable items were included. While the caloric content of horsebread was relatively low (due to the non-edible items ground into the flour), this bread was very high in fibre. Horsebread was one of the Middle Ages' first natural laxatives.

³ **Orris root** is a term used for the roots *Iris germanica*, *Iris florentina*, and *Iris pallida*; Once important in western herbal medicine, as well as an ingredient in many brands of gin. After an initial drying period, which can take five years or more depending on the use, the root is ground, dissolved in water and then distilled. One ton of iris root produces two kilos of essential oil, also referred to as orris root butter, making it a highly prized substance, and its fragrance has been described as tenaciously flowery, heavy and woody. Orris root is often included as one of the many ingredients of Ras el hanout, a blend of herbs and spices used across the Middle East and North Africa, primarily associated with Moroccan cuisine.

in the gardens of country estates. Whether conserved or candied, eaten as table fruit, or distilled into medicinal waters, these fruits became a larger part of the English diet after mid-century.

In 1600 approximately 800 markets in England gave rural and urban inhabitants access to a variety of foods. Country residents regularly purchased food at small markets and fairs. City residents, on the other hand, usually shopped for food at markets held once a week. Account books kept for a London household in 1612 record weekly purchases of meats, poultry, wines, cooking fats, and flour and spices. In London, as in other cities, each market sold particular goods such as herbs, cheese, or freshwater fish. Other items were bought from large regional fairs where vendors sold dry goods, livestock, and grains. Storing provisions required dry space that was rodent-proof: egg baskets, barrels, covered earthenware jugs, hanging meats on nails, and placing pies on shelves. The round pie is called a coffin. Coffins were an economical alternative to ceramic pie dishes. The hard rye crust was not eaten and could be re-used. The top crust was removed and portions were scooped out and served to the diners.

In the seventeenth century, English cooks relied on a variety of methods for preparing and preserving foods. Knowledge of cookery was often recorded by women in their own "receipt books," but printed collections of recipes gradually became available as well. Published cookery books by professional male chefs like Robert May included elaborate desserts as well as everyday staples such as pottage. Women often copied from printed recipes finding new ways to use the local produce available to them. When François Pierre de La Varenne's cookbook was published in the 1650s, it transformed both French and English cooking. In England, La Varenne's book helped to bring about a transition from medieval-style recipes to more recognisably modern preparations in which the use of flour-based roûx, or sauces, was particularly important. While the English took up French cooking methods, even Anglicising French terms, they continued traditional practices as well. Roasting meat, beef in particular, was central to English cooking, and the roast became renowned as a symbol of English culture. "Kickshaw" and "hash" are Anglicised words adopted from French cooking in the mid-seventeenth century. From *quelque chose*, kickshaw refers to a puff paste dough filled with berries, marrow, kidney, "or any other thing what you like best" Hash describes a common cooking technique (*hacher*, to hack or slice) for sliced meats, as well as the resulting dish of meat in a sauce.

Appropriate behaviour in both cooking and eating was of great concern in Shakespeare's England and was addressed in numerous published volumes. Not only was the treatment of servants dictated but also rules for the proper serving and consuming of food. Good table manners were crucial to maintaining social relations since they were thought to express respect for hosts and others worthy of esteem. While bills of fare in cookbooks note the proper order for serving each course, carving manuals give instruction to servants on how to carve in public. Here the housewife employs the basic tools necessary: a napkin to cover her arm, a broad carving knife to present food on, and a two-tined fork to hold the meat in place. Presentation of dishes in the correct order by the server was a part of the dining ceremony. The butler dispensed drinks from the tiered cupboard at the rear and served sauces. The counterpart of the modern dessert, the banquet or sweetmeat course that followed an elaborate meal was a combination of both food and entertainment. Sweet foods were often prepared from published recipes: for example sugar paste or marmalade: and were sometimes believed to act as aphrodisiacs. Elaborate vessels made from expensive materials appeared on the banquet tables of the wealthy and enhanced the appearance of the sweets. Trenchers decorated with verses to be read aloud made the tableware part of the banquet entertainment.

Food and drink played important roles in Christmas celebrations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Christmas festivities often ended with a Twelfth Night banquet on the sixth of January, and the Christmas season was the time when the yeomanry and apprentices demanded finer quality bread and ale than they ordinarily received. This tradition, called "wassailing," provided an important opportunity for the gentry to demonstrate their hospitality. Religious aspects of keeping Christmas changed during the seventeenth century, although many social customs like wassailing remained intact. Josiah King's book mocks those who would suppress Christmas. Brawn, made from force-fed boar meat and served with mustard sauce, is traditionally associated with Christmas in England.