Researching Medieval Recipes

Edouard Halidai (Daniel Myers)
MedievalCookery.com

I. What is Medieval?

Medieval ≠ Traditional

There is a tendency to assume that traditional recipes are medieval, or at least have medieval origins. However, the changes in European culture in the 16th and 17th centuries in turn caused substantial changes in European cooking. The recipes of medieval Europe have a unique style and flavor that, while still appealing to the modern palate, are very different from those of any modern cuisine.

Medieval ≠ Primitive

It is also assumed that since the cooks of medieval Europe did not have modernly equipped kitchens, the food that they prepared were not as elegant as those made in the present. A cursory examination of even the simplest cookbooks from the time can yield a surprising array of dishes that are as subtle, complex, and delicate as anything made by modern cooks.

II. Pitfalls for the Interpreter

Aside from an almost complete lack of standardized units of measure, there are a number of additional challenges for the modern cook when interpreting medieval recipes. Each can lead to wildly different understandings of what was actually cooked and served historically.

A. Bias due to modern recipes

When the title or ingredients of a recipe are similar to a modern one, it is easy to assume that the final product is also similar. This may not (and is most likely not) the case. For example, the recipe for "Crusterolles" calls for making dough out of flour and frying it in a pan. Some have interpreted this to be like modern Irish pan breads, however a closer reading of the source recipe suggests that crusterolles should be smaller and deep-fried, leading to something more like an Indian poori.

B. Bias due to modern techniques

When the ingredients used are strongly associated with a modern cooking technique, modern cooks will often use that technique out of habit. The recipe for "Snowe" - a whipped cream like dessert - is made with egg whites and cream. Most modern interpretations use equal proportions of the two, whip them separately, and fold them together to make something like meringue. However, the source recipe calls for much less egg white than cream, and the two are whipped together resulting in a thicker version of whipped cream that is also more stable than regular whipped cream.

C. Scribal errors

Occasionally the scribes who were re-copying medieval manuscripts would lose their place and make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes went unnoticed and uncorrected. This can lead to recipes that would have been as unusual then as they are now. There are several recipes for "pynade" - a candy like peanut brittle that uses pine nuts instead of peanuts. One copy of this recipe though calls for chicken as well, but is the only case where meat is added to such a dish.

D. Translation errors

Because of the degree of spelling variations in medieval sources along with a tendency to use ambiguous abbreviations, it is very easy to mistranslate them. For example, in a recipe from "Forme of Cury" for Rysshews, the source word "fyges" has in one case been read as "fynges" and translated as mushrooms, however from similar recipes in the same source, it can be concluded that "figs" would be correct.

E. Transcription Errors

Occasionally errors are introduced in the process of transcribing from the original manuscript. The handwriting is often faded, run together, or otherwise obscured. For example, in the transcription of "Forme of Cury" one recipe uses the word "brymlent" in the title, and it is assumed that this is a name for a particular kind of medieval tart. Close examination of a facsimile of the manuscript however shows that the letter "m" is actually "in" run together, and the proper name of the dish is "bry (bream) in lent" - simply instructions for making a fish tart during lent.

F. Bad recipes

There are a small number of recipes in the original sources that are "Joke recipes". These recipes were of course never made in the medieval period, but might be used unintentionally by researchers as "proving" odd practices or the consumption of unusual food (or non-food) items.

III. Logical Fallacies

Research of Medieval Cooking is prone to certain errors of reasoning. All of these can lead to wildly erroneous conclusions.

A. *If something was possible then it was done*

Example: It is so trivial to make a sandwich that people must have made them in medieval England. Human behavior is controlled my much more than just what is possible. Dairy aren't consumed throughout much of Asia even though domesticated cattle are present.

B. *Absence of proof is not proof of absence*

Example 1: There are very few recipes for vegetables in this specific medieval cookbook, therefore the writer of that book ate very few vegetables. The flaw can be easily seen if it is considered that the ways to cook common foods were so well known that the cookbook writer didn't bother to write them down.

Example 2: Cucumbers were introduced to England from the Roman empire, therefore they must have been present throughout the medieval period. This statement fails to consider the possibility of climate change.

IV. Avoiding the Problems

By following three simple guidelines, most of these pitfalls and fallacies can be avoided.

A. *Use Primary and Secondary sources*
Start from as close to the original source as possible. Good primary and secondary sources are readily available (see list). Tertiary sources should be treated read with a large amount of skepticism.

B. *Find multiple examples*
Compare similar recipes from as many sources as possible. This will help in translation and will highlight any oddities.

C. Make the recipe as instructed

  The first time you try a recipe, follow the medieval instructions. This will (hopefully) result in something more like what the author intended. On subsequent tries alterations can be made for taste, ease of preparation, and the like.

V. Some Primary and Secondary Sources

Boke of Keruynge
Peter Brears (ed.)
Southover Press.
ISBN: 1-870962-19-2

Chiquart's "On Cookery"
Terence Scully, (trans.)
Peter Lang Publishing
ISBN: 0820403520

Curye on Inglish
Constance Hieatt & Sharon Butler (eds.)
Oxford University Press
ISBN: 0-19-722409-1

The English Housewife
Michael Best (ed.)
McGill-Queens University Press
ISBN: 0-773-511032

Libellus De Arte Coquinaria
Rudolf Grewe & Constance Hieatt (eds.)
Medieval & Renaissance Texts
ISBN: 0-866-98264-7

The Neapolitan Recipe Collection
Terence Scully (trans.)
University of Michigan Press
ISBN: 0-472-10972-3

A Proper Newe Booke of Cokerye
Anne Ahmed (ed.)
Corpus Christi College
ISBN: 0-9504261-3-X

Two Fifteenth Century Cookery Books
Thomas Austin (ed.)
Oxford University Press
ISBN: 0-85991-849-1

The Vivendier
Terence Scully (trans.)
Prospect Books
ISBN: 0-907325-81-5

The Viandier of Taillevent
Terence Scully (trans.)
University of Ottawa Press
ISBN: 0-7766-0174-1

VI. Free Primary and Secondary Sources

A more complete list is available online at http://www.medievalcookery.com/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?Etexts

The Book of Kervynge (English, 16th century)
Wynkyn de Worde
http://milkmama.tripod.com/kervynge2.html

Ein Buch von guter spise (German, 14th century)
Alia Atlas (trans.)
http://cs-people.bu.edu/akatlas/Buch/recipes.html

Enseignements qui enseingnent a apareillier toutes manieres de viandes (French, 14th century)
Daniel Myers (trans.)
http://www.medievalcookery.com/notes/lessons.html

Forme of Cury (English, 14th century)
Samuel Pegge
http://ibiblio.unc.edu/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/etext05/8cury10.zip

Wel ende edelike spijse (Dutch, 15th century)
Christianne Muusers (trans.)
http://www.coquinaria.nł/kooktekst/Edelikespijse0.htm

Das Kuchbuch der Sabina Welserin (German, 16th century)
Valoise Armstrong (trans.)
http://www.daviddfriedman.com/MedievałCookbooks/Sabrina_Welserin.html

Liber cure cocorum (English, 15th century)
Thomas Gloning (ed.)
http://staff-www.uni-marburg.de/~gloning/lcc3.htm

Libro di cucina / Libro per cuoco (Italian, 14th-15th century)
Louise Smithson (trans.)
http://www.geocities.com/helewyse/libro.html

Le Ménagier de Paris (French, 14th century)
Janet Hinson (trans.)
http://www.daviddfriedman.com/MedievałCookbooks/Menagier/Menagier.html

Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books (English, 15th century)
Thomas Austin (ed.)
http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/c/cme/cme-idx?type=HTML&rgn=TEI.2&byte=3356093

Le Viandier de Taillevent (French, 14th century)
James Prescott (trans.)
http://www.telusplanet.net/public/prescotj/data/viandier/viandier1.html