

Drummond's Rotten Meat: When Good Sources Go Bad

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Butcher's Stall, Pieter Aertsen (1551)

Introduction

One of the most pervasive myths about medieval food is that medieval cooks used lots of spices to cover up the taste of rotten meat. This belief is often presented in the popular media as fact, with no cited references. Occasionally though a source is mentioned, and the trail invariably leads to:

The Englishman's Food: Five Centuries of English Diet
J.C. Drummond, Anne Wilbraham
First published by Jonathan Cape Ltd 1939

(For this paper I have used the Pimlico edition, 1991 - ISBN 0-7126-5025-3)

Who is Drummond?

Jack Cecil Drummond graduated from East London College in 1912 with a degree in Chemistry. He was the first professor of Biochemistry at the University of London, pioneered vitamin research in the 1930s, and served as a scientific advisor to the British Ministry of Food from 1939 to 1946. He is not a historian, and does not present himself as an expert on either food or medieval life.

This does not preclude him from making a contribution to the field of medieval cooking, but it does mean that any assertions he makes must have supporting references to have any weight.

The Source

The Englishman's Food is a thick book that details food production and consumption in England from pre-historic to modern times, with the section on the medieval time period making up only a small portion. References are cited throughout the text, and quotes appear to be properly attributed, but the work is clearly meant to be more of a popular work than one of scholarship or scientific research.

The portions of text that are the apparent source of the "Moldy Meat Myth" appear in a two page section in a chapter on the quality of food.

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Analysis

The first quote is rather interesting, in part for its economic implications.

The cheaper cookshops often prepared pies and other dishes from tainted meat; there are fourteenth- and fifteenth-century regulations against such practices and occasionally a prosecution, but detection was difficult and the temptation correspondingly great.

Presumably it is the poor who frequent the cheaper cookshops and not the wealthy, but the poor are the least able to afford the spices that Drummond later claims were used to cover the spoiled taste, and since spices were more expensive than meat, it wouldn't be economical for a cookshop catering to the poor to use expensive spice to cover rotten meat in pies when it'd be cheaper just to use fresh meat in the pies. Further, as meat starts to spoil, the taste becomes unpleasant long before the meat is unsafe, and would presumably be very easy to detect in a simple meat pie.

In the second quote Drummond implicitly repeats the assertion that “tainted” meat was being used by medieval cooks, and that spices were used to cover the spoiled taste. However the one piece of evidence he sites in support of this turns out to be completely irrelevant.

It is not surprising to find that the recipe books of these times give numerous suggestions for making tainted meat edible. Washing with vinegar was an obvious, and one of the commonest procedures. A somewhat startling piece of advice is given in the curious collection of recipes and miscellaneous information published under the title of The Jewell House of Art and Nature by 'Hugh Platt, of Lincolnes Inne Gentleman' in 1594. If you had venison that was 'greene' you were recommended to 'cut out all the bones, and bury [it] in a thin olde coarse cloth a yard deep in the ground for 12 or 20 houres'. It would then, he asserted, 'bee sweet enough to be eaten'.

I have to date come across extremely few recipes for “making tainted meat edible”, but in the ones I know of the practice is described in a way that suggests it was not commonly done (and usually consist of cutting away the spoiled parts and washing the rest clean). Drummond states that washing meat with vinegar was a common method for this, but does not provide any examples or documentation. Game meats were often washed or cooked with vinegar or wine, but this is to tenderize the meat and to reduce the gamey flavor - which is decidedly different from masking or removing off tastes due to spoilage.

The example that Drummond does give is most certainly not for dealing with spoiled meat. He misinterprets the word “greene” to mean spoiled, when in fact it has the exact opposite meaning - unripe. Venison, along with a number of other meats, is traditionally hung to age for two or three days after butchering to help tenderize it and to improve the flavor. With this simple knowledge in mind, Platt's instructions are clearly a way to take a freshly butchered carcass and speed up the aging process so that it may be eaten sooner.

Similar instructions for rapidly aging poultry can be found in *Ménagier de Paris*.

Item, to age capons and hens, you should bleed them through their beaks and immediately put them in a pail of very cold water; holding them all the way under; and they will be aged that same day as if they had been killed and hung two days ago.

Interestingly enough, in a section about butter, Drummond himself gives a different interpretation of “green”.

Hard cheese was a popular and relatively cheap food. 'Green' cheese was not, as one might imagine, a variety showing green markings, as, for example, Stilton, but a very new soft cheese. (pg. 73)

In the third quote, Drummond goes on to discuss spice usage, again stating that it was necessary to cover the taste of spoiled meat.

The popularity of strong seasoning for meat was undoubtedly due to the frequency with which it was necessary to mask taint. Onions, garlic and spices not only did this but they added relish to the rather insipid salted and pickled meats of the winter. A large trade in hot spices was carried on with the Mediterranean countries and had been in existence as far back as the eleventh century. Onions were always very popular. In the sixteenth century the demand in London was so great that large quantities were imported from Flanders and landed at Queenshythe for sale in the neighbouring market. (pg. 37)

No documentation or support of any kind is offered to back up the assumption of “taint”. It is also odd to see that, as described above, salted and pickled meats - which were salted or pickled as a method of preservation and should not be spoiled – are seasoned with onions and garlic in the same way as the allegedly spoiled meat.

Drummond also fails to note that the increase in spice use, and the decrease in the latter middle ages, did not correspond to any changes in the methods for preserving meats. This would suggest that spice usage had more to do with other factors, such as fashions in cooking, than it does with covering “taint”. He assumes that the only use for spices is as a masking agent, and that no one would put spices on food just because they like the flavor they impart.

The recipes I have seen that call for salted meats all call for washing and/or boiling the meat before further cooking. This is to remove as much salt as possible, and to replace water pulled from the meat by the salt.

The two recipes below from *Ménagier de Paris* are good examples.

Note that if a ham has been salted for as long as a month, it is appropriate to put it to soak the evening before in cold water, and the next day to scrape it and wash it in hot water before cooking it, or cook it first in water and wine, and throw out this first cooking-liquid, and then cook it in another water.

Venison of Deer or Other Beast, If you wish to salt it in summer, it is appropriate to salt it in a wash-tub or bath, ground coarse salt, and after dry it in the sun. Haunch, that is the rump, which is salted, should be cooked first in water and wine for the first boiling to draw out the salt: and then throw out the water and wine, and after put to partly cook in a bouillon of meat and turnips, and serve in slices with some of the liquid in a dish and venison.

Refutation

Ironically enough, Drummond provides some strong evidence to counter his “Moldy Meat” theory. In the chapter on the quality of food in the medieval period, he starts off by citing early sources on the strict punishments for those selling unwholesome products, and goes on to quote one section on the Mayor of London's control of the market.

The officers charged with the ouersight of the markets in this Citie, did diuers times take from the markets pigs sterued, or otherwise unwholesome for men's sustenance, these they did slit in the eare. (pg. 34)

This indicates that the common practice of the time was to remove any unhealthy live pigs from the market and mark them.

Drummond also quotes about the cookshops from *A Description of London*, by William Fitz Stephen, circa 1183.

There daily, according to the season, you may find viands, dishes roast, fried and boiled, fish great and small, the coarser flesh for the poor, the more delicate for the rich, such as venison, and birds both big and little. (pg. 36)

It is clear that there is a large variety and quantity of meats readily available. It is counterintuitive to think that they would bother to try rescuing spoiled meat with such an abundance of good meat about, likewise that they'd eat great amounts of spoiled meat.

That animals were commonly sold alive at market is supported by a footnote in *Du fait de cuisine* that specifically states that animals should be kept alive until needed - common sense, since living animals generally don't spoil.

And for this the butcher will be wise and well-advised if he is well supplied so that if it happens that the feast lasts longer than expected, one has promptly what is necessary; and also, if there are extras, do not butcher them so that nothing is wasted.

Medieval people weren't stupid, and they were every bit as discriminating as their modern descendants. They even avoided some foods that had an appearance which suggested being spoiled, as shown in the following quote from *Ménagier de Paris*.

Note that some hang their pigs in the Easter season and the air yellows them; and it would be better for them to keep them in salt as they do in Picardy, even though the flesh is not so firm, it seems; nevertheless you get better service from bacon which is fair and white than from yellow, because however good the yellow may be, it is too repulsive and causes disgust when viewed.

Origin?

So the question remains, just where did Drummond get these ideas? The misinterpretation of the recipe for quickly aging venison is one clear possibility. Another may rest in the introduction to *The Forme of Cury*. There, Samuel Pegge makes some notes on the 14th century English cookbook he transcribed, where he discusses the use of herbs and spices in the recipes.

“Many of them are so highly seasoned, are such strange and heterogeneous compositions ... that they seem removed as far as possible from the intention of contributing to health; indeed the messes are so redundant and complex, that in regard to herbs, in No. 6, no less than ten are used, where we should now be content with two or three: and so the sallad, No. 76, consists of no less than 14 ingredients.”

...

“I observe further, in regard to this point, that the quantities of things are seldom specified, but are too much left to the taste and judgement of the cook, if he should happen to be rash and inconsiderate, or of a bad and undistinguishing taste, was capable of doing much harm to the guests, to invalids especially.” (Forme of Cury, Samuel Pegge, 1780)

A quick reading or a quote out of context might leave the reader with the belief that the medieval recipes in question contained a lot of spice, and could be made worse by an uncaring cook. What is actually being said though is that the medieval cook used a larger number of spices in each dish (compared to an 18th century cook), and that quantities for each spice were not given in the recipe, leaving the cook to rely upon their experience, senses, and skill.

Conclusion

In the writing of his book, Drummond made some unsupported statements to the effect that people in the middle ages heavily spiced their food to cover the taste of spoiled meat. Whether this was a conclusion he reached from misreading period manuscripts, or if it was a common misconception at the time, he presented it as established general knowledge. The accessibility of his text combined with the authority he derived from his social status lent weight to his book and made it a perfect resource for those doing casual research into the history of food. This has created a self-perpetuating chain of references, much like the spreading of a rumor, where inaccuracies are repeated as truth because the presenter has heard the same inaccuracy from several sources, not realizing that they all go back to a single source.

Bibliography

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