

Craving difference in late fourteenth century England

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Overview

Late fourteenth century England was still ravaged by periods of plague more than forty years after the terrors of the Black Death, but life had improved for many of those landed 'third estate' workers who had survived, not least because of the labour shortages caused by the plague itself, favourably shifting the balance of supply and demand, coupled with the effective failure of the 1349 and 1351 Labour Laws. Indeed, DeWitte presents an argument for long term benefits of individuals surviving the plague for populations as a whole (2014, p.7).

This was the beginning of the end of feudalism, the beginning of what was much later dubbed, 'the golden age of the peasantry'. English was now the language at Court and in the courts; it was also blooming in the literary works of William Langland, John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the 'Pearl Poet' author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, some of which working people would have heard read by travelling entertainers; while John Wycliffe's English translation of the bible was being declaimed around the country by wandering Lollard preachers, troubling a Church already uneasy with accusations of corruption and greed, and tottering in the wake of God-sent plagues. The Great Uprising of 1381 was still reverberating throughout the population, worrying both ruling classes and the church (Fryde 1996, p.113 et seq.). And at the beginning of the decade, while there was a fragile peace with France, an hiatus in the Hundred Year's War which relieved the requirement on the male population to join battle, the tyrannical and deranged Richard II was out of the country asserting himself with a personal campaign in Ireland. It was a *fin de siècle* of great changes for the third estate in England.

The extant morsels of information we have about the lives of land-based workers in the late fourteenth century provide little evidence on how they could have escaped the culinary stir craziness of their alleged highly limited diet. Indeed, it has been estimated that up 80% of a land-based worker's regular diet could have been cereal-based (Woolgar 2006, p.11 et seq.). It seems inconceivable that in the context of the time, fundamental human desires would not have driven them to seek out ways to vary the cereal monotony of bread, pottage, and ale.

The paper will explore the regular foodstuffs described in the current literature, along with their means of preparation and preservation. And I will also provide examples of additional sources of foods that could enliven the daily diet, and the means by which they could have been acquired – by gathering, growing, and by trading in the burgeoning local markets. And just how they may have realised dietary variety on a central hearth in their dark and crowded dwellings.

The regular foodstuffs

The calorific bulk of their diet would have come from cereals in the form of flour/bread, grains/pottage, and malted grains/ale. Of these, pottage provided the widest scope for variety. Pottage was a slow-cooked grain-based dish simmered over an open fire. Oats were usually the main ingredient, with husked barley as an alternative. It could range in consistency from a thickened soup to a thick porridge; and variety usually came with the addition of pulses (dried peas and beans), vegetables (onions, leeks, garlic, cabbage), and potherbs (parsley, mint,); and eaten with small amounts of meat (cured, smoked) or fish (salted, smoked, dried) for flavour where these were available, fish days permitting.

Ranging in terms of quality and cost, bread was made from wheat, rye, maslin (wheat and rye), or dredge (barley and oats). It is unlikely that wheaten bread would be the staple for our labouring families – this is more likely to be rye or maslin bread. The cheapest loaves would comprise of dredge, sometimes even with ground peas or beans added for bulk. Some free tenants would have a bakehouse and a brewhouse, both physically separate building away from the main dwelling to prevent fire damage.

Ale was the drink of preference, even if a pure spring was at hand. It was sweet, calorific, and generally safe. Malted barley was the cereal of choice or brewing ale where this was a common crop. Other areas would use malted oats or dredge. Medieval ale, or small beer, does not keep well as it is low in alcohol and does not contain hops (which act as a natural preservative). It could have herb or fruit flavouring. It was not intended to be clear, and could even be quite murky. Soured ale or alegar was the medieval equivalent of modern-day malt vinegar and much-used in medieval cooking.

The daily life of medieval workers

There are few records of what life was like for land-based labour save for manorial accounts and court records, from which one can only derive some superficial insight into events other than the quotidian. Even the detailed records of food and drink consumed at harvest times only tells us about the overall provision during some two weeks of heavy work with no details on how the food and drink was apportioned.

There is little social historical record of the period, simply on account that it was the first and second estates did not regard it necessary to compile this. There are insights in the burgeoning English literature of the latter part of the fourteenth century, and while these are interesting in themselves, they are nevertheless contained within works of fiction. The nearest we have to social history comes from the records of the inquisitor Jacques Fournier, Bishop of Pamiers from 1318 to 1325. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie employs these records to create a vivid picture of life in the village of Montaillou between 1294 to 1324. Here we find a community of people whose modest aspirations and their solutions lend credence to the idea that English country people did not simply exist on a diet of pottage, bread, and ale. The villagers grew vegetables and herbs, they caught small mammals and birds, they enjoyed their food to the extent that it could be a social medium – they entertained visitors to take meals their houses. They even had leisure time to sit out chatting and enjoying good weather. It is not viable to translate this mountain lifestyle to lowland medieval England, but one can easily see that there were aspirations to minimise and overcome the necessities of a dull quotidian life, even one fraught by an effective invasive Inquisition, and that these driving emotions could not be unique to the Comté de Foix in sub-Pyrenean France (le Roy Ladurie 1978).

Relief from cereal monotony

Nottingham's Goose Fair is now one of the major amusement ride events in England, and a visitor would be hard-pushed to find any evidence of its medieval origins unless they had been searching there for extant medieval food, as here they will find one of the city's favourite local dishes, mushy peas with mint sauce (BBC, 2012). This improbable standalone dish is simply slow-cooked dried peas with a dried mint and vinegar sauce. A dish wholly redolent if not descendent of medieval land-based worker's food – the otherwise dull-tasting slurry of cooked protein-rich dried peas enlivened with a sharp flavourful sauce. Dried peas and beans were a protein mainstay of the diet, while mint and vinegar sauce is a simplified working simulacrum of the *Verde Sawse* described in the

Forme of Cury by the Master Cooks of Richard II (Hieatt, 1985). *Verde Sawse* was a thickened herb sauce served with simply-cooked fish: “*Take persel, mynt, garlek, a litul serpell and sawge; a little canel, gynger, piper, wyne, brede, vyneger & salt; grynde it smal with safroun, & mess it forth.*” (Hieatt, 1985, p.130) The collection also includes a simple mint sauce for mackerel: “*Take Makerels and smyte them on pecys; cast them on water and verious; seeth them with myntes and with oother erbes; color it grene or yellow, and messe it forth.*” (Hieatt, 1985, p.122) The country people's green sauce was a thin unadorned sharp foil to simply-cooked dried peas (and there is still a more general custom to add fresh mint to fresh peas today). It is not unlikely that other vinegar-based sauces would have been commonplace for the third estate, perhaps mirroring the *Jance Sawse*, and *Garlic Cameline* found in the 1393 *Ménagier de Paris* (Hinson). The former, a yellow sauce of ginger, garlic, almonds and verjus; could have become garlic, ground nuts in season or breadcrumbs, and alegar. The latter, ginger, garlic, breadcrumbs and vinegar, with optional fish liver; could have become garlic, breadcrumbs, alegar, and available potherbs or gathered wild plant matter, and even small mammal or wild bird liver if this was to hand. I suspect that these sauces would also contain a significant amount of salt (in frugal preference to salting the bulk of the main dish).

While it may simply be imagination that links a locally popular dish found today in an amusement fair with 700 years of history to fourteenth century recipes for the aristocracy, the similarities are fundamental. Both feature extremely simple, cheap, acidic herb-based sauces. And mushy peas with mint sauce is more significant as it serves a hot bulk with a cold sauce – the ideal combination for one-pot cookery in a medieval house. In order to proceed with speculation about free-tenant's food in the late fourteenth century it is necessary to look at what was actually available to them. The sheer volume of choice is not just an indication of what could possibly have been achieved, but what may actually have been achieved.

In addition to the barley, beans, oats, peas, rye, and wheat in their fields, their gardens could grow fresh beans and peas, cabbages, garlic, leeks, onions, potherbs, and turnips; and they might cultivate apples, cherries, damsons, gooseberries, pears, and plums. They may keep bees for honey and wax. They could keep cows primarily for milk; sheep for milk, meat and wool; chickens primarily for eggs, but also other chickens and capons; geese for more geese and eggs; and pigs; goats were less common in the medieval period. Milk from the family's cow/s or sheep would be turned into butter and cheese, with whey fed to the family pig, or even used in cooking. Cheese was an important source of stored home-grown calories, and it is more likely that a family would keep some hard cheeses back from late summer milking for consumption during the winter, with surplus soft and hard cheeses also being available for sale at a local market. They would preserve as much meat as

was feasible – bacon, mutton ham, pork ham, sausage, much of which could be smoked and stored in smokey open structure of the roof of their dwellings. They could have access to some of the 120 edible plants commonly growing by their fields, by streams and rivers, in and around woodlands, and by the paths they trod on a daily basis – their flowers, seeds, stems, leaves, roots and tubers would be eaten fresh; while some leaves and seeds could be dried and stored for later use (see appendix 1). Depending on their location, they could harvest bilberries, bird cherries, brambles, cowberries, crab apples, dewberries, rose hips, elderberries, guelder rose berries, hawthorn berries, juneberries, redcurrants, rowan berries, sloes, stone bramble berries, whitebeam berries, wild cherries, wild pears, wild plums, wild raspberries, wild service berries, and wild strawberries. They could harvest acorns, beechnuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, and walnuts. Among the many wild birds that could be caught or shot (legally or otherwise) are blackbirds, duck, fieldfares, finches, larks, geese, partridges, pheasants, plovers, redwings, rooks, snipe, sparrows, wood pigeons, woodcock; wild bird's eggs could also be responsibly harvested in the Spring. There were badgers, hares, hedgehogs, moles, rabbits and squirrels. In spite of prejudice or fears there is an abundance of edible fungi on hand, some even in Winter, and many could be dried for use in time of paucity, including: bay boletus, ceps, chanterelles, chicken of the woods, common bonnet, fairy ring mushrooms, horse mushroom, morels, oyster mushroom, puffballs, saffron milkcap, shaggy inkcaps, slippery jack, wood blewits, and wood ears. There may be some legal freshwater fishing for chub, dace, perch, tench, and trout; and some villages even had fishponds This broad provision assumes a typical English lowland location sufficiently distant from the coast as not to be influenced by the ready availability of marine produce, and distant from large areas of forestation, moorland and mountains.

Of course, it is not possible to have access to all of these potential foodstuffs, however, access even to a relatively small percentage could provide free-tenants with a range of foodstuffs that could easily make food less monotonous if they so choose to cultivate, gather, or catch them in the first place – if they were driven by desire for interesting food, cravings even.

The vast majority of these potential food stuffs were obstinately seasonal, a quality that could be both frustrating and elating – wild strawberries, for example, are only available for a few weeks of the year, but you can look forward to them, and begin craving them as their flowers drop and their fruits begin to set. I imagine that as today, wild strawberries would be eaten in situ, by all members of the family – an annual event. Similar anticipations could be felt for the ripening of other wild fruits throughout Summer and early Autumn, for the first nuts in Autumn, indeed, for the first edible plants in Spring. Land-based labour was unavoidably linked to the diverse natural cycles of the rural environment in a very physical way that is almost impossible to conceive even if one is living on

the land today.

Ironically, the downside of this seasonality were inevitable times of glut, when, for instance, there was simply too much available to be consumed in a short period of time. This is frustrating both in the sense of the inability to eat more (say) brambles than one can eat at one go, but more frustrating as there was no effective means of fruit preservation available. Fruits may have been used to flavour ale, but the preservation technology and equipment had not yet been developed (jam-making was rare and beyond the means of working people on account of the price of sugar). Apples and pears could be stored in a cool, frost-free, vermin-free clamp until well into the New Year, or stored as cider or perry if in sufficient quantity; and nuts would remain edible for months; but soft fruits were either eaten when ripe or left for wildlife or to rot.

Nevertheless, in even but the harshest of winters some fresh foodstuffs could always be available, including vitamin-rich, over-wintering plants such as wintercress and some sow thistles (the emerging Little Ice Age had not really taken hold of winters in the late fourteenth century), though February and March would always be a challenge.

Local fairs and markets would offer opportunities for trading surplus vegetables, eggs, fowls, butter, cheese, etc, for salt, fresh fish, brined/smoked or dried fish, maybe even a little black pepper for a special occasion such as a family wedding or important feast day.

So what could have been eaten?

While the sturgyns, swannes, pekokes, and porpays of the *Forme of Cury* are the preserve of royalty and aristocracy, the book contains many recipes whose origins maybe commonplace:

Tredure: “*Take brede and grate it; make a lyre of rawe ayren, and do therto saffroun and powdour douce, and lye it up with gode broth, and make it as a cawdel. And do thereto a lytel verious.* (Heatt 1985, p.101)” This could be translated as an egg and meat stock soup, thickened with stale breadcrumbs, with a small amount of ale. A similar dish, *Blandissorye* (Heatt 1976, no. 5), also adds cheese to the soup – easily accomplished when you make your own cheese.

Frumente: “*Tak clene whete & braye it wel in a mortar tyl the holes gon of; sethe it til it breste in water. Nym it up & lat it cole. Tak good broth & swete mylk of kyn or of almand & temper it therwith. Nym yelkes of eyren rawe & saffroun & cast therto; sal it; lat it nauyt*

boyle after the eyren be cast therinne. Messe it forth with venesoun or with fat motoun fresch. (Hieatt 1985, p.98)” This could be translated as cracked wheat or barley cooked in a chicken or meat stock, and thickened at the last moment with raw eggs.

Frytour of erbes: “*Take gode erbys; grynde hem and medle hem with flour and water, & a lytel yest, and salt, and fry hem in oyle. And ete hem with clere hony.* (Hieatt 1985, p.132)“ This could simply be green herbs in a yeast batter, cooked on a griddle by an open hearth, or maybe in the oven after bread baking has been completed. Served with honey.

Cabochoes in potage: “*Take cabochoes and quarter hem, and seeth hem in gode broth with oynouns ymynced and the whyte of lekes yslyt and ycorue smale. And do therto safroun & salt, and force it with powdour douce.* (Hieatt 1985, p.99)” Here, potage refers to soup rather than pottage. A simple soup/stew of cabbage, onions, leeks, and garlic.

Salat: “*Take persel, sawge, grene garlec, chibolles, oynouns, leek, borage, myntes, porrettes, fenel, and toun cresses, rew, rosemarye, purslarye; laue and waische hem clene. Pike hem. Pluk hem small with thin honde, and myng hem well with rawe oile; lay on vynegar and salt, and serue it forth.* (Hieatt 1985, p.115)” This is an alium salad with available herbs, with oil and vinegar. Raw onions, spring onions, and garlic stems, or whatever aliums were available, could provide a crunchy alternative to the ever-present green sauce.

The necessity for one-pot cooking dictated that day-to-day meals would take the form of a thick soup/stew; a cold, tart, salty, maybe spicy sauce; loaf-bread, or maybe some griddle or stone-cooked flat-breads, scones or fritters; cheese; fruit if available; and small beer/ale. Food would be eaten from a wooden bowl with a wooden spoon, hence, whatever was in the cooking pot must be spoonable, or tackled by hand when cool enough.

Spit or skewer cooking of meat over the open fire would only be undertaken on special occasions or in times of glut, as such cooking does not get the most from meat in the same way that simmering can draw out all the flavour. Oven cooking of meat and meat pies could be undertaken in the bread oven after baking had finished. But this is not everyday cooking.

A further influence on how food was prepared, cooked, and served/eaten is the physical space of the house. By the end of the fourteenth century it was less common for free-tenants to share the inside of dwelling with livestock. There would be separate buildings for people, animals, grain storage,

brewing and baking. But the shuttered window voids of dwellings would not be glazed, so it would never be that bright indoors, and for many months of the year it would simply be dark on account of day-length, temperature, or weather. Transmitted light would come directly from the open hearth while reflected light would come from rush lights in wall-sconces. In practical terms, the closer you are to the fire, the more your food would be silhouetted by the light of the fire, and the more difficult it would be to see how and what you were eating. Hence the advantage of one-pot cooking with a tasty sauce – this was all spoonable from your bowl.

Conclusion

In the late fourteenth century, basic desires and craving could readily provide free-tenants with a varied diet that was actually enjoyable with dishes that could actually be looked forward to. Yes, this is speculation; it seems that one would have to ignore the surrounding abundance of opportunity not to take advantage of it. Life was not a cereal monotony of work, sleep, bread, pottage, and ale...

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