

The Medieval Restaurant Dining Experience

Whether you're serving at a Medieval Times or other Middle-Ages themed eatery, catering at a Renaissance Faire, or find yourself playing "serving wench" at a King Arthur-themed wedding, understanding the Medieval dining experience will help you carry off this part-meal, part-show with style. Many people's ideas about how folk ate in the Middle Ages are built more out of myths and legends than actual history. Maybe these ideas came about by attending a poorly-executed 'Medieval Banquet' where gluttony ruled supreme, and table manners were derided. However, in the case of the late Middle Age English gentry, the opposite was true. Now, isn't that reassuring? Take into account that, although the existence of the American continents was known at this time, it was mainly regarded as "the big piece of land in the way when you try to find a western route to the Orient". Foods native to the New World, such as potatoes, tomatoes, and corn, would not be discovered for nearly two hundred years. Keep the cuisine native to Europe, Asia, and Africa. And brace yourself for a huge disappointment: no chocolate! Chocolate didn't come around until the discovery of the South American cacao tree. Dealing with what they had, ladies of the land would vie with each other to lay out the most exotic fare. The further away the foodstuff came from, the more expensive it was. The table the lady set was a status symbol and a reflection of the richness of her husband. Soups and stews were called 'pottages' (as in a 'mess of pottage') in those days; they would be served in a handled pottery bowl, and wine served in a glass. Venetian glass was much prized for this purpose, being hand-blown by artists of the craft. Red wine was preferred, and the deeper and redder, the better. For a long time, darkness of the wine was seen as a sign of quality, and some unscrupulous dealers had been known to darken their product with beetroot juice. This led to strict rules being introduced, with dire penalties of a beheading for those caught, after a king or two became displeased with the practice. A small dish for holding salt, called a salt-cellar, would be made of the finest material, for salt in those days cost more than saffron. Food was served in messes to cater for four people (the origin of the British Army term 'mess hall') and each individual took a small portion on to their 'trencher'. A trencher was a deep slice of bread suitable to scoop out a bowl from, and the higher your status, the fresher your trencher. The trencher was not usually eaten, but left, along with any uneaten food, for either the servants, alms for the poor or to be fed to the animals. But any cold meat and leftover fruit might be reserved for breakfast the following day. The diner brought his own cutlery, which consisted of knife and spoon only, since the fork was not introduced until the 17th century. The spoon, according to the owner's status, might be bone, horn or pewter. He might even have been born with 'a silver spoon in his mouth', as the saying goes. The knife could be the sheath knife that most men carried for dual function of fighting and dining, or it could be one especially made for the purpose. There were books on etiquette at the table. Some of these rules still hold good today, carried down by tradition. In the Middle Ages, you ignored them at your social peril. Water, often scented with rose petals, was always provided for the diners to wash their hands before eating. Sometimes this was brought around again between courses. The rules were much like today; no talking with your mouth full, no loud talking, no elbows on the table, and no belching. Water being a somewhat hazardous beverage in these days before treatment plants, ale and wine were seen as the preferred beverage, even to small children, who would drink 'new wine' which was not fermented or apple cider. It is true that "fingers were made before forks", and eating with the hands was tolerated - but only to the same relative degree it is today! But, one inflexible rule which still stands today with modern Muslims, is that food was taken from the common serving vessel with the right hand only. The reason is identical to the Muslim rule; the left hand was used for, to put it delicately, personal sanitary purposes! The main course may have consisted of an extravagant dish, such as a great pie consisting of several layers of different meats - a simple roast would have been considered too plain. Bread and cheeses either imported or domestic may also have been served. Desserts were usually milk-based dishes, sloppy and extremely bad for your teeth, but sometimes at the close of a meal, or between courses, appetizers or canapes might be brought out. These could be sweet or savory. Surviving recipes mention meat balls shaped like hedgehogs, or decorated to look like miniature pieces of fruit, or some form of dumpling. Other finger foods were 'douchettes' which might be sweet, similar to a modern custard tart, or made with eggs and bacon, like a miniature 'pocket' quiche. Another popular finger food was a mushroom pie, shaped like a miniature Cornish pasty. If a tourney or hunting party was planned, the lady might instruct her cook to prepare finger foods. These were to serve out to any friends or acquaintances who might drop by her tent and, once more, the main objective was not to feed visitors, but to impress them with their extravagance. So, the more imported food she could offer, and the further afield it came from, the better. The much-vaunted spices of the orient were indeed considered precious in Medieval Europe; a mere sack of spices might be so valuable that you had to be careful traveling with them, lest you be robbed! The final course in each case was, again, designed to impress with a big finish. There would be much anticipation waiting for the kitchen to bring out its final surprise. Maybe a great baked pudding shaped like a swan, a creamy confection of whipped cream and fruit served in a dish shaped like a boat, or fruit tarts baked in alchemical symbol shapes. The final desert was the kitchen staff's chance to shine, and it was even customary for the guests to stand and applaud at this final presentation. Now that you have a better grasp of this time, by all means apply the knowledge at your next Medieval-themed banquet. Nothing upsets a true Renaissance devotee more than seeing the common ignorance of history that is rampant in modern events. If you see your staff repeating some mistake, correct them on it. Further sources of information may be found through the Society for Creative Anachronism, commonly known as the SCA.

About the Author

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