

## SOME BASIC ASPECTS OF MEDIEVAL CUISINE

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The subject of medieval cuisine possess intrinsic appeal as a curiosity, but dealing as it does with ephemeral pleasures, it does not immediately appear to be a serious subject of inquiry. This is not only because of historians' preferences for the lives and culture of ordinary people, but intrinsic to the subject matter of food and the extent to which it is a fitting object of erudite commentary. Michel de Montaigne recorded a conversation he had with a chef brought to France by Cardinal Giovanni Caraffa, the future Pope Paul IV and Montaigne's patron. The conversation was actually rather one-sided as the chef lectured him on the "science of eating" ("la science de guele") with what Montaigne describes as "a grave and magisterial countenance, as if he were speaking of some grand point of theology. He unraveled the rules regarding sauces and different salads according to their seasons," but Montaigne found this slightly comical: "bloated with grand and magnificent words such as one might use in describing the government of an Empire," and certainly not worthy of such high seriousness.<sup>1</sup>

This slightly comical, fundamentally *unseriousness* remains a problem for anyone writing or discussing the history of cuisine. An historical approach to nutrition, or medical theories about digestion, or certainly ideas about body image are all respectable themes, but while the techniques and rules of cooking are not easily regarded as academically appropriate in the way that, for example, the techniques and rules of painting or music clearly are.

The degree of academic respectability pertaining to various areas of enquiry has shifted over time. Acting and other arts associated with the theater were once regarded as lowly and now are worthy, while pharmacy was once a grand and complex science and is now a sub-profession. In the Western world there is no tradition of a "science of eating" apart from questions of nutrition. An exception is the book *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* by the fifteenth-century papal librarian Bartolomeo Sacchi who wrote under the name "Platina". This attempt to defend the notion of enjoyment and appreciation of cuisine along supposedly classical lines had little lasting influence except as a cookbook<sup>2</sup>. The most famous disquisition on culinary aesthetics, Brillat-

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Brian Cowan, *New Worlds, New Tastes: Food Fashions after the Renaissance*, in *Food: The History of Taste*, ed. Paul Freedman, London, 2007, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Platina, *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, Rome, cca. 1470. There is a recent edition with an English translation: Mary Ella Milham, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Critical Edition and Translation of De honesta voluptate et valetudine*, Tempe, 1998. On vernacular translations, see Timothy J. Tomasik, *Translating Taste in the Vernacular Editions of Platina's De honeste voluptate*

Savarin's "The Physiology of Taste," (written in the early-nineteenth century), is an opinionated and magisterial stylistic guide, not, despite its title, a scientific treatise.<sup>3</sup>

In other civilizations a discriminating understanding of cooking was a perfectly appropriate subject of elite discussion. In China, expertise concerning cuisine was as important for a cultivated man as knowledge of calligraphy or poetry. The transition from Ming to Qing dynasty in the seventeenth century, for example, produced a number of nostalgic, literary, even lyrical evocations of better times often expressed by a longing for lost gourmet treasures, such as the autumn river crabs, clams and (of all things) junket recalled by the scholar Zhang Dai.<sup>4</sup>

In many Islamic societies as well there was a tradition of sophisticated appreciation of cuisine amounting to a form of scholarship. While cookbook manuscripts of the Christian Middle Ages are ordinary, undecorated manuals, cookbooks of al-Andalus, Baghdad and other culinary centers were often dedicated to discriminating patrons and were in themselves luxury objects<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, in medieval Europe there was no custom of learned written commentary on the aesthetics of food. Dining had all sorts of social symbolism and specific foods were associated with peasants (pottage, dairy products, root vegetables), or with aristocrats (game, spices), but the quality and composition of even the most elegant banquets was an artisanal rather than learned matter.

There certainly *were* rules and aesthetic principles about taste, presentation, order of courses and desirable ingredients, but for the world of gastronomy, there is no amateur let alone scholarly discourse equivalent, for example, to the Emperor Frederick II's treatise on hunting with falcons, no European ruler discusses how to roast swans or what spices are best in a sauce to accompany eels or even why he is so fond of sturgeon or lampreys cooked a certain way.

The assumption that food, while enjoyable, is not a sufficiently profound object of study has carried over into attitudes towards what is appropriate for historians to study. The history of cuisine has usually been regarded as a species of amateur history, something on the order of the mistresses of Louis XIV or the history of fashion. If the history of upper-class taste in food was considered trivial, the diet of ordinary people and levels of

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et valedtudine, in *At the Table: Metaphorical and Material Cultures of Food in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Timothy J. Tomasik and Juliann M. Vitullo, Turnhout, 2007, p. 190-210.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *La Physiologie du goût*, Paris, 1826.

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Quest for Perfect Balance: Taste and Gastronomy in Imperial China*, in *Food: The History of Taste*, p. 119-122.

<sup>5</sup> Maxine Rodinson, *Studies in Arabic Manuscript Relating to Cookery*, in Rodinson et al., *Medieval Arab Cookery: Essays and Translations*, Totnes, 2006, p. 103-115 (translation of an essay originally written in French in 1948 for the *Revue des études Islamiques*).

nutrition were not only accepted but exalted subjects, nowhere more so than in the journal *Annals* which defined worthy aspects of historical research from the 1950s to 1980s. Thus the “histoire de l’alimentation” was important: what was the diet of the English working class in the nineteenth century?, or what was the role of millet and barley versus that of wheat in the medieval diet? How did modern military conscription or affect nutrition? What was the cycle of famines in Carolingian Europe? Only recently has the interest in “histoire de la cuisine” been recognized as a significant part of cultural history. This is the result of the attention historians have given in recent years to outlook and representation (*mentalités*). Aesthetic principles (such as fashions in art) and even consumer behavior (the rise of the modern department store or the mass-importation of tea) are seen as part of the formation of societies and as motive forces in economic expansion.<sup>6</sup>

For medieval cuisine, there has been considerable progress in our understanding of what people who had some choice in the matter ate at different times. From an anthropological interest in ceremony and social hierarchy (as indicated, for example, by great banquets) to an actual concern with recipes and techniques, historians and literary scholars such as Bruno Laurioux, Constance Hieatt, Terence Scully, Massimo Montanari and Jean-Louis Flandrin have both presented new material (such as editions of cookbooks) and integrated the study of cuisine into the history of material as well as mental culture.

Crucial here is the question of taste. Until recently, as I said, there was no difficulty understanding the significance of food for people who had little choice in the matter. To investigate the dietary regime of people who had a range of possibilities assumes that once the basic needs for survival have been met, choices among options are of significance. This is in fact very easy to demonstrate. In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz showed how the European taste for sugar and the change in its consumption from luxury spice to staple commodity affected global economies in dramatic and terrible ways.<sup>7</sup> The transformation of the Caribbean islands into sugar plantations and the growth of transatlantic slavery to provide a labor supply for them were the result of consumer demand. The historical importance of these shifts of population and cultivation patterns needs hardly emphasis. Moreover, the ways in which sugar was consumed were distinct in different societies. Europeans particularly liked

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<sup>6</sup> On the attitudes of historians, especially in France, see Bruno Laurioux, *Une histoire culinaire du Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2005, p. 9-34.

<sup>7</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in modern History*, New York and London, 1985.

sugar in the newly popular beverages tea, coffee and chocolate none of which had been accompanied by sugar in their original cultural habitats.<sup>8</sup>

Other examples of the historical significance of gastronomic taste are furnished by the transmission of New World products such as chili peppers in India and Indonesia, tomatoes in Italy, maize in Romania, or the potato in Ireland. Some of this radically improved nutrition in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and at the same time created extreme over-dependence that resulted in malnutrition and even famine (as in Ireland in 1848).

There are also many contemporary instances of the unexpected consequences of shifts in tastes: the American and European love of bananas and its effect on Central America; the impact of fast-food cooking techniques versus health concerns on the tropical oil industry; the ecological and social consequences of developing the Brazilian cattle industry to provide beef for North America.

Having made my case for the seriousness of the history of cuisine, I am now about to undermine it by describing some of the high-end medieval preferences. Our sources of information include the recipes from some 150 cookbook manuscripts that survive from the thirteenth through fifteenth century. Other sources are descriptions of banquets, account books for noble and royal houses, trade and merchant records, denunciations of gluttony, and information from churches especially monastic communities. The late Middle Ages has a reputation for ponderous ceremonial style and a love of ostentation and complexity, a reputation not completely unmerited. A cookbook by Maitre Chiquart, chef to the Duke of Savoy, features a restorative broth made by boiling chicken with jewels and gold in a special glass container. Chiquart also offers an edible castle with four towers. In front of one tower is pike cooked three ways and in three colors (the fish remains whole, but the tail is fried, the middle boiled, the head roasted), and each section is served with a different colored sauce. At the base of the other three towers are a glazed piglet, a skinned, cooked and redressed swan, and a boar's head. All these animals are breathing fire by means of wicks soaked in camphor and then set alight.<sup>9</sup>

Another well-known aspect of medieval gastronomy is the passion for spices. Here again there are some well-known excesses. The marriage of George the Rich, Duke of Bavaria-Landshut in 1476 involved a series of banquets requiring the purchase of 286 pounds of ginger, 205 pounds of cinnamon, and 85 pounds of nutmeg.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Marcy Norton, *Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics*, in *American Historical Review*, 111, 2006, p. 660-691.

<sup>9</sup> *Chiquart's 'On Cookery': A Fifteenth-Century Savoyard Culinary Treatise*, ed. and trans. Terence Scully, New York, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, entries "Georg der Rieche" and "Gewürze".

There is more to medieval taste than vulgarity and excess, however. I'd like at this point to outline what might be considered the basic principles of the medieval culinary aesthetic. Although we should not assume that the extravagant displays of Chiquart or the multiplication of dozens of banquet dishes were typical, medieval cuisine was characterized by a love of artifice rather than an emphasis on natural flavors. The history of European cooking shows oscillations between elaboration and simplification. Classic French cooking was introduced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries amid much fanfare about doing away with the bizarre "Arabic" style of the Middle Ages in favor of the true flavor of basic ingredients, and at various times, including the vogue for *La Nouvelle Cuisine* in the 1980s, there was been a rebellion against artificiality and mere display in the name of authenticity and honesty. Right now in Europe and America there are two competing restaurant styles, on the one hand an emphasis on simplicity, seasonality and local tradition exemplified by Alice Waters and her restaurant "Chez Panisse" in Berkeley, California. Such concern with restoring the quality of primary ingredients is typical of countries that have lost their agrarian (peasant) traditions, in which agriculture has become an industry and there is almost no substantial population working on small farms.

The other current trend is a love of innovation exemplified by the vogue for "fusion cuisine" (combining elements of different cuisines producing, for example, vanilla-scented venison with bok-choy). This fashion emphasizes inventiveness and creativity over authenticity and tradition. Exemplary in the desire for new effects is what is at the moment probably the most famous restaurant in the world, *El Bulli*, north of Barcelona. Its owner, Ferran Adrià has developed all sorts of alchemical transformations of food by foaming, freeze drying, infusing, and using *trompe l'oeil* techniques to create dishes such as "risotto Milanese" made with bean sprouts instead of rice, or "carrot air," a concoction that floats onto the plate.

In the Middle Ages there were rules for what foods were appropriate and what styles of preparation were fashionable, thus spices were always in vogue as were large birds and fish, but there was a great desire for innovation and consequently a change in fashion as regards presentation and ingredients. Medieval cooking placed a great emphasis on color (red and gold were highly regarded) and texture (aspic was admired for its slippery consistency and was very difficult to make before the invention of artificial gelatin). While menus for the upper-middle and upper classes obsessively emphasize protein (meat and fish), within this uniformity there was an immense variety of animal species consumed so that medieval taste was simultaneously limited and omnivorous. Festive meals seems to involve the same sorts of things in each course, thus a three-course banquet might involve poultry in each service. The

courses were distinguished more by methods of preparation than by basic ingredients so that, partly for health reasons, boiled dishes came first, then roasts, and then fried foods. The imposition of days of fasting by the Church made fish extremely important in the diet of those who could afford meat on normal days. Fasting did not mean abstemiousness but rather avoidance of prohibited foods. A fast day meal served to Richard III shortly after his coronation, for example, shows some of the variety of species, in this case of sea and freshwater creatures.<sup>11</sup> A first course included salted lampreys, pike soup, plaice, sea crabs, fried guard and baked conger eel. This was followed by tench, bass, salmon, sole, perch, shrimp, trout, gurnard again (this time baked with quinces) and porpoise.

The same combination of uniformity and variety occurs in meat day meals. At the enthronement of the bishop of Salisbury in 1414, a meal began with boiled meats including capon, sawn, peacock, pheasant, meatballs in aspic, wheat porridge with scrambled eggs and venison, and “mawmeny” (wine with sugar and spices thickened and mixed with ground pork and chicken). The second service of roasted meat featured piglets, crane, venison, heron, stuffed poussins and partridges. Fried meats, small birds and delicacies comprised the third course: bittern, curlew, pigeon, rabbit, plover, quail, larks, fritters and puff pastries. Desserts were not so much a course as an aftermath of candied preparations, dragées, spiced wine (known as *hippocras*, *claret* or *piment*) and rolled wafers.<sup>12</sup> At a banquet served in 1458 by the count of Foix (or envoys of the king of Hungary, desserts included a series of heraldic animals sculpted in sugar with whole spices embedded. Rampant and couchant animals held the arms of the king of Hungary in their mouths or paws. Red hippocras was served with this concluding course while white hippocras preceded the meal.<sup>13</sup> But typical desserts also include such things as fried pork meatballs and other things that might be considered salty rather than sweet postscripts of the main meal.

Large animals enjoyed great prestige, thus lampreys (large river eels) were beloved as were sturgeon and porpoise. Splendid birds such as peacocks were *de rigueur* but so were very small song birds such as ortolans and larks. Contrary to what one might expect, beef was not highly prized, although consumed in quantity. At great feasts there is little in the way of preserved meat such as salt pork or cod, but in fact a lot was eaten even in noble houses

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<sup>11</sup> *The Coronation of Richard II, the Extant Documents*, ed. Anne F. Sutton and P.W. Hammond, Gloucester and New York, 1983, p. 291.

<sup>12</sup> Described in C.M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England*, New Haven, 1999, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Louis Flandrin and Carole Lambert, *Fêtes gourmandes au moyen âge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris, 199), p. 31-32.

on routine occasions. Certain foods such as beef, mutton or sausages were associated more with moderately prosperous townspeople than with the aristocracy.

A key aspect of medieval taste was, of course, the love of piquant and varied flavors. The passion for spices, probably the best known aspect of medieval cookery, has something to do with the love of special effects. The development of modern European cuisine involved the rejection of spices as artificial, tending to cover up flavors rather than enhance them. It is an irony of modernity that European food, until its very recent globalization and fusion, has had very little spice and that Europeans since 1800 at the latest have disliked the aromatic tastes of the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. Before the triumph of classic French cuisine in the eighteenth century, spices were dominant flavors in Europe as well, their aromatic appeal enhanced by the difficulty and expense of acquiring them from places so far away as to be unknown or mythologized by their European consumers. The attraction of spices is a major characteristic of medieval cuisine and conversely their ejection from most European cooking represents an important turning point in culinary history.<sup>14</sup>

Spices were omnipresent in medieval gastronomy. Something on the order of 75% of medieval recipes involves spices.<sup>15</sup> In their updated compendium of medieval dishes adapted to modern techniques, *Pleyn Delit*, Constance Hieatt and Sharon Butler collected 131 medieval recipes of which 92 involve exotic spices.<sup>16</sup> A Catalan cookbook compiled for the king of Naples in 1500 contains approximately 200 recipes and of these no less than 154 call for sugar. Cinnamon is used in 125 of the recipes and ginger is mentioned in 76.<sup>17</sup> This passion for spices is all the more notable given the modern European abandonment of almost all spices other than pepper, except for a certain modest presence in desserts.

More than just the ubiquity of spices, two things are striking about medieval recipes: that spices were used across the menu (with meat, fish, soups, sweet dishes, *friandises*, even with wine), and that they were used in combinations (in a manner that remains characteristic of Middle Eastern and Indian cooking), not singly in the hesitant European or American manner (cloves with ham; cinnamon on toast; saffron in paella).

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<sup>14</sup> On spices and their importance in medieval culture generally, see Paul Freedman, *Flavor, Fragrance and Fashion: Spices in the Middle Ages* (forthcoming), New Haven, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Bruno Laurioux, *De l'usage des épices dans l'alimentation médiévale*, in *Médiévales*, 5, 1983, p. 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, *Pleyn Delit: Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks*, Toronto, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> Mestre Robert, *Llibre del coch: tractat de cuina medieval*, ed. Veronika Leimgruber, Barcelona, 1982.

Why were spices so popular? There are some standard explanations, but these are false or at least misleading. There is the persistent and erroneous notion that spices were used to preserve meat or to cover up the taste of meat that was past its peak. Scholars have tried to refute this notion once and for all,<sup>18</sup> but it returns however often it is refuted and is so instinctively attractive that mere facts can't wipe it out. In fact spices don't do all that much to preserve meat from spoilage, at least when compared to effective measures such as salting, smoking, pickling or air-curing (as for sausages and ham). Among the best known dried, aged or salted items of European cuisine are such things as prosciutto (pork), bacalao (cod), Bündnerfleisch (beef) and other meats that might be *flavored* with spices (Spanish chorizo, or hams or sausage coated with pepper), but whose retarded perishability is obtained through other means.

So one can group the love of spices, color, special effects, and elaborate recipes under the heading of artifice – a theory of cuisine that emphasized sophistication over simplicity. In keeping with the love of artifice, medieval food tended to be highly processed. Raw food was seldom served in elite households – vegetables were never served raw until the vogue for salads on the eve of the Renaissance. Even fruit was more often served cooked, dried or sugared than raw (partly because it was believed raw fruit tended to rot in the stomach and so dangerous). There was great affection for bright and varied colors, illusion and transformation. A common dish is described as “apples” was actually meatballs colored gold (“endorred”), or green (glazed with parsley sauce). “Eggs in Lent” were in fact eggshells drained of their contents and then stuffed with almond milk for the white, and cinnamon mixed with saffron for the yolk. Skill and somewhat vulgar effects were displayed and achieved by sculpting food to look like animals or objects, or artificially enhancing the look of animals or birds. Thus a favorite dish that appears in many cookbooks, was glazed “hedgehogs” (in England known as “urchins”), consisting of ground meat stuffed into a sheep's stomach and then formed into a hedgehog shape with sliced almonds, often colored with different dyes, stuck along its back. Wild boar's head was prepared with one side glazed with green sauce and the other covered with gold foil and the heraldic or mythological effect was enhanced by making it appear to be breathing fire. Birds were cut up, roasted,

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<sup>18</sup> Such as Gilian Riley, *Tainted Meat. An Attempt to Investigate the Origins of a Commonly Held Opinion About the Use of Spices in the Cooking of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, in *Spicing Up the Palate: Studies of Flavours – Ancient and Modern. Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1992*, Totnes, 1992, p. 1-6; Toby Peterson, *The Arab Influence on Western European Cooking*, in *Journal of Medieval History*, 6, 1988, p. 317-320; Lorna J. Sass, *Religion, Medicine, Politics and Spices*, in *Appetite*, 2, 1981, p. 7-13; Terence Scully, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge, 1995, p. 56-57, 84. Yet it is stated as fact in the article on *Spices and Flavours*, by Hansförg Küster, in *The Cambridge World History of Food*, vol. 1, Cambridge, 2000, p. 46.

and then reassembled in their plumage to look as if they were still alive, an effect resembling edible duck decoys. A rooster was set on an orange-glazed suckling pig as if mounted on a horse, the bird being given a little metal helmet and lance. This “Armed Rooster” (*coq beaumez*) is found in the widely-imitated fourteenth-century cookbook, the *Viancier* attributed to the French royal cook Taillevent.<sup>19</sup>

There were various soups and vegetables that accompanied these dishes, but the menus fail to show much interest in dairy products, fruit, vegetables or cereals other than wheat in the form of bread. The reasons for this disparagement among the upper orders has to do with medical theories of the time and how different foods typified the hierarchical image of society. Things changed in the course of the fifteenth century as cheese, formerly an emblem of rusticity became the object of sophisticated gourmandise and we start to hear more about fruit. Pantaleone da Confienza’s “*Summa laticiniorum*” of 1475 is the first treatise devoted exclusively to cheeses.<sup>20</sup> The fashion for salad which began in Italy spread to the rest of Europe by the beginning of the sixteenth century. Melons were all the rage during the Italian Renaissance although doctors warned that they were dangerous even among the already perilous category of fruit. According to the usually judicious Platina, King Albert II of Bohemia and Pope Paul II died because they ate too much melon.<sup>21</sup> Such excesses or alleged excesses notwithstanding, the preference of the affluent during the high Middle Ages was for an unbalanced, high-protein meat and fish diet.

Naturally the medieval recipe collections offer show-pieces rather than everyday dishes, and they reflect the taste of the princely courts and the nobility rather than that of the common people, but one might say that today there is a similar disparity between pretension and what is really being prepared at home in cookbooks today: that cookbooks are in many cases fantasies of gentility rather than practical manuals of instruction. They may offer an idealized view of what people actually prepare, but cookbooks are not for that reason completely fictional or arbitrary measures of contemporary taste.

Medieval cuisine was not divided simply into a gorgeous vulgarity consumed exclusively by a tiny aristocratic minority and the subsistence porridges of the peasantry. One of the largest collections of recipes from this era was assembled in the 1390s by a member of the upper bourgeoisie or petty knightly class, an elderly Parisian gentleman, author of a household and moral

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<sup>19</sup> Many of these special effects are discussed and presented in Flandrin and Lambert, *Fêtes gourmandes au moyen âge*.

<sup>20</sup> *Formaggi del medioevo. La ‘Summa laticiniorum’ di Pantaleone da Confienza*, ed. Irma Naso, Turin, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, Berkeley, 2002, p. 10-12, 181, 242-268.

advice book known to posterity as the “Ménagier of Paris”.<sup>22</sup> The anonymous author of the *Ménagier* compiled a collection of edifying stories, proverbial wisdom, household hints and some 380 recipes, all with the purpose of giving his very young wife (fifteen years old) instructions for how to run a household. In the prologue he addresses his wife with a mixture of condescension and admiration. She is of higher social status than he is and he is indulgent towards her girlish (and not particularly productive) activities such as caring for violets, growing roses, dancing and singing. He wants to impart information about more useful tasks that fall to the young lady’s area of responsibility and he certainly had a great store of knowledge (400 pages in the modern printed paperback edition). Few men in European history ever knew more about how to run a house, from keeping vermin out of bed linens to gardening to keeping fit.

The recipe collection in the *Menagier* is important because of the relatively modest station of the author. He was not striving for dazzling effects, nor did he expect to have a courtly public or princely cooks read his work. While many of the recipes are derived from cookbooks of great chefs such as Chiquart, the author rejects dishes that are too expensive or that are difficult and time-consuming – no stuffed mutton or “hedgehogs”. Stuffed and gilded chickens he dismisses, saying “this requires too much fuss and is not the work appropriate to a chef for a bourgeois or simple knight, so I am leaving it aside.” The *Menagier* offers recipes for precisely those items missing from the courtly world such as sausages, charcuterie, and even such humble vegetables as cabbage, turnips and beans.

The author of the *Menagier* mentions money-saving ideas, such as flavoring mustard with spices already used to flavor *hippocras*, but he is by no means frugal. His menu suggestions for celebrations are on a smaller scale than those of the court, but there is a similarly impressive quantity and diversity of food offered and the same omnipresence of spices. “One must know spices,” he instructs his wife. His familiarity with spices extends to distinguishing two kinds of ginger, four kinds of pepper and such rare imports as galangal, nutmeg, cloves, grains of Paradise and zedoary are considered household necessities.

I want to turn to the ways in which beliefs about health and medicine intersected with gastronomy. This is another salient feature of the medieval

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<sup>22</sup> *Le Mesnagier de Paris*, ed. Georgina E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier, Paris, 1994. A detailed summary of its contents is given in Nicole Crossley-Holland, *Living and Dining in Medieval Paris: The Household of a Fourteenth-Century Knight*, Cardiff, 1996. Some excerpts are translated in Tania Bayard, *A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in Fourteenth Century Paris*, New York, 1992. On the *Ménagier*’s recipes in relation to other cookbooks, see Bruno Laurioux, *Le règne de Taillevent: livres et pratiques culinaires à la fin du moyen âge*, Paris, 1997, p. 117-158.

attitude not only towards food in general but towards choice and taste. One reason for the popularity of spices, for example, was their supposed medical effects, both as drugs and as ingredients that countered the humorally bad properties of meat and fish. Spices played a key role in the complex theory of health and equilibrium in cuisine, a notion that the body needs to achieve a balance among difference fluids, forces, influences or stimuli. This is found in many traditional cultures and is of fundamental importance in Chinese cuisine as well as philosophical outlook and underlies the combination of religious and quasi-medical ideas of the culinary culture of India. In the European Middle Ages, health as well as personality were thought to be governed by the interaction of four bodily fluids or “humors” as they were called: blood, bile (or yellow bile), black bile, and phlegm. If these were not balanced, that is if one predominated while others were weak; the result was a susceptibility to disease as well as mood or personality disorders. Those with an excess of black bile suffer from depression (melancholy, derived from the Greek words *melan* = black and *kehole* = bile). A preponderance of blood (*sanguinis* in Latin) results in an excessively sanguine temperament.

The great theorist of humoral pathology in the western tradition is the Greek physician Galen (AD 130-199) who emphasized diet as well as medical intervention to deal with humoral imbalance. The goal of preventive medicine and of the Galenic regimen for healthy living was to avoid excess of any one humor and the consequent physical and mental disequilibrium. The humors corresponded to the basic elements of matter according to Greek science. The four elements – earth, air, fire, water – reflected qualities of warmth, dryness, cold and moisture. Humors were combinations of qualities, thus blood is both warm and moist and corresponds to the element air. Regular (yellow) bile is warm and dry and its element is fire. Phlegm is cold and moist like water, while black bile is cold and dry, conceptually linked to earth.

Food possessed similar varying qualities of heat, moistness and so forth. When digested, food affected the humors and so could improve balance if consumed wisely, or contribute to imbalance and illness if not.<sup>23</sup> Health was affected by many factors such as sleep, exercise, and climate, but according to Greek and Arab physicians whose works were translated and adopted as authoritative by Western Europe, food has the most direct impact on well-being.

A healthful dietary regime had to match the qualities of particular foods with individual temperament. Beef is cold and dry, so a person with a tendency to melancholy (i.e. someone with a preponderance of black bile) ought not to eat a lot of beef. Pork and fish were conceived as cold and moist while game

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<sup>23</sup> On humors and medieval cooking methods see Terence Scully, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge, 1995, p. 41-86.

animals tend to be warmer and dryer than domestic animals. Young animals are moister than adults; females are moister than males. There is an almost infinite complexity to the elaboration of humoral theory. Methods of preparation differed so that roasting or frying made food warmer and dryer. It is a good idea to roast pork because it is naturally too cold and moist, but roast beef is less desirable since beef is already dry. Beef was preferred boiled (at least by the health-conscious) because boiling both warms and moistens. Obviously instinctive correspondences were limited: that fish were cold and moist makes sense, but the difference between beef and pork would not occur to the uninformed observer. Very similar ingredients might have quite different properties. Vinegar, for example, was cold in the third degree and dry in the first. Its cousin must (lightly fermented grape juice) was warm and moist in the second degree. Wine tended to be warm and dry (with white wine less warm than red), while verjuice (made from unripe grapes) was cold in the third degree and dry in the second.

Spices were thought to be important to offset the natural qualities of basic foodstuffs. Most spices were hot and dry and so they tempered the contrary qualities found in meat, fish and game. Beef, goose, brains, tongue and other humorally cold meats required vigorously spiced sauces such as *cameline* (based on cinnamon). Lamprey was the object of something approaching adoration by the aristocracy, but doctors considered it dangerously cold and moist. The fact that King Henry I of England died in 1135 a week after consuming a meal of lampreys in defiance of his doctor's orders didn't help the reputation of this freshwater king of the eel family, but it didn't diminish its culinary attraction. Lampreys required a peppery sauce (pepper being hot in the fourth degree, and dry in the second), and also some elaborate cooking methods. They should be immersed in wine in order to kill them, then dried and boiled in wine and water. They should be prepared in aspic, baked in pastry or roasted.<sup>24</sup> Other foods were more neutral, safer. Chicken, for example, required only a light sauce such as *jance* (wine, vinegar and burnt bread flavored with ginger and cloves). *Jance* is also appropriate for fried fish, but boiled fish (which retains the essentially moist and cold character attributed to fish) demands a stronger sauce such as *cameline* or green sauce.<sup>25</sup>

Different spices possessed heat and dryness of varying intensity. Mace and nutmeg were considered hot and dry in the second degree. Ginger was quite hot (in the third degree) but unusually among spices it was thought to be moist (in the second degree) rather than dry. Sugar was rather moderate: hot in

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<sup>24</sup> Terence Scully, *The Opusculum de saporibus of Magnus Mediolanensis*, in *Medium Aevum*, 54, 1985, p. 197.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Seasoning, Cooking and Dietetics in the Late Middle Ages*, in *Food: A Culinary History*, ed. Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, New York, 1999, p. 320-327.

the first and moist in the second, and it was regarded as unusually healthful, conferring a benign influence on whole categories of food such as preserved fruit and semi-medicinal candied products known as “comfits” that are the ancestors of both preserves and candy.<sup>26</sup>

To what extent were people guided by medicinal theories in deciding what to eat? The authors of medieval cookbooks often assured their readers that they had consulted extensively with physicians in compiling the recipes, so that for example a note prefacing one of the manuscripts of the best-selling English collection *Forme of Cury* (i.e. “how to cook”) says that it was composed with the assent and advice of “masters of physik and of philosophie”.<sup>27</sup> A book of sauces (mostly involving spice combinations) by the fourteenth-century physician and astrologer Magninus of Milan claims to be a medical treatise and not a cookbook at all. Although sauces were invented to promote enjoyment more than health, Magninus acknowledges, they are really intended for people of a delicate and humorally unbalanced constitution. Sauces and the recipes contained within are really not for healthy people for whom eating sauces can be dangerous!<sup>28</sup>

In terms of actual practice, medieval diners probably strayed from medical advice as often as we do today. The huge quantities of meat ingested by the affluent contradicted Greek medical teachings. Lampreys and melons continued to be served at elite tables despite doctors’ repeated warnings about their dangers. People tend, then and now, to be selective about what nutritional or dietary advice to follow, selective both in the sense of what advice they agree with and whether or not they follow advice even if we agree with it.

The intersection between common opinion and medical advice is evoked by a comical moral example penned by the Catalan Franciscan writer Francesc Eiximenis in the late fourteenth century. His portrait of a fat, gluttonous cleric summarizes a number of points made in this paper: the mixture of health and connoisseurship, the interaction between self-indulgence and medical advice, and the ubiquity of spices in prestige dining. Eiximenis invents a letter from a grand ecclesiastic to a doctor in which he complains of loss of appetite and constipation. Without being aware of it, the priest describes an absurdly greedy dietary regime and the physician responds by denouncing his behavior which damages the soul as well as the body.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> There is a Catalan cookbook called the *Book of All Manner of Comfits* that includes marzipan, candied ginger, nougat and sugared fruit preserves, *Llibre de totes maneres de confits*, ed. Joan Sanyanach i Suñol, Barcelona, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> *Curye on Inghlysh: English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, London, 1985.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn Thorndike, *A Mediaeval Sauce-Book*, in *Speculum*, 9, 1934, p. 186.

<sup>29</sup> Francesc Eiximens, *Lo Crestià (selecció)*, ed. Albert Hauf, Barcelona, 1983, p. 142-145. I have commented on this in more detail in *Medieval Clichés of Diet and Health According to Francesc*

Although this is a fairly conventional satire against gluttony, the exchange between doctor and patient shows conventional beliefs about food that are, comic effects notwithstanding, more realistic than the standard church denunciations of gluttony on the one hand or the diets prescribed by medical experts on the other. The tone of the cleric's self-regarding mixture of complacency and hypochondria is typical of a certain kind of patient in every era even if his tastes are peculiarly medieval.

The priest varies his diet with the seasons. In summer he has poultry roasted on a spit or boiled or stewed with a sauce made with verjuice. In this season he also favors goat, veal, lamb and young partridges. In winter he prefers fat chickens, roosters, capons, doves and quails, but still eats partridges and lamb. Autumn is the season for game, so common dishes of the time include deer, mountain goats, hares and rabbits, but also thrushes, coots and woodcock. In spring he turns to peacock, pheasant, crane and goose. The cleric claims to be a man of simple tastes as the only sauces he likes are those flavored with green ginger, cloves or goat's milk. The meal concludes with custards, cheesecakes grilled cheese on toast with sugar, dried fruits and candied spices. In winter he drinks spiced wines with wafers. He has definite preferences as to wine, finding the local red wines indigestible and opting instead for Bordeaux, Saint-Pourçain (Auvergne – very popular in the Middle Ages) and wines from other parts of the Iberian peninsula.

For between-meal snacks the cleric eats medical sugared confections (electuaries), sugar-coated larks (“for the liver”), spiced candies, gingerbread and jam, syrups, juleps and edible violets. The cleric takes frequent baths, avoids thinking about death, and frequently enjoys sexual intercourse for his health (although regretting that his bulk and age make him unattractive to women). After his baths he partakes of what seems to be a rather daunting aphrodisiac, egg-yolks spiced with cinnamon and cubeb. His clothes are perfumed with musk, civet and rosewater.

As can be imagined, the doctor's response is harsh. Not only does he denounce the immoral and ridiculously self-indulgent habits of the priest, the doctor mocks his humble origins recommending that he revert to the habits of his youth when he was a mere peasant and ate barley, bread, onions, garlic and a little salted meat, washed down with water.

Even though the cleric is rendered as ridiculous, his tastes reflect both fashion and medical advice: lots of sugared confections, spiced wine in winter, attention to the seasons, even sexual intercourse as a form of medical hygiene. The priest's desire to follow trends, enjoy himself and lead a healthy life is ludicrous but reflects a widely held goal.

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*Eiximenis*, in *Sociedad y memoria en la edad media: Estudios en homenaje de Nilda Guglielmi*, ed. Ariel Guianca and Pablo Ubierna, Buenos Aires, 2005, p. 127-134.

There is something comical about medieval cuisine, but then again, about the passions and fashions of gastronomy in any era. Nevertheless, these desires and status symbols have historical meaning. I have tried to give an impression of what were considered important and desirable qualities for cuisine in the Middle Ages. This is a sophisticated but to us rather alien sensibility. I want to emphasize that however alien, these tastes lasted for centuries and were not merely the product of late-medieval ostentation, or not exclusively. Roman cuisine had been equally enamored of the piquant, the exotic and the clever and artificial even if Roman fish sauce lost favor and the favorite Roman spice, silphium, was harvested to extinction and so untasted since about the era of Nero. For the period after the Middle Ages, the Italian Renaissance does not represent a radical break. Platina, as I said, is unique in his attitude towards food as he addresses the reader as a cultivated enthusiast rather than the practitioner of a craft. Platina quotes Roman medical and nature writers such as Celsus and Pliny as well as Martial on sea urchins and turbot, or the agronomist Columella on peaches. He recalls excellent meals with friends and has a lot to say about such simple ingredients as herbs and cabbage. But even if he seems to avoid grand effects à la Chiquart, Platina is still very much a medieval cook in the specific dishes he describes, such as peacock “cooked as though it seems to be alive” or lamprey flavored with nutmeg, cloves and a sauce made out of its own blood.<sup>30</sup>

The real changes would come later and is especially clear in the case of spices. In 1648, the French princess Marie-Louis de Gonzague journeyed to Poland to meet her new husband King Casimir V. She and her entourage were dismayed at the ceremonial meals presented to them in Germany and Poland whose dishes were so strongly flavored with spices (especially saffron) as to be inedible or at least, in the words of one of these unfortunates, “no Frenchman could eat them.” In 1691, the countess of Aulnoy, a French traveler in Spain, also commented on the unpleasant reek of saffron and spices in what was on offer. Conversely the French rejection of spices was noted by a German observer in the early eighteenth century who remarked that his countrymen, who like well-spiced food, were going to be disappointed with what they ate in France.<sup>31</sup>

Changing tastes are obvious in the cookbooks. As I indicated earlier, a high percentage of medieval recipes call for spices, usually many of them at the same time. By contrast François Massialot’s *Cuisinier roial et bourgeois* (1691) mentions ginger in only 1% of its recipes. Cinnamon is used in 8%. Such medieval prestige spices as saffron, galangal or grains of Paradise are

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<sup>30</sup> Platina, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, p. 109-110, 210.

<sup>31</sup> Examples from Jean-Louis Flandrin et al., introduction to François Pierre de la Varenne, *Le cuisinier françois*, Paris, 1983, p. 14-15.

completely absent in Massialot.<sup>32</sup> The *Nouveau Dictionnaire* of 1776 stated clearly that “today in France [...] spices, sugar and saffron etc. are proscribed” (sugar in main courses, that is, as its use in desserts and hot drinks soared).<sup>33</sup> With this statement we reach the end of medieval cuisine.

I hope I have at least suggested that the taste in food is as much a part of the life of the aristocracy as the codes of chivalry and love. I have also briefly mentioned the hierarchical social codes represented by different kinds of food such as vegetables and game. The most important historical force in all of this, however, is consumer preference. It is a cliché of world history, for example, that the desire for spices lies behind the European voyages of discovery and colonial competition, beginning with Columbus and Da Gama in the 1490s. This is true, but what created that demand, what were medieval culinary and imaginative desires, what spices and cuisine meant, are subjects that remain to be explored.

#### ASPECTE DE BAZĂ ALE GASTRONOMIEI MEDIEVALE Rezumat

Acest articol abordează problema istoriei gastronomiei dintr-o perspectivă istorică universală și apoi pe cea a bucătăriei medievale, cu scopul de a demonstra profunzimea și importanța sa, în pofida aparentei lipse de seriozitate cu care este creditată de obicei. Pentru a ilustra această percepție, autorul citează un fragment din Montaigne, care arată atât importanța acordată de un profesionist al bucătăriei artei sale, cât și disprețul frust al unui gânditor modern, care o plasează undeva în rândul subiectelor comune, nedemne de un vocabular și de o retorică alese.

Paul Freedman definește poziția culturală a Europei medievale față de gastronomie. Astfel, el arată că lumea occidentală medievală nu a dezvoltat o „știință a bucătăriei” comparabilă cu rafinamentul gastronomiei orientale, chinezești sau islamice. Dacă în China și Islam tratatele de gastronomie erau obiecte de lux și subiecte de discuție savantă echivalente poeziei sau caligrafiei, în Europa occidentală s-a dezvoltat numai o ierarhizare socială sumară a alimentelor, prin asocierea unor tipuri de mâncare cu anumite categorii sociale. Desconsiderația europeană pentru acest subiect a fost transmisă mai târziu în epoca modernă, istoria bucătăriei fiind considerată un gen de istorie pentru amatori. Între anii 1950-1980, studiile istorice elaborate mai ales în mediul școlii franceze de la *Annales* au examinat preponderent obiceiurile alimentare ale categoriilor inferioare, în timp ce gusturile elitei și-au păstrat reputația de frivolitate, de subiect ce nu merită atenție. Totuși, recent, „histoire de la cuisine” a dobândit locul care i se cuvenea în cadrul istoriei mentalităților. Importanța gustului în istoria socială sau economică este demonstrată de efectele uneori dramatice

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<sup>32</sup> Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Chroniques de Platine: pour une gastronomie historique*, Paris, 1992, p. 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking*, Ithaca, 1994, p. 201.

la nivelul structurii sociale ori chiar în apariția unor dezechilibre variate, mergând de la nivelul relațiilor mondiale până la probleme privind starea de sănătate a populației actuale.

Istoriografia bucătăriei medievale s-a dezvoltat pe căi diferite. Unele au constat din studii referitoare la cultura materială ori la cea mentală. Autorul prezintă câteva aspecte specifice gastronomiei medievale din perioada de la sfârșitul Evului Mediu, având ca surse rețetele culinare păstrate din secolele XIII-XV, listele de socoteli ale caselor nobile sau regale și descrieri ale unor bancheturi princiare sau aristocratice. Bucătăria medievală se caracterizează prin preferința față de mirodenii, dragostea pentru inovație și tendința accentuată spre sofisticare. Existau reguli cu privire la felurile de mâncare și asortarea lor, se insista asupra culorii și texturii. Dieta categoriilor superioare se bazează preponderent pe alimente cu un conținut mare de proteine, precum carnea. Tipurile de carne erau foarte diversificate, incluzând vită, vânat, pește și păsări. În același timp, dieta categoriilor inferioare, alcătuită preponderent din fierturi din vegetale sau produse derivate din lapte, era de obicei respinsă de categoria superioară. Gastronomi medievală europeană, afirmă autorul, a fost înlăturată de o revoluție a gusturilor în epoca modernă, care a renunțat aproape complet la utilizarea mirodeniilor în prepararea alimentelor, preferând să sublinieze calitățile aromele naturale. Rețetele medievale includ utilizarea mirodeniilor la aproape toate felurile de mâncare. Această preferință a fost explicată în mod eronat ca fiind o modalitate de păstrare a alimentelor perisabile ori pentru a masca alterarea lor. Condimentele nu atingeau performanțele procedeele tradiționale de conservare alcătuite din afumare sau sărare și uscare. Alte caracteristici ale rețetelor medievale constau din ceea ce se poate numi preparare excesivă, căutarea efectelor spectaculare și împodobirea felurilor. Nu se consumau alimente în stare crudă, iar moda salatelor s-a răspândit numai din secolul al XVI-lea, venind din Italia. Brânzeturile, asociate cu populația rurală, au apărut în meniurile elitei abia începând cu a doua jumătate a secolului al XVI-lea. Mezelurile nu fac parte din gusturile aristocrației; acestea erau mai degrabă asociate cu populația orășenească cu oarecare stare. Slăbiciunea pentru mirodenii se explică prin intermediul credințelor despre medicină, calitățile alimentelor și necesitatea asigurării unui echilibru între fluidele trupului, sau umori: sângele, bila (neagră și galbenă) și flegma. Anumite alimente erau recomandate sau interzise în funcție de calitățile asociate lor și de simptomele pacientului. Studiul ilustrează apoi câteva asemenea exemple de calități atribuite unor alimente și combinațiile cuvenite pentru o alimentație sănătoasă, în conformitate cu recomandările de dietă ale vremii. Unele surse permit estimarea măsurii în care oamenii urmau în mod real ori se abăteau de la sugestiile medicilor sau autorilor de rețete culinare.

Gastronomia medievală, cu gusturile sale atât de străine de orientările culinare de astăzi, nu a dispărut în timpul Renașterii. Autorul arată că abia după mijlocul secolului al XVII-lea, din spațiul cultural francez a început să se întindă o tendință de respingere a utilizării mirodeniilor în prepararea felurilor de mâncare. Nu mult mai târziu, reorientarea culinară a început să fie reflectată de cărțile de bucate, în care se poate observa scăderea dramatică a utilizării mirodeniilor precum ghimbirul, șofranul, scorțișoara, cuișoarele sau nucșoara etc. Autorul încheie arătând că gusturile și dorințele culinare ale aristocrației medievale reprezintă un subiect la fel de important ca și codul cavaleresc sau cel al dragostei, un subiect care este deschis cercetării.