The Flower of Wheat: Bread in the Middle and Colonial Ages

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Bread was the essential food for all classes of society in the Middle Ages. The basic element, common to every table, was the *pain de mayne*, the hand-bread or table loaf, a round, bellied bread to be eaten plain, however else bread was incorporated with the meal. Recent historical studies have revealed surprising similarities in the statistics for bread consumption across class and geographic boundaries, confirming the centrality of this staple food in the medieval person's diet. Rather, differences of social status and era present themselves in the composition of that bread, as well as the source of its production.

Two main types of bread dominated the production of medieval bakeries, table bread and trenchers. This object receives frequent mention in literature, even idiomatic usage ("a good trencherman"), and occupies a position somewhere between tableware and food. The *Menagier de Paris* gives specifications for the desired size of a trencher: "half a foot long, by four fingers, by four fingers."[1] These relatively small loaves would then be turned over and over in the oven until hard, flat crusts formed on both sides, so that, when cut horizontally, the soft bread remaining would dissolve to form a relatively sturdy pair of bowls. With trenchers, staleness was actually an asset, so the menagier tells his wife to demand four-day-old trencher bread from her baker, for the best dinner party.

Since structure was critical with trenchers, brown bread was ideal, but color was quite a different matter with *pain de mayne*. Wheat had historically held the place of primacy among grains for purposes of bread baking because of its prevalence in the Mediterranean lands. It should be noted, though, that the term "wheat" was used somewhat generically by some writers, and sometimes encompassed a number of different related grains, including varieties as different as spelt, a hard wheat valued for its high nutritional capacity. Rye, on the other hand, was the grain most easily grown in the British Isles and northwestern Europe (Scandinavia, Germanic lands, Netherlands, much of France), and remained the most common cereal crop until the end of the eighteenth century.[2] Oats and barley were also widely available, but were commonly used as animal fodder, so remain absent from medieval bread production.

Over time, the whiteness of wheat flour and the bread made from it became a sign of times of plenty and of high social status because of its relative scarcity in the medieval diet. The standard of excellence, prized above all on the medieval dining table, was the pure white leavened bread, sometimes even called 'cake.' Medieval physicians even maintained that this bread had special curative properties, when, in fact, it actually had less nutritive value than the breads which left in more of the wholesome wheat bran, just as the good old Wonder Bread ads used to claim in the 1950s and '60s.[3] Mixture of flours also acquired the mark of lower status, signifying the adulteration of the flour of pure wheat, [4] and peasants became associated with black bread, the dark ryes and whole grain varieties, often made with whatever grains (sometimes with whatever plant

materials, period) they could find and grind. The vast majority of the population fell in between, eating *meslin* or *maslin* bread (Fr. *metail*), a mixture of wheat and rye flours that was most economical in the growing climate of Northern Europe.[5]

Bread composition changed even further once it reached the shores of America, to reflect its new agricultural and economic environment. It appears that corn went into immediate use, ground into flour, thereby earning its place in the bread-baking mix. Cornmeal alone, however, yields the griddle-cooked "johnny cake" or "corn dodger," rather than a leavened loaf. Bread's ongoing prevalence lay in the colonists' continued reluctance to adopt the potato as an acceptable carbohydrate, on account of its membership in the nightshade family. Perceptions of healthiness of heavy vs. light breads appear to have been left behind as colonists crossed the Atlantic; the new environment, with its radically redefined notions of status and starvation, as well as a different growing environment, changed attitudes toward acceptability of bread products. While refined white wheat bread would still have status implications in the urban centers, much of the negative connotation associated with lesser admixtures fell by the wayside. Famed American journalist William Cobbett notes that "though Long Islanders are very prosperous, nine out of ten families rarely eat wheaten bread; instead they usually have rye."[6]

One might assume that the poor would receive less bread than the wealthy, as well as poorer quality bread, but recent studies of medieval and colonial bread consumption prove exactly the opposite. In fact, consumption figures for various countries are surprisingly similar as well. In the houses of late medieval English nobility, every individual is given a standard daily food ration of between two and three pounds of wheat bread and about a gallon of ale. What is even more striking is that the nearby castle garrisons are provisioned at almost exactly the same rations, as are the local hospital inmates. Crossing into the French provinces, the 3500 residents of Chambéry appear to have received approximately 24 litres of wheat per month, which likewise averages out to about a two-pound loaf of bread per day. These figures back up the notion that bread is the absolute staple of the medieval diet throughout Europe, at all levels of society.[7] Remarkably, this amount appears again, virtually unchanged, in the everyday diets of the working residents of the American colonies. Social historians like Stephanie Grauman Wolf and Billy Smith have shown that the average colonial, living in Philadelphia between 1750 and 1800, also got by on "a pound and a half of grain in some form, usually bread," supplemented by small amounts of other food groups such as dairy and meat, just like his medieval counterparts.[8]

Who produced all the bread consumed by medieval people? Commercial bakers -- and the best indication of the importance of their product and their profession in the medieval society was the amount of regulation placed on them. This regulation was both internal and external in origin. Bakers organized themselves into self-regulating commercial trade cooperatives known as *guilds*. These collectives functioned as a combination of trade union and market monopoly and regulatory body. Guilds compelled bakers to join their groups; no rogue enterprises were allowed in guild territory. Once you paid in, however, your business and your family enjoyed the

protections associated with guild membership. As a master baker, you could take and train apprentices, without fear of having your proprietary recipes stolen and used to establish another profitable bakery under someone else's name. If anything happened to you or your business, the guild would pay out a kind of insurance money to your family. Since all bakers were guild bakers, the guild fixed prices on baked goods in the region, as well as overseeing the quality in guild bakeries and securing good prices on raw materials from other merchants and manufacturers. The guilds comprised a powerful force in medieval urban life, especially when they controlled the most important portion of the medieval diet.

So who protected the consumer against the guilds? Well, technically, that was where the state came in. But the state could not fight every battle on the common man's behalf, so only two foods were deemed important enough to legislate -- beer and bread. The king's court came to oversee aspects of weight, quality and price on the most necessary foods. [See "*All Bread is Not Created Equal*"]

Once bread or porridge was produced, its uses were virtually endless in medieval cooking. However, there are few recipes for the making of bread in medieval manuscripts; it was a separate and distinct professional craft, and therefore not included in cookbooks or domestic manuals. No recipes for porridge were given either, as the boiling of grains was assumed to be intuitive. Descriptions of common meals, menus and uses of bread and grains inform our views, though. The well-to-do often enjoyed a fine white bread bun for breakfast, sometimes with currants or raisins in it, resembling a *brioche*. Peasants, on the other hand, often ate their coarser black bread with raw apples or cheese for breakfast or a working lunch in the fields.[9] [See Breughel unit] The staple food for the broadest section of society at the main meal was a soup or stew -- the French *potage* -- made of beans and/or game. If not served in trencher bread, it was often poured directly over a hunk of coarse bread. One rural dish with medieval origins, still being reported on the French countryside menu in 1789, was a kind of "instant bread soup": “The bread is all ready in a big wooden dish, with a little knob of butter, and then the boiling water is poured over it. Voila! That's the soup. A clove of garlic and a raw onion grated by the cook and sprinkled over the soup -- that's the seasoning, the last word in culinary fashion. The soup is served, it's excellent."

In richer aristocratic and bourgeois kitchens, bread and cereals were not used so much as the center of the meal, as the essential matrix that held it together. The most common appearance was simply as the centerpiece of the table, the *pain de mayne* and the trencher bread that held the meat, gravies, purees and other dinner foods. The quality of that tough outer trencher crust was essential to the success of the feast. Only one other baked good had so much resting on its structural integrity -- the pastry shell. Pies and savory meat dishes were baked into dough crusts, and, as oven-hot juices built up behind the starchy wall, once again, the quality of the baker was critical to social and culinary success. However, pastries were typically prepared in the home kitchen, so the honor of the house was on the line. The home kitchen also recycled all stale table bread -- drying, grilling, or even charring it, to make crumbs for incorporation into sauces. Once broken down, bread could be soaked in broth, vinegar or verjuice; it

would be sieved, then set aside for last-minute incorporation in a sauce as a thickener. Other crumbs, the paler ones, would be crushed and made into a panade, then sieved and added to the sauce at the boiling point. At that moment, it would break down, losing its own texture and making the sauce smooth, shiny, translucent, and creamy. If added to milk or stewed fruit over gentle heat, then cooled, it could even become a flan or custard.[10] With knowledgeable use, the staple of the medieval diet could create a symphony of textures and flavors in the medieval kitchen.

Notes

1. [back] Terence Scully, *Early French Cookery: Sources, History, Original Recipes and Modern Adaptations*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 65
2. [back] William Ashley, *The Bread of Our Forefathers: An Inquiry in Economic History*. (Oxford, 1928), p. 2
3. [back] Terence Scully, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1997), p. 36
4. [back] Odile Redon, Françoise Sabban, and Silvano Serventi, *The Medieval Kitchen: Recipes from France and Italy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 17
5. [back] *Ibid.*
6. [back] William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*. (London: Peter Davies, 1926), p.55.
7. [back] Scully, *Art of Cookery*, p. 36-7
8. [back] Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *As Various as Their Land: The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 91; Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 95-104
9. [back] Scully, *Art of Cookery*, p. 36
10. [back] Redon, Sabban, and Serventi, *Medieval Kitchen*, p. 23