

# Getting Your Daily Bread—Breads in Medieval Society

## Teacher's Content Base Outline

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### I. Bread was the essential food for all classes of society in the Middle Ages.

#### A. Two main types of bread

1. trenchers " a long, flat loaf turned over and over in the oven until hard, flat crusts formed on both sides, then cut horizontally, the knife parallel to the tabletop; a cross between tableware and food
  - a. when meat with juices were poured in, soft bread inside dissolved, leaving a relatively sturdy bread bowl
  - b. word *trencher* is French for "to cut"
  - c. staleness was actually an asset, because the more stale the trencher, the less likely it was to fall apart while still being used. The Menagier says to demand four-day-old trencher bread from the baker for a good dinner party, at which nobody's clothes or mood would be ruined by a leaky trencher.
2. table bread (a.k.a., *pain de mayne* or "hand-bread") " a round, bellied half-pound loaf
  - a. this was the basic element of every meal, common to every table; what distinguished it was its colour and consistency
  - b. the higher in status the household, the whiter and lighter the table bread

#### B. Wheat had historically held the place of primacy among grains for bread baking because of its prevalence in the Mediterranean lands, but was not always the most commonly available grain in Northern Europe.

1. some medieval writers used the term "wheat" to encompass a number of different related grains, including varieties as different as spelt, a hard wheat valued for its high nutritional capacity.
2. the wheat grain has as a brownish hull around it, much like a kernel of corn, called the wheat bran. When dried and rubbed between pieces of cloth, or bolted, can be removed, leaving only the "flower" of the wheat grain. When milled, the bolted wheat "flower" yields the purest white wheat flour.
3. over time, the whiteness of pure 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.

- a. pure white leavened bread became the standard of excellence among table breads, sometimes even called “cake”
- b. medieval physicians maintained that this special bread had curative properties because of the purity of the flour when, in fact, it actually had less nutritional value than breads which left in more of the wholesome wheat bran (similar to the Wonder Bread ads of 1950s and ‘60s)

**C. Rye, on the other hand, was the grain most easily grown in the British Isles and northwestern Europe (Scandinavia, Germanic lands, Netherlands, and much of France), and remained the most common cereal crop until the end of the eighteenth century.**

1. majority of the population ate *meslin* or *maslin* bread (Fr. *metail*), a mixture of unbolted wheat and rye flours that was most economical in the growing climate of Northern Europe.
2. mixture of flours acquired the mark of lower status, signifying the adulteration of pure wheat flour; peasants became associated with black bread, the dark ryes and whole grain varieties.
  - a. ironically, the darker bread was actually healthier for the peasants eating it than was the “cake” eaten by the nobles! Bran, whole grains, malts and other ingredients in the dark varieties of bread are now expensive items found in health food stores, a sign of status in today’s society.
  - b. in times of need, bread was often made with whatever grains (sometimes whatever plant materials at all) could be found and ground

**D. Quantities of bread consumed were comparable across all social classes, as revealed by recent studies of medieval and colonial households.**

1. each individual in houses of late medieval English nobility received standard daily food ration of 2-3 lbs. of wheat bread and 1 gal. of ale.
  - a. soldiers posted at local castle garrison, and inmates at the local hospital, get almost exactly the same rations as the nobles
2. the French town of Chambéry has 3500 residents, and received approx. 24 L. of wheat per month. This averages out to about a 2 lb. loaf of bread per day.

## **II. The vast majority of the bread consumed in the Middle Ages was produced in commercial bakeries.**

**A. The best indication of the importance of their product and their profession in medieval society was the amount of regulation placed upon them.**

1. Internal regulation " guilds, or self-regulating commercial trade cooperative, which functions as combination of trade union and market monopoly

- a. bakers' guilds compelled bakers to join their groups; no rogue enterprises in guild territory
  - b. once you paid in, your business and your family enjoyed protections associated with guild membership
  - c. as a master baker, you could take and train apprentices, without fear of having proprietary recipes stolen and used to open a new profitable bakery under someone else's name
  - d. if anything happened to you or your business, the guild paid out a kind of insurance money to your family
  - e. guild fixed prices on baked goods in the region, oversaw quality in guild bakeries, and secured good prices on raw materials from other merchants and manufacturers
- 2. External regulation " assize laws from the king's court. Only two foods were deemed important enough to legislate: beer and bread.**
- a. assize laws dealt with aspects of weight, quality and price on these necessary foods [See "All Bread is Not Created Equal"]

### **III. Bread and porridge were not only consumed by itself as a staple of the diet, their uses were also endless medieval cooking.**

- 1. Very few recipes for making of bread and porridge exist in medieval manuscripts**
  - a. none for bread, because it was a separate professional craft, and that information was closely guarded by those experts who made their living by it.
  - b. none for porridge, because the boiling of grains was considered to be intuitive, and not requiring a degree in rocket science or a recipe
- 2. Common meals and menus were frequently described in cookbooks and domestic manuals.**
  - a. the well-to-do often started the day with a fine white bread bun with currants or raisins in it; peasants often ate coarse black bread with raw apples or cheese for breakfast or a working lunch in the fields [See Breughel unit.]
  - b. staple food at the main meal for the broadest section of society 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.
- 3. Nothing was wasted, even in the richest households**
  - a. both trencher bread and pastry crusts depended on their strength against hot liquid contents for the success of a meal, so sometimes required coarser grain or more stale bread than usually found in an aristocratic house

- b. all stale table bread was recycled to make crumbs as a thickener into sauces, or heated slowly with milk until it reached a custard-like consistency**