

Fast Food in Medieval Europe

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While we generally think of fast food as a uniquely American invention of the late twentieth century, it has in fact been around since Roman times in urban settings in which there were a great many poor and /or single adults living in small rooms. These people had no money or space to lay in stores of food; they could afford neither cooking utensils nor fuel to prepare food. [1] Already in the late 12th century, there was a "fast food" area on the Thames in London, a medieval version of a "drive-in", where hungry travelers could fill up; these shops provided a range of pricing and foods and were open around the clock. [2]

By the high and late Middle Ages, there were many urban centers in Britain and continental Europe where such conditions, as in ancient Rome, were also present. 13th-century Köln and Venice had around 50,000 inhabitants, while London was nearing the 25,000 mark in its smaller confines. [3] However, studies of the city of Colchester, England, in the early 14th century show that only 3% of households that paid taxes [11 out of 389] had a kitchen. Many artisans, other workers, and classes of the urban poor, such as impoverished widows, lived in single rooms, where there were no cooking facilities, not even a hearth. From wills that inventoried possessions, it is possible to gain a glimpse of the difficult circumstances in which they lived. The bequests of the poor women included only clothing and bedding, which means that they must have lived in inexpensive lodgings with neither furnishings nor cooking equipment. Langland's [Piers Plowman](#) notes that impecunious widows had to spend the little money they earned spinning on their rent, milk, and oatmeal. Coroners' rolls for convicted criminals reveal a similar picture. In 14th-century London, murderers and other perpetrators of violent crime were listed as having no possessions; in the rolls that still exist, only seven criminals had kitchen utensils. [4]

What did people like these, living on society's margins, eat? The one commercial product that was cheap, readily available, and not immediately perishable, was bread, which formed the mainstay of their diet. Flour also formed the basis of a wide variety of prepared foods, most of which were sold hot, which means that they were meant for immediate consumption. Fast foods of the London of the late 13th and early 14th centuries containing wheat included pies, hot cakes, pancakes, and wafers. [5] Meat pies and pasties were especially adaptable for ease of carrying and consumption, much like today's Big Mac.

How do we know that poor people were the chief patrons of the fast food shops? Since these people were illiterate, they left no spending records. The answer is in the process of elimination. We do know the spending and eating habits of the wealthy, because they left detailed records, which indicates that they rarely used the cookshops; their main commercially prepared expenditures were for bread, which everyone from all classes who lived in cities purchased, and condiments like mustard. [6] Additional evidence that

the main patrons were the poor can be found in urban surveys of grain stocks, which show that 41% of the households had no grain at all on hand. [7] Evidence can also be found in regulations such as in those enforced in London in 1350, which prevented greedy bakers from charging more than a penny to put the meat of a customer in a bread casing and bake it. [8]

Why did people with sufficient incomes to buy food, store it and cook it not use the cookshops and the fast food outlets of the time, as many in that position do today? There are some answers that are the same now as then. The cooks in these places were generally not well-regarded; the common view of them was that they were dishonest and dirty. Both of these qualities affected the wholesomeness as well as the safety of the food. Norwich sources from the late 13th century indicate that cooks from a neighboring town made sausage and pudding from diseased pork that was not fit to eat. During the same period, cooks and pasty makers apparently warmed up pasties that were several days old and spoiling. York ordinances prohibited the sale of fresh meat kept for more than 24 hours or the sale of undercooked pasties or those with tainted meat, yet York cooks were successfully indicted for all of these practices. Other unsafe food practices included the production of pasties and meat pies from tainted rabbit, geese and offal, or to pass beef pasties off as venison. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the host of the Tabard Inn was infamous for the use of warmed-up pies and the presence of numerous flies in his establishment. [ix] A common saying in late medieval and early modern times was that "God sends the meat, but the devil sends cooks." [x]

The wholesomeness and safety of food concern people today; even with a much stronger state enforcement of food safety practices, people know that dirty restaurant kitchens and use of unwholesome food still exist. But, then as now, the urban poor depended on such places for day-to-day sustenance. Then as now, fast and unwholesome food is available to those whose incomes or lack of them make their cost prohibitive. Medieval people, who lived alone with not even a hearth, often returned to their miserable quarters after a hard day out in the cold, at a time when the food markets were closed, had to have something to eat. [xi] And the cookshop, often open well after midnight, with smells of savory pies and hot cakes, was it.


Related projects

Medieval fast foods made with flour: the baked pastry or roll, then as now, provided a convenient package. For a Home Economics lesson, you could do the following:

1. Make medieval and colonial examples of fast foods: pasties, meat pies, gingerbread, lebkuchen, etc., and compare their food values with selected modern fast foods.
2. Look at the original sources in the appendices regarding medieval and colonial complaints about fast food and its purveyors. List the complaints registered about fast food in medieval times in this article and in the article about fast food in colonial times.
3. Invite someone from the board of health in your city to speak about food safety and restaurant violations.

4. Find material on the effect of fast food on inner-city economics.

Notes

1. [\[back\]](#) Martha Carlin, "Fast Food and Urban Living Standards in Medieval England," Food and Eating in Medieval Europe, edited by Martha Carlin and Joel T. Rosenthal, pp. 27-52, pp. 27-28. [London, Rio Grande, Ohio: Hambledon Press, 1998]
2. [\[back\]](#) Carlin, pp. 29-30.
3. [\[back\]](#) <http://scholar.chem.nyu.edu/tekpages/urbanpop.html>
4. [\[back\]](#) Carlin, pp. 42,43,48-49. John Langland, [Piers Plowman, C-text, x, ll. 71-97.](#) 
5. [\[back\]](#) Carlin, p. 31.
6. [\[back\]](#) Carlin, pp. 34-39; p. 41.
7. [\[back\]](#) Carlin, pp. 45-46.
8. [\[back\]](#) Carlin, p. 31.
9. [\[back\]](#) "For many a pastee hastow laten blood/And many a lakke-of-Douere hastow soold/That hath been twies hoot and twies coold./For of thy persle yet they fare the wors/That they han eten with thy stubbul-goos/For in thy shoppe is many a flye loos." Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. N. F. Blake (London: Edward Arnold, 1980), l. 4338-52.
10. [\[x\]](#) Carlin, 39-41.
11. [\[xi\]](#) Carlin, 51.