Hot Pies! Hot!

Street Food in Medieval English Urban Centers

Lady Eulalia Piebakere (AoA, JdL, GdS) (briwaf@gmail.com, http://briwaf.blogspot.com)

Increasing urbanization during the High Middle Ages led to the growth of a thriving economy of ready-to-eat prepared foods purchased from street vendors. If you've ever been curious about the concept of medieval fast food, this lecture class will cover who ate prepared food and why, and the types of foods typical of English urban centers in the 12th through 15th centuries.

Defining Street Food

This examination will focus on a relatively narrow category of food: prepared foods that were intended to be consumed immediately. (Street vendors typically emphasized that prepared foods were sold hot. [Carlin 32]) This is in contrast to either made-to-order foods (as would be available in inns or similar establishments), ingredients intended to be cooked at home, and prepared foods purchased to supplement meals prepared in the home (i.e. bread and ale), all of which were also available in medieval English towns and cities. These foods are roughly equivalent to modern fast food, and were a unique facet of the historical urban food landscape.

Consumers of Street Food

Commercial cooks first appear in England in the 11th and 12th centuries, and became increasingly common in subsequent years. At least one fast food vendor was operating in London in the early 1170s, and in 1212 multiple cookshops were mentioned in London records; York boasts 35 commercial cooks in 1304, and by 1314, Norwich had a "Cockrowe" (Cook Row). (Carlin 29) Professional cooks appear to have been a uniquely urban phenomenon. London in the medieval period was home to both the richest and the poorest of the country (Murphy), and it is likely that cookshops were almost exclusively used by the poor.

There is a distinct lack of evidence for use of cookshops by wealthy townspeople or by travelers (Carlin). By contrast, there is evidence that the urban poor relied heavily on street food. In medieval towns and cities, many single adults lived in dwellings with no access to kitchen facilities (Carlin 32, 46); the number of cooks is highest in towns with a high proportion of single adults (50). Without access to cooking facilities, street food would have been the only hot food available to the urban poor, significantly increasing its appeal. Additionally, the regulation of cookshops by municipal authorities (for example through price controls) suggests that such places were viewed specifically as providing hot food for the poor (Carlin 49).

Sellers of Street Food

As already described, street food was generally sold out of cookshops, permanent structures which were generally clustered in specific locations (Carlin 33). Shops ranged in size, some small and some large, and they were attached to dwellings (Hammond 47). Regulations defining cookshops were minimal, requiring only signage and that the food sold meet town regulations; women in particular operated cookshops out of their homes by either selling food out their doors that was then taken off-site or setting up a room within their dwelling where customers could eat their purchased food (McIntosh 130). In spite of this, most cookshops in London were concentrated near the Thames (Hammond 48). Cookshops could not sell raw food, and could not offer lodging; additionally,

piebakers had their own dedicated shops (ibid). London had many open-air markets selling fresh produce, meat, fish, dairy, etc. (see Hammond 41-43), and it is possible that small-scale food vendors operated less permanent shops in such locations.

Cookshops and cooks generally had an unsavory reputation. Chaucer's cook has a "mormal" (sore) on his shin, associating him and by extension his profession with disease and dirt. The 15th century *Liber Albus*, a London custumal (book of law) suggests general suspicion for food retailers on the part of civic authorities by curtailing their activities, prohibiting officers of the city from working as food retailers, and discussing laws related to food retailing in the same context as laws dealing with "rebellious persons." (Carrel, 186-187) This again emphasizes the association between the poor and cookshops, as wealthier citizens would have likely avoided them.

Additionally, roving female distributers called "hucksters" played a large role in food distribution of food in medieval cities, in particular selling wares to the poor. Hucksters operated on a small scale, typically purchasing goods to resell, and usually moved around the city calling out their wares; the variety of goods sold by hucksters included bread, ale, fish, grain, and vegetables (McIntosh 131). Hucksters typically worked in poor neighborhoods, and were themselves poor (McIntosh 132); if, as previously discussed, such persons had no access to cooking facilities, hucksters may also have sold prepared foods.

Typical Examples of Street Food: Literary and Other Evidence

Fast foods found in towns in England during the late 13th and early 14th centuries include spiced meat and fish pasties; cooked meats, game, and poultry (wild and domestic); "cheesecakes" and flans made of eggs, bread, cheese; and wafers and griddle cakes. (Carlin 32) Additionally, cookshops would prepare food using ingredients provided by a customer, most typically encasing meat in pastry and baking it. (Ibid)

Contemporary literature offers a view of the kinds of dishes available. In the prologue to the Cook's Tale, Chaucer describes the foods the cook is familiar with:

> A COOK they hadde with hem for the nones
> To boille the chiknes with the marybones,
> And poudre-marchant tart, and galyngale.
> Wel koude he knowe a draughte of London ale.
> He koude rooste, and sethe, and broille, and frye,
> Maken mortreux, and wel bake a pye.
> But greet harm was it, as it thoughte me,
> That on his shyne a mormal hadde he.
> For blankmanger, that made he with the beste.
>
> (Lines 381-389, ed. Kökbugur)

Several of the foods mentioned, such as mortreux (ground meat cooked in broth, variously interpreted as a stew or a terrine) and blankmanger (chicken and rice cooked in almond milk), are known from contemporary recipe collections. The earliest cookery books, however, were intended for an elite audience. As such, these foods may not be representative of those most likely to have been available from street merchants and consumed by the urban poor.

The 15th century poem "London Lickpenny" describes the foods offered to the hapless (and penniless) protagonist in colorful detail:

(Starting line 59) Cokes to me, they toke good entent, Called me nere, for to dyne, And proferyd me good brede, ale, and wyne. A fayre clothe they began to sprede, Rybbes of befe, bothe fat and fine; But for lacke of money I might not spede. In to London I gan me hy; Of all the lond it bearethe the prise. "Hot pescods!" one gan cry, "Strabery rype, and chery in the ryse!" One bad me come nere and by some spice; Pepar and saffron they gan me bede, Clove, grayns, and flowre of rise. For lacke of money I might not spede.	(Starting line 81) Then went I forth by London Stone Thrwghe-out all Canywike strete. Drapers to me they called anon; Grete chepe of clothe, they gan me hete; Then come there one, and cried "Hot shepes fete!" "Risshes faire and grene," an othar began to grete; Both melwell and makarell I gan mete, But for lacke of money I myght not spede. Then I hied me into Estchepe. One cried, "Ribes of befe, and many a pie!" Pewtar potts they clatteryd on a heape. Ther was harpe, pipe and sawtry. "Ye by Cokke!" "Nay by Cokke!" some began to cry; Some sange of Jenken and Julian, to get themselvs mede. Full fayne I wold hadd of that mynstralsie, But for lacke of money I cowld not spede. (ed. James M. Dean)

The prepared foods mentioned in this text include beef ribs, hot pescods (pea pods), hot sheep's feet, "risshes" (rissoles, small fried balls or pastries), and pies. By examining contemporary recipes and archeological evidence, we can attempt to recreate some of these dishes.

Food in the Archeological Record

Archeological evidence can flesh out our sense of the foods available in medieval English urban centers, specifically the types and ages of animals most frequently consumed and species of plants definitely known.

In urban sites, beef and mutton comprise the majority of animal remains from the 11th through the 16th centuries (Sykes). Although younger animals (ie calves) appear with relative frequency in urban deposits (ibid), such animals were likely only consumed by the wealthy and thus can be excluded from consideration here. While pigs were kept in towns during this time period, beef consumption in urban sites was higher than either mutton or pork consumption (Albarella). Pigs were generally associated with the poor (ibid), however, which may mean pork was used in cookshops.

The following is a list of remains of food plants found in London deposits (pre-1500) (Moffett):

Opium poppy
Black mustard
Brassica spp. and *Brassica sinapis*
Bean (*Vicia faba*)
Lentil?
Flax
Chervil
Coriander
Alexanders
Fennel
Dill
Celery
Carrot (wild?)
Mint
Bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*)
Wheat (*Triticum* spp.)
Rye
Barley
Common oat
Bristle oat
Black mulberry
Fig
Walnut
Hazelnut
Bramble/raspberry
Strawberry
Dog rose-hip
Rose-hip
Sloe
Primitive plum
Wild cherry
Sour/morello cherry
Plum/cherry (*Prunus* spp.)
Pear/apple
Hawthorn
Grape
A single citrus seed

This list includes foods that are likely to have only been available imported, and thus would have been more costly (figs and citrus) as well as those that were grown locally or even that grew wild. Locally grown foods were cheaper, and thus are likely to have figured more prominently in street food intended for poor consumers.

Recreating Medieval Street Food: Recipes

Two typical examples of street food are pies and pescods. Pies are particularly well-suited to the circumstances of street food: they could be sold hot when baked, or stored for a period of time before selling; additionally, they require no equipment to carry or eat. Pescods are simply peas in the pod (and would have only been available during a relatively short part of the year), likely boiled and possibly served with some kind of seasoning.

For the pies that I am sampling today, I started with a 15th century recipe for chewets (also spelled chewettes in modern sources, and dozens of ways in period sources), which are small pies fully enclosed in a self-supporting crust:

> *vij. Chawettys.—Take buttys of Vele, & mynce hem smal, or Porke, & put on a potte; take Wyne, & caste þer-to pouder of Gyngere, Pepir, & Safroun, & Salt, & a lytel verþous, & do hem in a cofyn with ȝolkys of Eyroun, & kutte Datys & Roysonys of Coraunce, Clowys, Maceȝ, & þen ceuere þin cofyn, & lat it bake tyl it be y-now.* (Austin 48)

This has all of the classic elements of medieval pie recipes: minced meat is cooked in liquid and put into a crust along with spices, dried fruit, something sour (vinegar or verjuice), and some kind of binder (eggs or suet). This provides an excellent jumping-off point for recreating street pies. However, the specific ingredients of this pie are all typical of elite cuisine; I believe that some substitutions are appropriate:

- I have used beef for the meat. See comments above regarding urban meat consumption.
- The use of wine is dubious for this application. By the 14th/15th centuries, virtually all wine in England was imported and wine was typically expensive. You could substitute ale, or simply water.
- Imported spices were also generally quite expensive. By contrast, mustard was grown locally and was widely used in lower-class food. It will provide a similar heat as some of the spices suggested in this recipe.
- Dates and currants were both imported; cheaper, locally-grown fruits included cherries and plums, both of which are excellent in meat pies.

The recipe I used is as follows (yields 6 small pies):

Crust:

1.5 cups whole wheat pastry flour
1.5 cups unbleached all purpose flour
1.5 cups grated suet
1 tsp salt
2-4 T water

Cold method: Blend all ingredients except water in a food processor, or by hand using a pastry cutter. Add water slowly until mixture forms a ball. Divide into 6 small balls. Divide each ball into one large piece and one small piece. Roll out the large piece, then pinch into a pot-shape (this is easier to demonstrate than to explain; see this video from Hampton Court: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-SH7MBKPlc).

Hot method: Put flours and salt in a bowl and mix lightly. Heat suet and ¼ cup water on the stove or in the microwave until just boiling, then pour into the flour and mix well. Carefully knead the mixture. Divide into 6 small balls, and again divide each ball into a large and small piece. Mold the large piece over the bottom of a flour-dusted glass (I used a pint glass), then carefully remove it. Note: you will have to fill and seal each crust while it is still warm.

Filling:

1.5 lbs beef (chuck, "stew meat," etc.), minced fine or ground
½ cup dried cherries
1 tsp salt
1 tsp – 1 tbsp (depending on your tastes) wine vinegar or apple cider vinegar
2 tsp powdered mustard seed
2 eggs

Simmer the beef in ¼ to ½ cup water for 20-30 minutes. Mix the cooked beef, cherries, vinegar, mustard, and salt together and let cool. Add the eggs.

Fill each top crust with filling, then top with the top crust (brush the bottom of it with water or egg wash first), sealing the edges together. To make the top "ruffle," pinch the edges in between two fingers and a knuckle. Poke a hole in the top of each pie, and bake at 350°F for 45-50 minutes or until crusts brown.

Pescods:

These are simply peas in the pod, boiled and served with butter and salt.

Conclusion

There are some surprising parallels that can be drawn between medieval fast food consumption and modern fast food consumption. Medieval people generally viewed fast food as a kind of last resort of the unlucky – low-quality food prepared in dubious establishments by shady characters, unwholesome and unhealthy. Modern fast food establishments enjoy a similarly bad reputation; we are bombarded with messages about the fundamentally unhealthy nature of fast food, and yet fast food consumption continues to rise. When we look at who ate and eats fast food, a stark pattern emerges: convenient, prepared foods, however unhealthy, are still disproportionately consumed by those with few economic resources.

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