

Diet and Drink in the Middle Ages

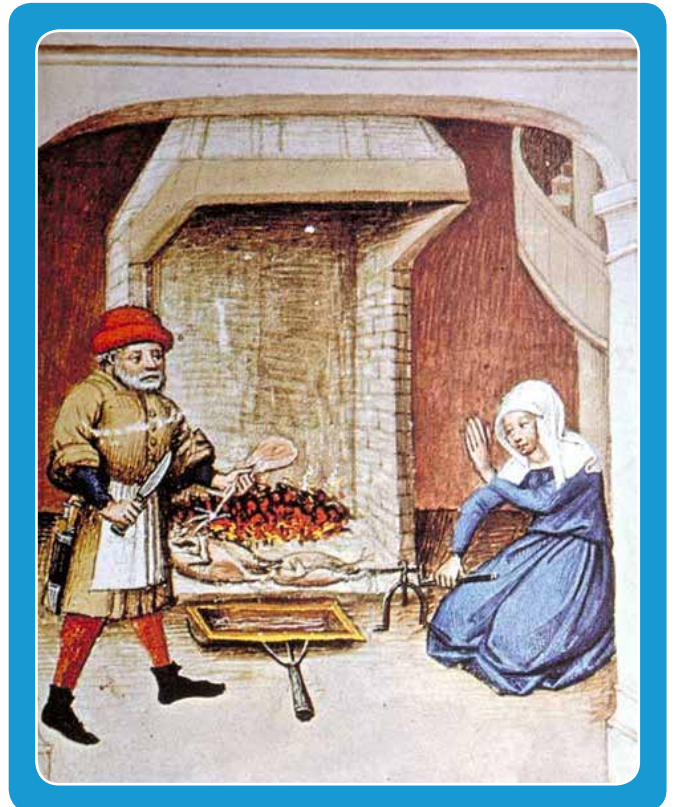
How do we know what people ate and drank in the Middle Ages? There won't be any food left lying around! The answer is quite simple - we rummage around in their bins!

Archaeologists digging around ancient sites look for the **midden** – the place where stale food and rubbish was thrown away. Seeds, animal bones, shells and pollen can tell us about the kinds of foods eaten by folk in the Middle Ages. We can also look for **account books** that show foods bought, traded and sold. **Books** written at the time might describe great feasts. That can tell us what luxury food people ate.

The Peasant Diet

Poorer people ate **grains** such as oats, along with **fruit** and **vegetables**. They liked **meat** when it was possible to get it. **Fish** was pickled, salted, smoked or dried. They ate **frumenty**, which was a wheat porridge made with milk and served with meat. They also ate **bannock**, a form of flat bread made from barley, oats, peas or beans.

Everyone would have kept a **cow** or **goat** in their home and had a garden to grow **fruit** and **vegetables** such as onions, leeks, apples, pear, berries, peas, beans, and leafy greens. **Berries** and **nuts** were collected. Animals went to the city to be slaughtered, so it was much easier to get meat if you lived in town.



A couple roasting poultry on a spit over an open fire, 1432.



Did you know?

After the Black Death which crossed Europe in the fourteenth century, a third of the population died. With fewer mouths to feed there was more food to go round and people did not go hungry nearly as much.

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A Rich Man's Diet

Wealthy people had many choices of things to eat and drink. The best cuts of **meat** went to the rich people. They drank **wine** from France and they enjoyed **pepper**, **spices** and other luxuries from the East. Those who could afford it would eat **white bread** made with refined wheat. The rich ate fresh **fish** and **pork** whilst the less well-off ate preserved versions of these meats – ham and bacon.



Did you know?

Most people in the Middle Ages ate with the seasons and they had rabbit in winter, lamb in spring and doves from April to November.

They Even Had Takeaway Shops!

In towns and cities it was not always possible for folk to cook for themselves. Living quarters were cramped and the poorest people did not have the facilities for baking and cooking. In larger cities such as London there might be a **public kitchen** selling warm meals to travellers and soldiers as well as those who could not afford their own hearth – an early form of the take-away!

The most impoverished people and lepers might receive food as alms at the gate of the monastery or at a hospital on the edge of the town or city. Meat considered unfit for sale at market might be given to lepers, presumably as it was held that as they were already diseased they would be unaffected by the rotten flesh.



The wealthy enjoyed a more varied diet. This illustration dates from 1475.



Medieval peasants eating and drinking outdoors, from 15th century.

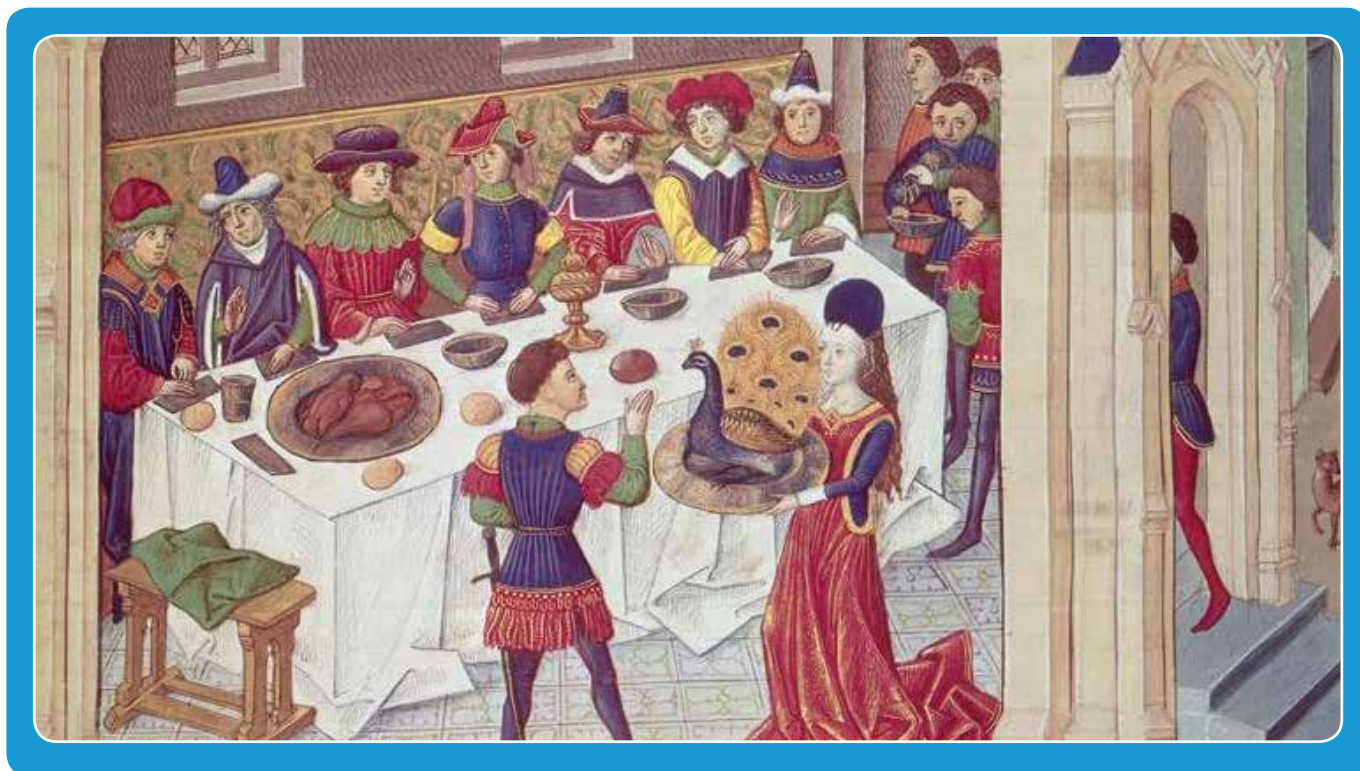
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Dining and Feasting

The **Church calendar** was important in telling people what to eat. For instance, during Lent meat was forbidden, so a variety of fish was eaten.

For the rich people, dining was a way to **entertain and impress**. Seating was arranged with the most important person placed to the right of the host. Everyone would face the highest ranking members of the party and turn their backs to those of lower rank. Each diner would bring their own knife and sharpen it against a whetstone at the entrance to the room; that's where we get the saying,

'to whet your appetite'. A variety of meats and fish would be offered to a guest. Meat was served on a trencher, a piece of bread or wood that soaked up the juices and could be given to the poor – or dogs – after the meal. Diners were expected to have **good manners**. They were warned not to place their elbows on the table, to chew with their mouth closed and not to pick their teeth at the table. Belching was allowed and even encouraged although diners were advised to look at the ceiling when doing so.



A medieval banquet, complete with peacock, mid 15th century.

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Drinking

Along with food, medieval men and women also enjoyed their **drink**. **Ale** was brewed by women and sold to taverns to help the family income. Ale was a popular drink because water was often unsafe to drink. It was brewed from barley and the final product was thick and often chewy.

Ale cunners - town officials who tasted the ale - set the prices for each tavern. The owner was forced to sell at those prices or face punishment. The ale cunner chalked the price outside each tavern so that the customers were not cheated.

Beer made from hops was introduced to England from the Netherlands in the late thirteenth century but was not widely drunk until the fifteenth century. It had a longer shelf life than ale and tasted nicer, but ale remained popular.

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Did you know?

Aqua vive or 'live water' was as a Highland brew made with local herbs - a bit like whisky.

In addition to drinking, **taverns** were the sites of **business meetings**; many agreements were made over a pint of ale. Ale lawings followed a verbal contract; these drinking parties solidified the agreement. Taverns were also used for enforcing the law. Often a local court would order a dispute to be resolved through a public apology and the sharing of a drink.



This monk tastes wine, stored in barrels in the monastery cellar, late 13th century.