

Food ideas: Medieval German recipes for the autumn

My cousin Ele recently sent me a compilation of German recipes from the Middle Ages whose title, loosely translated, is "How to keype a Tscherman manne's strength up". It gives a fascinating glimpse into how people ate in Europe 700-odd years ago.

In the Middle Ages, game was plentiful: not just deer and rabbit, but also animals like badgers, otters and bears. In contrast, spices were only beginning to be brought in from the Orient, and so were used only by the nobility. Peasants' daily staple food was oat, barley or millet porridge, interspersed with cabbages and turnips for much of the year, and other vegetables from their garden or wild foods like dandelion leaves when these were available.

People's diets were heavily curtailed by religious holidays which constrained the use of meat. For this reason, cooks became adept at cooking fish and making pseudo-meat dishes out of fish, not unlike our bean-burgers and nut roasts. Spoons, forks and plates were perceived as being for religious use and so not used in the home: people ate with knives and their hands, scooping things out of communal bowls or taking them from platters (I am not going to draw links to current times here...)

Ele's book does not provide recipes for all of the intriguing dishes that it alludes to, for instance millet gruel, beaver tail (which was treated as fish since it helps the beaver to swim, and so could be eaten on Fridays when meat couldn't), or pies with live birds inside. However it does include many tasty ideas. Below is a winter menu to allow you to replicate the dinner of a Medieval German noble family, should you wish:

Baked onions (from the monks of Lake Tegern): Peel 600g of onions, and cut into 1 centimetre thick slices. Melt 40g butter, stir in 1 tablespoon of honey, add the onion slices and cook briefly. Add half a cupful of white wine, cover, and let cook for 10 minutes. Add 4 tablespoons of cream, salt and pepper to taste, sprinkle with chopped herbs and serve.

Chicken with cinnamon sauce (from the French chef Taillevent (c. 1315 - 1395), whose recipes were also used in the German courts): Mix together 75grams of ground almonds, 1 tablespoon cinnamon, a pinch each of grated/powdered ginger, cloves and cardamom, the juice of half a lemon and a cupful of bouillon, and cook gently until the sauce thickens into a creamy paste. Cut 600 grams of chicken breast into bite-sized chunks. Dip into a bowl of flour which contains some salt and pepper. Fry gently in lard until golden, arrange on a plate, and cover with the sauce.

'Nun farts' (from the 15C 'Mondseer Kochbuch'): Beat together 2 eggs, 1 egg white and 2 teaspoons of honey. Stir in 50g ground almonds, 100g of flour and a pinch of salt. Knead together into a firm dough and let sit, covered (I would use a plastic bag rather than whatever they used in Medieval times), for 30 minutes. Roll the dough out about half an inch thick. Cut into 2 inch squares and fry these in oil in a shallow pan until golden. Remove any excess oil and eat with jam or a fruit sauce.