

# Practical Foodservice in the Middle Ages

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A note on modern, quality foodservice: Quality foodservice includes a number of people (at different levels) doing a number of different tasks. General (good) foodservice in today's society includes at minimum a facility manager, assistant managers, head cooks or chefs, cooks, general food prep help, wait staff, and cleaning staff. Everyone has a specific job that they were trained to do, and all the pieces work together to make a whole.

Food service in period (in a noble's house) worked much the same way but on a generally larger scale (depending on the situation). There are far more many dishes per course then. The “managers” were also responsible for keeping track of multiple operations spread across multiple buildings, including the dairy, brewhouses, and farm production.

An additional note: Personally I find it difficult to wrap my brain around the awesome production that went on in period kitchens. Many of us have modernly worked in foodservice, either professionally or in the SCA. Think about these experiences and take away the electricity, thermometers, and gas stoves, plus add a dairy, a brewhouse, and possibly another operation or two.

## **How period foodservice worked:**

Household operations were highly organized and routine oriented. There were a number of workers, and each had a job to do. Depending on the size of the house/rank of the lord, there were a number of organized operations that all supported each other.

Foodservice can be broken down into a few major components: Money, management and staff, food, preparation, and service.

## **Money:**

-Money truly does make the world go round, and this is a fact that still is and probably always will be the same.

-The office of exchequers was ultimately in charge of the whole operation. The physical office was generally located near the main gate of the house or castle in order to easily receive and record taxes and collections paid to the noble of the castle. This information was carefully logged and compiled daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly.

-Items bought with this money were carefully inspected upon arrival, and logged for any discrepancies.

## **Management and Staff**

-Cofferer was ultimately in charge of all financial affairs in the household. He had a number of clerks working under him who were responsible for accounts, food purchasing, inventory, and kitchen oversight.

-General foodservice staff included the head/master cook, those in charge of the various food operations and their staff, and the various stations of waitstaff.

## **Food**

- Houses contained many areas for food storage to keep food (especially through the winter months).
- Storage facilities were generally kept in cool dry basements for grains, butter, dried fish, etc.
- Non-perishables were bought at various times per year, these items included grains, spices, fuel, etc.
- Perishable items were bought fresh daily. The quality of these items were inspected upon arrival and returned if found unacceptable. These items might include meat, fresh fish, dairy, and produce.
- An inventory was kept updated at all times.
- Food and fuel was rationed out and recorded on a daily basis.

## **Preparation**

### House Layouts

- Manors and castles were architecturally designed to easily accommodate the flow of the daily activity in the house. Foodservice was the highest items of importance when considering the design of a manor. See Images A and B
- Rooms/locations generally included the counting house, beer and wine cellars, fuel storage areas, a well, a larder, a bake house, brewhouse, boiling house, buttery, pantry, kitchens, dairies, and food storage areas.
- Layouts were in a systematic order, working, from kitchens to pantries to the hall or chambers. The bakehouses and brewhouses were located “behind” the kitchen, and depending on the century, were removed from the beginning.

### Counting House

- Main offices of the house including the exchequer offices. Management was able to control everything from these offices, as they were centrally located.

### Bakehouse/Pastry

- These may have been one large room, or two separate rooms connected to each other
- Bread was made daily in the bake house
- Pies and pastries were made in the pastry and then cooked in the ovens, after the bread was baked.
- The ovens of the bake house were very specifically designed to accommodate a large amount of bread for the house. The base of these ovens was generally about 2-3 feet off the ground, allowing the baker to more easily tend to the oven. Fires were made inside the oven to heat it. They were removed and the ashes cleaned out when the oven was determined hot enough. See Image C
- Bread yeast was generally acquired by either using the head of ales and beers from the brewhouse, or from a sourdough.

### Brewhouse

- Brewhouses were located near the bakehouse.
- Heat from the bread ovens allowed the yeasts to activate.
- Yeasts for brews was recycled from one batch to another.

-Some brewhouses had areas to make the own malt for brewing, including areas to germinate, dry, and grind the grain.

#### Larder

-Meat was hung, inspected, and cut into messes to serve 4 people (about 2 lbs of meat each).

-Fats were removed to be used for cooking or rendered for candles.

#### Boiling House

-Boiling house was also generally in the same location as the baking and brewing houses.

-Messes of meat were boiled to be cooked. (This is was most efficient way of cooking large amounts of meat quickly.

-Dried fish was re-hydrated in the boiling house.

-Cauldron furnaces were fueled by wood.

-Cauldrons were very large cast pots, made from copper and lead. Some were able to hang over fires, while others were so large the needed to be filled and emptied while stationary.

-Large furnaces with cauldrons often had a raised platform for the cook to use to cook the food.

#### Kitchen

-The kitchen took care of the roasting of meat, as well as other general preparations.

-Roasting fires were generally heated with charcoal.

-Kitchens were designed to make the most use of daylight as possible, and also used a number of candles to light the kitchen.

#### Buttery/Pantry

-These are what we would generally consider to be staging areas or wait-stations.

The pantry held all plate wear and cupboards.

-Food could be easily passed into the buttery for service, without staff having to walk into different rooms.

#### Great Hall

-Most servants/house workers ate in the feast hall (manor cafeteria)

-The feast hall was also used for great feasts on holidays or days of celebration.

-The hall was well let and attractive, with tapestries on the walls.

#### Private Chambers

-In the high middle ages we see the lords eating away from the servants, in their own private chambers. A table is set up in the chamber for the lord, and possibly the rest of his family.

### Service

#### House Workers

-House workers received their meals in a cafeteria style, under the supervision of managers who dished out their rations.

#### Lords and Feasts

-Feasts and private meals were served in a very regulated, specific way. Many people were required to serve even just a few people. Tables were covered and laid out in specific ways. Guests washed their hands before eating. Food was brought out and displayed to the lord, and then cut for him into bite sized pieces and laid on a trencher so he could eat it with his fingers. These tasks were performed by butlers, ushers, carvers, and chamberlains.

## Health and Sanitation

- Kitchens were supplied with fresh water from local wells, or from collected rainwater.
- Kitchens would very often boil their well water to make it potable.
- These kitchens were designed with basic plumbing in them. Water was carried and dispensed into basins through lead pipes. The water could be drained from the basins if necessary.
- There were a number of health and sanitation regulations in place in the Middle Ages.
- Meat was ensured to be cooked by boiling it and then roasting it over a fire or baking it.

## References

- Brears, Peter. *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*. London, 2008.  
 Brears, Peter. *Boke of Keruynge (by Wynkyn de Worde)*. London, 2003.  
 Flandrin, Jean-Louis. *Arranging the Meal: A History of Table Service in France*. 2007.  
 Scully, Terence. *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge, 1995.

## Appendices - Images

Images from *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*.

Image A

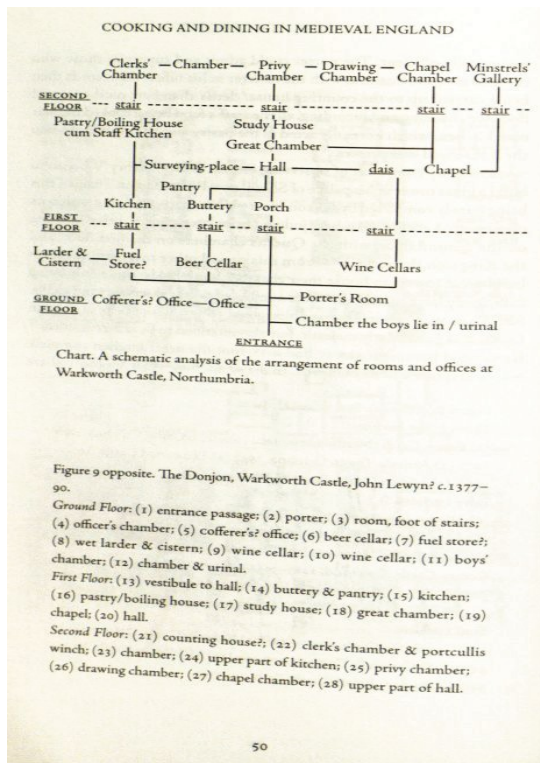


Image B

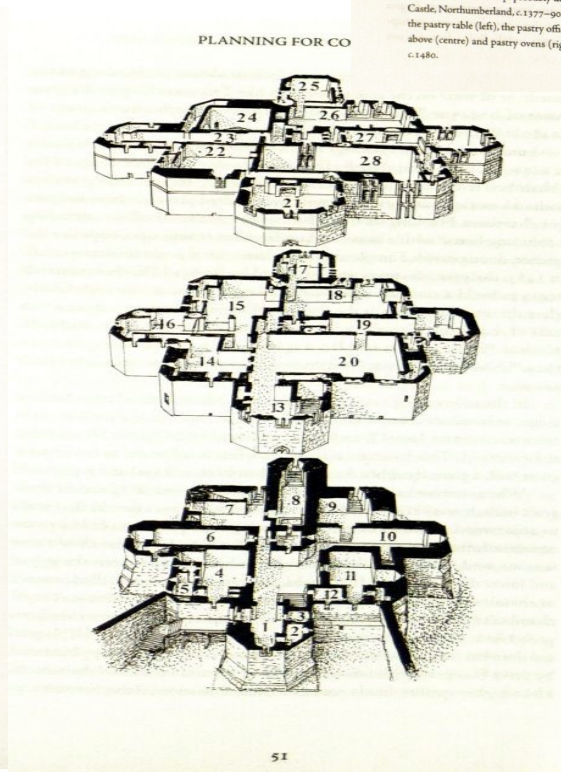


Image C

