

Primary and Secondary Sources on Feasts in Medieval Europe

Wealthy households in the Middle Ages were the scene of elaborate dinners that took servants many hours to prepare. "Dinner" was traditionally served between 10 a.m. and noon, leaving the afternoon for singing, dancing, and playing games.

- In the (castle) **kitchen** the cook and his staff turned the meat—pork, beef, mutton, game—on a spit and prepared stews and soups in great iron cauldrons hung over the fire on a hook and chain. (LMC, p. 111)
- The lord's kitchen was a scene of great activity when preparations for a feast were in progress. Many servants were needed to cook and serve the food. **Beggars** crowded at the kitchen doorway to ask for scraps from the lord's table. Sometimes, a charitable lady or steward would provide specially cooked soup or porridge for the poor people outside. (MAEL, p. 117)
- The wealthy could afford to eat a variety of **foods**: plenty of meat, as well as expensive imported luxuries such as sugar, raisins, and wine. Instead of plates, they used large slices of rather stale bread. At the end of the meal, these were gathered up and given to the poor, along with other left overs. (MAEL, p. 16)
- Ordinary people had to make do with very simple food. They ate lots of dark, coarse bread, some cheese and eggs, and vegetables from their own gardens, such as leeks, beans, onions and cabbages. They often made a thick warming soup called "pottage" from dried peas. Some families kept a pig which they killed in the autumn. Unlike the rich, the poor could not afford large quantities of salt and spices to preserve meat. . .Rotten meat and mouldy grain often led to sickness. Water, too, could carry disease, as there was no piped water supply. (MAEL, p. 17)
- At (castle) mealtimes **servants** set up tables and spread cloths, setting steel knives, silver spoons, **dishes** for salt, silver cups, and mazers—shallow silver-rimmed wooden bowls...Meals were announced by a horn blown to signal time for washing hands. Servants with ewers, basins, and towels attended the guests. (LMC, p.114)

- “At feasts...guests are seated with the lord in the chief place of the board (table), and they sit not down at the board before [they] wash their hands. Children are sat in their place, and servants at a table by themselves. First knives, spoons and salt are set on the board, and then bread and drink and many different dishes. Household servants busily help each other to everything diligently, and talk merrily together. The guests are gladdened with lutes and harps. Now wine and dishes of meat are brought forth and despatched. At the last cometh fruit and spices, and then they have eaten, board cloths and scraps are borne away, and guest wash and wipe their hands again. Then graces are said and guests thank the Lord. Then for gladness and comfort drink is brought yet again....”(LMC, p. 145)
- After **grace**, the procession of servants bearing food began. First came the (server from the pantry) with the bread and butter, followed by the butler and his assistants with the wine and beer. (LMC, p. 115)
- “The wine is turned sour or mouldy-thick, greasy, stale, flat and smacking of pitch. I have sometimes seen even great lords served with wine so muddy that a man must needs close his eyes and clench his teeth, wry-mouthed and shuddering, and filtering the stuff rather than drinking.” (letter from Peter of Blois, LMC, p. 115)
- **Ceremony** marked the service at the table. There was a correct way to do everything, from the laying of the cloths to the cutting of trenchers (bread for plates) and carving of meat. Part of a squire’s training was learning how to serve his lord at meals. (LMC, p. 115)
- The solid parts of soups and stews were eaten with a spoon, the broth sipped. Meat was cut up with the knife and eaten with the fingers. Two persons shared a dish, the lesser helping the more important, the younger the older, the man the woman...stress was laid on keeping hands and nails scrupulously clean, wiping spoon and knife after each use, wiping the mouth before drinking. (LMC, p. 116)
- During dinner, even on ordinary days, **entertainment** was part of the feast. The party might be entertained with music or jokes or stories. Many (castle) households regularly employed harpers and minstrels...When the meal was over one of the guests might regale the company with a song. Many a knight and baron composed songs. (LMC, p. 118)

- “I shall sing to cheer my heart, for fear lest I die of my great grief...when I see none return from that wild land where he is who brings comfort to my heart when I hear news of him...for the Saracens (desert nomads from Arabia) are evil.” (translated song of the Crusade by thirteenth century troubador Guiot de Dijon, LMC, p. 119)
- “When I see winter return, then would I find lodging, if I could discover a generous host who would charge me nothing, who would have pork and beef and mutton, ducks, pheasants, and venison, fat hens, and good cheese in baskets.” (translation of song by poet Colin Muset, LMC, p. 120)
- Besides music, other entertainment was provided at these dinners by **jugglers**...who went through acrobatic feats...balancing weights on long poles, tossing up balls, exhibiting trained bears...a similar sort of entertainment was provided by the “fool” of the castle, for kings and wealthy men were in the habit of keeping a jester who was known by that name. He often wore a cap and bells or a costume half one color and half another, or even shaved half his hair and half his beard to suit the rather crude ideas of what was comical. (WKWB, p. 95)
- “The ladies and the bachelors danced and sang caroles after dinner.” (from The Castellan of Coucy, LMC, p. 120)
- A carole was a kind of round **dance** in which the dancers joined hands and sang as they circled. (LMC, p. 121)
- Guests could be entertained with **parlor games** such as hot cockles, in which one player knelt blindfolded and was struck by the other players, whose identity he had to guess, or...hoodman blind, in which a player reversed his hood to cover his face and tried to catch the others. (LMC, p. 121)
- “After dinner there were wine, apples and ginger; some played backgammon and chess, others went to snare falcons.” (from The Castellan of Coucy, LMC, p. 120)