

## Luxury Dining in the Middle Ages

Paul Freedman

From the Middle Ages there is no amateur, let alone scholarly, discourse about cuisine. We lack, for example, an equivalent to the treatise by the Emperor Frederick II on hunting with falcons. What European prince or intellectual ever discussed how to roast swans or what sauce should accompany eels? Only in 1470 with Bartolomeo Sacchi, who wrote under the name of Platina, do we find a learned disquisition on the delights of cuisine, entitled *De honeste voluptate et valetudine* (*On Right Dining and Good Pleasure*) (Platina). While many sources of information for medieval banquets have survived, from chronicle descriptions to household accounts of expenditures and, of course, cookbooks, there is little meditation on the significance of food beyond survival for the poor and ostentation for the wealthy. That does not mean that it is impossible to understand the social meaning of food, but rather, as with so many answers to questions we have about the Middle Ages, that one has to extrapolate from miscellaneous source material to determine what constituted medieval taste.

My primary motive to study culinary history originated from a concern with class and prestige, particularly the attributes of cuisine that signified wealth and high social status. I am also interested in taste according to both of its two English meanings: the oral sense, and taste as an aesthetic opinion. I want to show how luxury dining expressed ideas of high social standing and reflected a culinary outlook.

Considerable progress had been made in recent decades to understand what people who had some choice in the matter ate at different times in the past. Historians began with an essentially anthropological approach to the ceremony and social hierarchy of meals, but more recently have devoted attention to recipes

and techniques. Scholars such as Bruno Laurioux, Constance Hieatt, Terence Scully, Massimo Montanari, and Jean-Louis Flandrin integrated cuisine into the history of material and popular culture.

Their studies have succeeded in destroying several clichés about medieval gastronomy. It turns out that Marco Polo did not bring pasta from China to Europe; spices were not used to mask the taste of spoiled meat; medieval table manners were not crude but rather elegant and rule bound. Medieval preferences were quite different from those of modern Europe where culinary tastes began to shift in the seventeenth century. The thin sharp sauces, highly spiced flavors and sweet and sour effects of the Middle Ages are alien to modern European sensibilities (Laurioux, “Histoire” 71-72).

Our sources of information include the recipes from some 150 cookbook manuscripts that survive from the thirteenth through fifteenth century. Recently what seems to be the oldest purely gastronomic (as opposed to medical) recipe collection has been discovered, a short set of sauce instructions datable to between 1150 and 1175 under the rubric *Salsamenta pictavensia* (sauces purporting to be from the French province of Poitou). The ten *Salsamenta* recipes are in a manuscript that belonged to Durham Cathedral priory and is now in the library of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge (Wallis and Gaspar).

Based mostly on cookbooks, I shall elaborate on what I see as the chief characteristics of high-end gastronomy in the Middle Ages. Those culinary assumptions endured for at least a century after 1500, thus encompassing the Renaissance. Although the Italian elite of the fifteenth century innovated by paying attention to previously ignored salads, cheese, and melons, for the rest, they perfected medieval showiness and artifice into even more splendid and, to our way of thinking, bizarre forms.

The medieval aristocracy preferred meat to all other foods. Game was important, but not to the degree often thought, and most of the wild animals consumed were birds rather than mammals. Noble and princely tables offered little in the way of vegetables or dairy products since these were associated with the diet of peasants. Only a few cheeses (and only toward the end of the medieval period) possessed any prestige (Laurioux, “Du bréhémont”). Because of fasting regulations, Christians frequently had to observe days for which meat was prohibited, so that fish was consumed in great quantities. Seldom was fish served on meat days so that given a choice, upper-class diners preferred meat. Within the second-class category of fish, large and rare species such as sturgeon enjoyed considerable esteem. Monasteries, at least in theory, banned meat, but for the laity and secular clergy the number of fast days in a year depended on one’s level

of piety and on diocesan regulations. Fridays, Lent, Advent, and other mandatory fasts constituted a minimum of about ninety days of abstinence per year. For those who added minor festivals, saints' commemorations, and vigils, the total could reach more than double that figure. Fish and other fasting dishes are therefore heavily represented in medieval cookbooks.

I will later discuss two medieval delicacies, lamprey and peacock, one fast and one meat dish. Their symbolic prestige resembles that of birds' nest soup in Chinese cuisine or caviar in twentieth-century European gastronomy: conventional signals of distinction functioning as almost *required* indications of rank and standing.

In general, aristocratic cuisine of the Middle Ages was elaborate, and little interest was directed toward highlighting the natural character of basic ingredients. True, certain foods were prepared simply—game birds were roasted and served with salt—but for the most part the medieval preference was for complexity and a spectrum of flavors. Medieval cuisine conforms to what Massimo Montanari has called an *analytic* as opposed to a *synthetic* style (Montanari 10-11). Analytic means that flavors are distinct, the goal being to intensify rather than cover the taste of lamb, pork, fish, vegetables or whatever is the primary product. In the modern European analytic regime, sauces are supposed to enhance or complement, and many classic French sauces rely on the essence or distillation of the meat or fish itself. European and American preferences are for “analytical” distinction, the meat with a dominant taste separated both physically and conceptually from vegetables and starches.

The opposite, synthetic cuisine, describes medieval high-end taste opinion, but also applies to the food of modern India or Mexico characterized by a spectrum of multiple flavors. The basic ingredient is less important than the sauce. Vindaloo curry as made in Goa or fish curry from Kerala are very different despite the misleading use of the general term *curry*, and neither the pork nor the fish stands out in contrast to the sauce. Similarly, for medieval food, meat was often highly processed so that many recipes call for boiling, then roasting, then cutting up or grinding the meat which was supposed to make the result blend better with sauces. It is appropriate that the oldest recipes, those given in the *Salsamenta pictavensia*, should be for sauces because creating and executing them was how a chef was judged. Their complexity did not so much complement what the sauces were served with as identify the dish in the first place.

The cuisine of the medieval upper classes was based above all on artifice. Surprise, novelty, and beauty were exalted as opposed to simplicity or naturalness. The medieval synthetic imagination resembles twenty-first-century “molecular

gastronomy” more than the restrained ethos of the Slow Food or farm-to-table movements. In keeping with the cult of artifice, *trompe l’oeil* (making one food look like another) was all the rage. A dish called “green apples” was formed out of ground meat covered with a parsley glaze and shaped to look like green apples; “eggs in Lent,” made with almond milk, aspic, and the “yolk” colored with saffron, not only mimicked the look of eggs but counterfeited a food prohibited for that time of the liturgical year. The so-called *Neapolitan Recipe Collection* (dating from the second half of the fifteenth century) devotes a section to “Gastronomical Marvels” (*mirabilia gule*), which includes cooked animals redressed so as to seem alive, fire-breathing roasted animal and boneless birds (*Neapolitan Recipe Collection* 57-59).

High-end food of the Middle Ages was colorful; red and gold were most highly regarded. Texture was also important so that aspic, for example, with its delightfully slippery gelatinous quality was prized. Aspic was prestigious, combining as it did color (it could be dyed any hue), texture appeal, and difficulty of execution. Anyone can make cloudy aspic, but before the invention of artificial gelatin in the late nineteenth century, it was challenging to get aspic prepared using animal cartilage to be brilliant and transparent.

The Middle Ages has a merited reputation for ponderous ceremonial style, love of ostentation, and complexity. The early fifteenth-century cookbook by Master Chiquart, chef to the Duke of Savoy, features a restorative broth made by boiling chicken with jewels and gold in a special glass container. Chiquart also offers an edible castle with four towers. In front of one tower is a pike cooked three ways and in three colors (the fish remains whole, but the tail is fried, the middle boiled, the head roasted), and each section is served with a different colored sauce. At the base of the other three towers are a glazed piglet, a skinned, cooked and redressed swan, and a boar’s head (Chiquart 137-46).

Probably the best-known characteristic of medieval prestige dining is the extensive use of spices. Spices also characterize modern synthetic cuisines such as those of Thailand or Ethiopia. I will not expatiate on spices since I have written about them elsewhere, but suffice it to say that they were a mark of upper-class taste, that recipe collections include many varieties and that they appeared throughout the meal (Freedman). Something on the order of 75% of medieval recipes require spices (Lauriou, “De l’usage” 16-17). The passion for aromatic ingredients is all the more notable given the modern European abandonment of almost all spices except for their modest presence in desserts.

Contrary to what one might expect, beef was not among the more prestigious kinds of meat. Neither at great feasts is there much in the way of preserved

products such as sausage, salt pork or cod, associated as they were with moderately prosperous townspeople. A few things such as chicken and herring were consumed by all classes, but as is usually the case in hierarchical societies, the food of the rich and the poor differed greatly not just in quantity but in terms of fundamental tastes.

Medieval cuisine was not divided simply into a gorgeous vulgarity consumed exclusively by a tiny aristocratic minority and the subsistence porridges of the peasantry. One of the largest recipe collections comes from the book known as the *Ménagier de Paris*. The complete work, assembled in the 1390s by a wealthy but non-noble townsman for his young wife, consists of edifying stories, proverbial wisdom, and approximately 380 recipes (*Ménagier*).<sup>1</sup>

The author of the *Ménagier* mentions money-saving ideas, such as flavoring mustard with spices already used to make aromatic wine (*hippocras*), but he is by no means consistently frugal. His menu suggestions for celebrations are less grandiose than those of the court, but there is an impressive quantity and diversity of food and the same omnipresence of spices. “One must know spices,” he instructs his wife. He distinguishes two kinds of ginger, four kinds of pepper, and considers as culinary necessities rare imports such as galangal, nutmeg, cloves, grains of Paradise, and zedoary. In evaluating prestige cuisines, it is important to see how far down the social scale their precepts are imitated. For example, pepper, originally an aristocratic condiment, would eventually become so common that in the fifteenth century it was derisively associated with peasants (Freedman 43).

A salient feature of medieval gastronomy is a concern with health and medicine, both what might be called the negative lore of dangerous ingredients and the positive identification of beneficial foods. Notions of dietary complementarity and opposition are found in many traditional cultures. In medieval Europe, health as well as personality were thought to be governed by the interaction of four bodily fluids or “humors”: blood, bile (or yellow bile), black bile, and phlegm. If these were unbalanced, that is, if one predominated too much, the result was susceptibility to disease as well as mood or personality disorders.

Edible items were thought to possess qualities of heat, moistness, cold, and aridity. When digested, food affected the humors and so conferred internal equilibrium if consumed wisely or contributed to imbalance and illness if not (Scully 41-86). Other factors influenced health such as sleep, exercise, and climate, but according to Greek and Arab physicians whose works were translated and adopted as authoritative by Western Europe, food has the most direct impact on

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed summary of its contents is given in Crossley-Holland, *Living and Dining in Medieval Paris*. On the *Ménagier* recipes in relation to other cookbooks, see Lauriou, *Le règne de Taillevent* 117-58.

well-being and humoral balance. Beginning in the thirteenth century hundreds of tracts on maintaining good health appeared (typically bearing titles such as *regimen sanitatis*), and they emphasized diet more than any other factor, so much so that they merit being considered simply food and health manuals (Nicoud 7).

Meat, spices, artifice, color, *trompe l'oeil*, periods of fasting, and humoral physiology—these are all characteristics of medieval aristocratic dining. They are alien to the modern French-derived culinary aesthetic. The new gastronomic fashion dispensed with spices and emphasized natural tastes even of modest ingredients such as vegetables. In *Les délices de la campagne* (1654), Nicolas de Bonnefons ordained “Let a cabbage soup smell and taste entirely of cabbage . . .” (Revel 150-51). Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chefs dismissed much of what had been considered elegant dining in the Middle Ages as vulgar, childish, even as “Arab.”

Having presented these generalizations, I would like to consider lamprey and peacock as examples of prestigious cuisine, chosen because they indicate concepts of desirability according to medieval tastes and demonstrate ideas surrounding fine dining in the period.

Lamprey is a fish according to modern scientific classification, but it looks more like an eel than a finned fish. A cylindrical creature with a circle of teeth at its front end, the lamprey lives on prey that it attaches itself to, sucking out the blood and flesh. It comprises a unique zoological class known as *Hyperoartia* although there were once other members of this taxonomy as fossils attest. It can be up to a meter in length. Like eels, lampreys migrate from rivers to the sea and back to fresh waters to spawn and die. They must be caught just prior to spawning, and their brief season varies with latitude, thus February in Iberia and April in southwestern France. Lamprey is no longer eaten in most of Europe except for northern Portugal, northwestern Spain (Galicia), and the area around Bordeaux and the Gironde River.

Lamprey was a delicacy in the Hellenistic and Roman world, its cult satirized by Horace and praised in the third-century *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus. A truly impressive lamprey was so long that it extended over the edges of the table. Lamprey’s prominence was enhanced in the Christian Middle Ages because the religious dietary laws placed it, along with dolphin and whale, in the category of fish, hence acceptable for fasting days. A feature of lamprey, that I can attest to from my one experience eating it in Bordeaux, is that it tastes like meat. Not only like meat, but very much like beef or venison.

Given a dietary regime requiring frequent abstinence from meat, one can understand why lamprey was so much in vogue. Highly regarded, lamprey was

also dangerous because of its humoral properties, cold and moist in the fourth degree. Additionally, lampreys and eels were thought to be potentially poisonous because they resemble snakes. The fourteenth-century physician Maino de Maineri noted that lamprey is perilous even if it is delicious (*valde periculosus quamvis sit ori saporiosus*) (*The Neapolitan Recipe Collection* 171-72). King Henry I of England was supposed to have fallen victim to his inordinate love of lamprey. According to the chronicler Henry of Huntington, the royal physician told the king to stay away from this delicacy, but he persisted despite unpleasant experiences after eating it previously and died after a last dinner featuring lamprey (Henry of Huntington 490).

This association of threatening and desirable is found in many cultures: fungi in Europe or the Japanese fugu fish. In order to reduce its humoral threat, the lamprey, according to medieval medical authorities, should be cooked with spices, especially black pepper, which is extremely hot and dry. If anything, danger added to the value of lamprey, already substantial because of its short season, difficulty of capture, strangeness, and resemblance to meat.

Medical advice was not always followed, judging from the many ways cookbooks suggest for preparing lamprey that do not emphasize pepper. Insofar as recipes involve spices, it is because almost everything included aromatics. The *Viandier*, the most widely circulated cookbook in medieval Europe, has two methods for cooking lamprey. This fourteenth-century compendium was attributed to the French royal chef Taillevent (1320-1395) although much of the text antedates his years of service. According to the *Viandier*, lamprey should be killed by being bled, here specifically from the mouth. As is the case with modern recipes, the lamprey's blood is used for the sauce. In the first *Viandier* recipe, the lamprey is scalded and then roasted on a spit. An accompanying sauce starts with spices and vinegar, to which the blood and burnt toast (as a thickener) are added.

The second *Viandier* recipe is for lamprey in galantine. Here it is cooked in a mixture of vinegar, wine, and water which, when cool, is thickened with blood and toast. Spices are added and the liquid becomes gelatin (Taillevent 130-34). A late fourteenth-century English recipe calls for the lamprey to be baked or roasted in pastry, served in jellied sauce or with the galantine on the side. Other English recipes more closely resemble the French style set down in the *Viandier* (Hieatt and Butler 75, 88, 127-28).

The Catalan *Llibre de Sent Soví* (which dates from 1324—no one knows what “*Sent Soví*” means) includes a recipe for lamprey baked in a *panada*, the ancestor of the modern *empanada*, whose small form, a stuffed turnover (technically an *empandilla*), is now a global snack (*Llibre de Sent Soví* 220-23). The lamprey

should be coiled within the pastry which would therefore have to be larger than the casing for the modern empanada. Alternatives (found in related Catalan recipe collections) are to spit-roast lamprey or bake it in a casserole (*Llibre d'aparellar de menjar* 322-23; *Llibre de totes maneres de potatges* 254-55).

A later cookbook in Catalan, from sometime before 1491 (and printed in 1520) is entitled *Llibre del Coc* (more or less “Cookbook”) and here we know the name of the author, Master Robert of Nola, chef to the king of Naples, ruled at the time by a branch of the Aragonese-Catalan monarchy. Robert’s *panada de lampresa* is not all that different from the earlier Catalan models, but the recipe is more detailed. It concludes that the *panada* is best when served cold, but then gives a sauce recipe to be used only with hot lamprey pastries (Mestre Robert 372-75).

An entry in *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection* instructs that the cook should place the lamprey in oil, verjuice (the liquid from crushed unripe grapes), and wine and then bake it on hot coals. The accompanying sauce is made with ground walnuts, toast, raisins, and spices, and then moistened with verjuice or another appropriate liquid. The lamprey’s blood is to be saved for the sauce. This recipe suggests putting half a nutmeg in the animal’s mouth and cloves in the ears, a serving suggestion that was already canonical. An alternative is spit roasting, and, in keeping with established tradition, the author regards the blood with such culinary reverence that he recommends setting a container over the fire be used to save the blood and fat produced as the lamprey turns on the spit, for these drippings are its essence (*Neapolitan Recipe Collection* 88).

Lamprey was quite expensive. Francesc Eiximenis, a Catalan didactic moralist of the fourteenth century, recounts a factually dubious but gastronomically intriguing story about a dinner that King Louis IX of France gave to the holy and learned Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (Eiximenis 239). As the plates were cleared, the king remarked, “Brother Bonaventure, you should know that you have just eaten lamprey at my table, valued at one gold franc. Does that seem appropriate food for a poor friar?” Bonaventure calmly answered that a member of his Order ought never be curious about what he is eating but rather should simply consume it for the love of God. Bonaventure put the king in his place by saying “I would as happily have eaten a salted sardine as that lamprey if that is what you had given me.” The cynical and slightly mean-spirited host in this exemplum hardly resembles the humble and abstemious Saint Louis of legend. A more accurate or at least reverential authority, Guillaume de Saint-Perthus, tells us that King Louis was accustomed to giving away large and expensive fish to the poor and contented himself with humble mixed seafood stews or soups (Guillaume de Saint-Perthus 120).



Peacock enjoyed as great a renown among meat-day possibilities as lamprey did for fasting times. All large birds were prestigious, especially those that were colorful, like mallard ducks or pheasants, but so were very small species, such as larks or plovers which were roasted and eaten whole. Peacocks were raised domestically, and the author of the *Ménagier de Paris* offers advice on how to nurture peacock chicks (*Ménagier* 273-74). At the palace of the kings of Majorca in Perpignan, peacocks walked in the urban castle's precincts and sometimes escaped into the town, provoking a number of incidents such as boys throwing stones and killing them (Catafau 165). The male's gorgeous plumage conferred on peacocks their distinction, and they have been admired in many other cultures besides that of medieval Europe.

In the classical tradition, the peacock was a symbol of immortality because its flesh was supposed to be incorruptible. Peacocks are prominent as sculpted ornaments for Roman Christian as well as pagan sarcophagi, and in medieval manuscript art, especially in bestiaries. In *The City of God* (XXI.4), St. Augustine recalls a dinner in Carthage at which he was served roast peacock. He saved some of the breast meat in order to see if it was indeed immune from deterioration. After thirty days there was no change, and even after a year, the slices, although dried out and a bit shriveled, had not putrefied.

The peacock had a late-medieval role as a bird on which oaths were taken. The French courtly poem *Les vœux du paon* (*The Vows of the Peacock*), written in 1312-1313 by Jacques de Longuyon, takes its title from a roast peacock that serves as a guarantor for solemn promises. The host, King Cassamus of Larris, goes first, swearing on the peacock that if his enemy King Clarus of India should fall from his horse, he, Cassamus, will help him remount and then will withdraw from the field. The work is most famous for an excursus that invents the "Nine Worthies" theme, chivalric heroes, three each from among pagans, Jews, and Christians, destined to become an endlessly repeated literary and artistic topic of the later Middle Ages (Grigsby).

As an example of life imitating art, the chivalric *Vœux du paon* inspired a number of events at which those assembled were exhorted to swear on a peacock or another prestigious fowl to fulfill vows such as going on crusade. The most famous example is the Vow of the Pheasant, a banquet organized for crusading purposes by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in 1454 to recruit knights to take back Constantinople from the Turks, who had conquered it the year before (Caron).<sup>2</sup> The fact that nothing resulted from the extravagant gestures did

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<sup>2</sup> There is also a poem about the origins of the Hundred Years' War, *The Vows of the Heron* (*Les Vœux du*

nothing to dim the attractiveness of the event.

Unlike lamprey, peacock was not challenging to cook, nor did it generate as many different recipes. As with all large birds, the preferred manner of preparation was roasting, usually on a spit. Sometimes the carcass was stuffed, but often not. An aspect of *trompe l'oeil* ostentation was for peacocks and other birds with colorful plumage to be carefully skinned, and then, once cooked, the skin and feathers were sewn back and the bird was served in such a way as to look alive. This was fairly complicated. The *Neapolitan Recipe Collection* gives detailed instructions for dressing a peacock in its feathers “so that when it is cooked, it appears to be alive and spews fire from its beak.” In order to create the fire-breathing effect, camphor is supplemented by distilled alcohol (*aqua vitae*) or strong wine to soak cotton wool which is then lit (*Neapolitan Recipe Collection* 58-59). The French *Viandier* provides a brief recipe for cooking peacock, but devotes more lengthy instructions about how to place wooden sticks to hold up its tail and spread it out in display. Some manuscripts of the *Viandier* mention the meat’s incorruptibility (*Viandier* 102-03, 268-69).

More elaborate and varied was the sauce to complement the peacock. While the English *Forme of Cury* and related manuscripts recommend simply eating it with ginger (Hieatt and Butler 62, 86, 152), the Catalan tradition is considerably more ambitious. The very first recipe in the *Llibre de Sent Soví* is a complicated “sauce for peacocks” made with chicken broth, onions fried with chicken innards and salt pork, almond milk, and either vinegar or a tart citrus or pomegranate juice. Nutmeg, grains of paradise, cloves, and larger amounts of cinnamon, saffron and ginger, and honey are added, supplemented later by fat from the cooked peacock along with chicken livers and meat from chicken wings. The sauce is boiled until it becomes orange brown, a tint between that of saffron and cinnamon. The peacock is roasted with pieces of salt pork and served decorated with “garlands” made from its colorful feathers (*Llibre de Sent Soví* 182).

Another Catalan cookbook known as the *Llibre d’aparellar de menjar* (*The Book on How to Prepare Food*), preserved in a unique manuscript and composed between 1360 and 1380, is based on the *Llibre de Sent Soví* but incorporates material from other texts that are now lost. Two sauces are to accompany peacock that is larded and spit roasted. The basic sauce recipe follows *Sent Soví*, but adds that the taste should be both sour and sweet (*agre e dolç*) and recommends using orange juice rather than vinegar. The spices are ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and

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*héron*): A Middle French Vowing Poem, in which a heron, supposedly the most cowardly of birds, was presented at a banquet by Robert of Artois to incite Edward III to war against the Valois by questioning his bravery. See Whiting 261-78.

small amounts of pepper and saffron. The second sauce has a stronger flavor of saffron (*amb safrà molt*). It has similar ingredients to the first, but added in a different order, the first recipe beginning with peacock and other bird livers and the second with onions cooked in lard (*Llibre d'aparellar de menjar* 214-19).

A third Catalan cookbook, the *Llibre de totes maneres de potatges* (*The Book of Every Kind of Dish*), is hard to date since it too is known through only one (in this case mid-fifteenth-century) manuscript. In the prologue, the author acknowledges his debt to the *Llibre de Sent Soví*, but the *Llibre de totes maneres de potatges* is more than a mere reworking of that collection. The rubric describes the sauce as made with almond milk, and it is even more elaborate than in its Catalan predecessors. Almonds are cooked in a broth of chicken, salted lamb tripe, and brawn. Meanwhile, separately onions are to be sautéed slowly in a mixture of rabbit meat, lard, and chicken to which vinegar or citrus juice is added and then honey or white sugar. The two cooked mixtures are combined, and, as with the *Sent Soví* recipe, this should result in a color between that of cinnamon and saffron. But we are not quite finished, for finally it is to be tempered with poultry liver, and then the fat from the peacock is added. The predominant spices are ginger and cinnamon. The sauce should be quite thick, and only a small amount needs to be supplied for each serving (*Llibre de totes maneres de potatges* 243-45).

The last Catalan treatise, the *Llibre del coc*, presents a peacock sauce recipe that, as the chef-author states, balances sweet, acidic, and spicy qualities. Here the almonds are toasted and mashed with the liver from peacock or other fowls along with toasted bread soaked in orange juice or white vinegar. With the addition of beaten eggs, spices, and sugar, it is cooked until ready for a final measure of sugar and cinnamon (Mestre Robert 101-03).

Medieval Catalonia also affords an unusual example of two brief recipes for peacock sauce not associated with a cookbook, appearing in a notarial register for what is now the French city of Perpignan in Roussillon for the year 1455. The recipes just list ingredients, although the first concludes by instructing that they should be made into a broth and seasoned. Both involve eggs, oranges, almonds, and fat. One has sugar and saffron and the other does not specify any aromatic or sweet ingredients (Catafau 167-71).

I have dwelt on these recipes because they exemplify the love for display, but they also demonstrate a concern with how the food should taste. As Christopher Woolgar observed, late medieval texts tell us more about what elegant dishes looked like—their color, shape, and presentation at the table—than anything concerning their taste (Woolgar, “Feast” 19, 23; “Medieval”). Despite the thousands of surviving recipes, it is not easy to obtain a sense of a gustatory aesthetic.

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Probably the best way to accomplish this would be to prepare as many examples of medieval recipes as possible, setting aside no longer obtainable ingredients such as porpoise or ortolans or challenging architectural constructions such as Chiquart's castle. Even if primary products have changed over the centuries, such reconstruction would provide a veritable sense of the taste of the medieval past.

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