Fine Dining Through The Ages



FINE DINING has always been the hallmark of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, from the early artisans who prepared roasted meats for their liege lords to today's black-tie events. However, what constitutes fine dining has been very different from one era to the next. In this issue, *Gastronome* begins a four-part series that will explore fine dining through the ages. With this installment, we transport you back in time to a royal banquet where our ancestor, the goose roaster, is hard at work.

PART 1: The Medieval Aristocratic Table

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IMAGINE A BANQUET SETTING WHERE ATTENDees are dressed up in their finest silk, furs, and jewels. The venue is palatial, the walls hung with elaborate tapestries. Flames crackle in the massive fireplace. While serenading musicians mingle with the noble retinue, dogs hover expectantly. Diners will remain for many hours, perhaps even for several days, to savor a feast so lavish in scale that even the most extravagant Chaîne dinners of today would pale in comparison.

Such banquets were the sociopolitical centerpieces of aristocratic life in the Middle Ages, and our Chaîne ancestors—the royal goose roasters—would have contributed to them extensively.

During the Middle Ages, food embodied political clout among the wealthy. As culinary historian Bridget Henisch noted, "In the cut-throat realities of everyday life, to nourish was not so much an act of love as a demonstration of power.… Lavish generosity was the hallmark of the important man" (Henisch, 10-11). Nobles, including kings, were sometimes bankrupted by extravagance because evidence of frugality could be met with contempt. Henry III's motto was, "He who does not give what he has, does not receive what he wants." Ironically, he also exemplified a powerful man falling from grace. When reckless spending caused him to simplify his hosting, he was lambasted in a 1250 chronicle: "The lord king, shamelessly departing from his father's footsteps, ordered the expenses of his court and the customary pleasures of hospitality to be cut back, even so as to incur the reproach of inexcusable avarice" (Paris, 141).

Given this highly charged cultural dynamic around food, the noble medieval meal was an elaborate performance, orchestrated to appeal to all of the senses. Quantities were immense. Since the wealthy could afford spices unavailable to most, rich sauces were expected. Then, as now, French wines held a privileged place at the table. Serving vessels were of gold, silver, or refined earthenware, the most coveted pottery made in Spain.

Lavish dishes were presented in succession, and each was appreciated in its own right without regard for the menu's balance, as in a modern Chaîne dinner. One record enumerates twenty-six courses for one meal. Another document from circa 1400 lists the projected supplies for a two-day meal for five hundred guests as follows: domestic meats, game meats, fish in remarkable quantities and varieties, eggs (12,000), spices (the essentials being ginger,

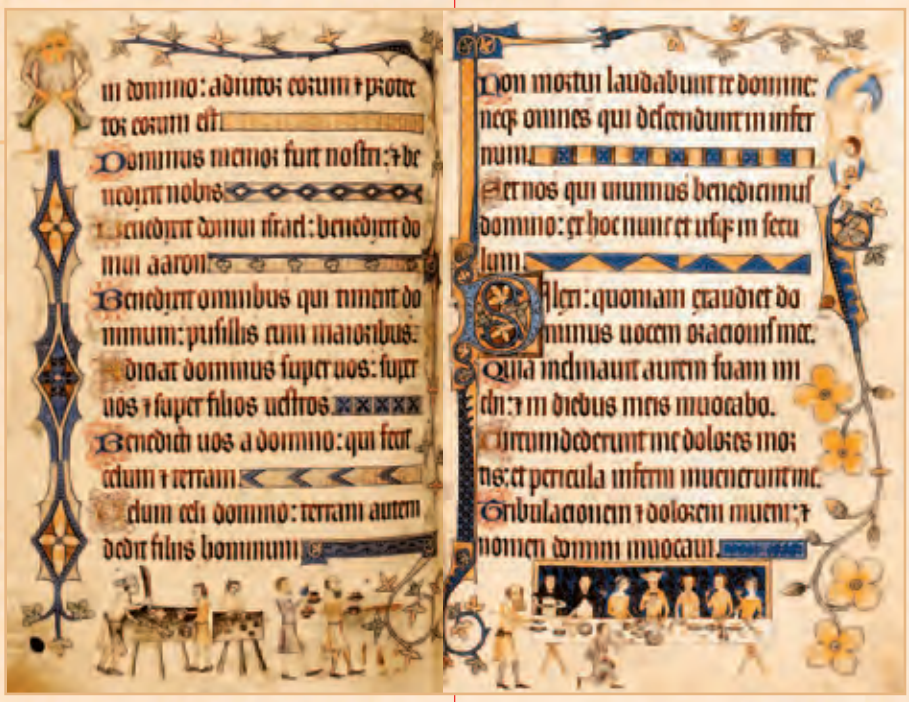
cinnamon, cloves, grains of paradise, long pepper, spikenard, black and white pepper, mace, saffron, galingale, and nutmeg), nuts, fruits, cheeses, flour (3,600 lbs.), colorants (including eighteen lbs. of gold leaf), spiced candies, vinegar (832 gallons), verjuice (1,040 gallons), oil, and wines for cooking (Scully, 41-42).

Food also became art. It was often painted or sculpted; sometimes it was embellished with gold, enamel, jewels, and ivory. Dishes were fashioned to resemble battlements and towers. Sometimes, fare portrayed imagined beasts. For instance, spiced pork belly might be shaped like a hedgehog, with fried almonds representing the bristles. Occasionally, food conveyed a message. At the coronation feast for Henry V in 1413, six roast cygnets were arranged around a roast swan to suggest the homage of the great barons to the newly crowned king.

Spectacle was paramount and extended beyond food presentation, with entertainment punctuating the myriad courses. Musicians, acrobats, animal trainers, magicians, comedians, singers, storytellers, and mimes performed at medieval feasts. Sometimes intricate "interludes," or short plays, were presented.

In contrast was the simplicity of the table, where bread, a cup, a knife, and one's fingers were the essentials. Fine white linen was required. One was expected to bring one's own knife, the handle as fancy as one could afford. Good white bread served as spoon, plate, and towel. Diners ate with their fingers from common platters and pots, dipping bread into the sauces. One generally shared a cup, so etiquette required that one's mouth be cleaned of grease or food before drinking. The well bred were taught to wipe their hands and knives on tablecloths only after cleaning them first with bread. Shared washbowls, infused with sage, rosemary, chamomile, or rose petals, were available before and after meals. Bones and other refuse were dropped on the floor, where the canine palace residents served as enthusiastic clean-up crews.

Formal manners were strictly prescribed and studied. Powerful aristocrats established reputations for generous hospitality at banquets, while guests demonstrated their nobility through refined manners. In the early Middle Ages, military prowess determined





(Above) The medieval banquet.

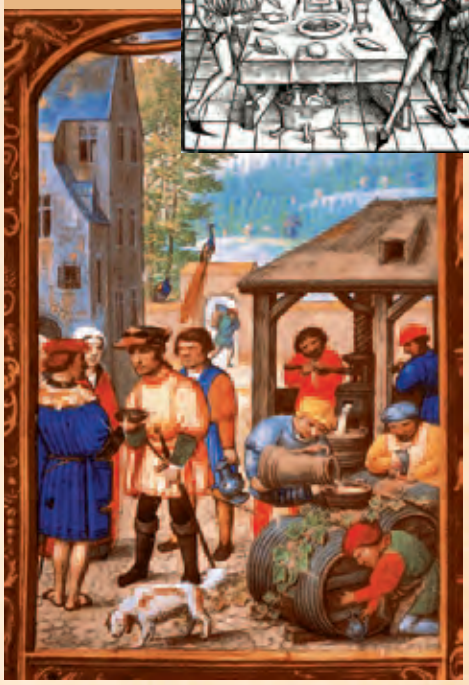
(Left) Illustrated manuscript showing a medieval meal being cooked and served.

(Right) Banquet hall.

(Below) Sampling new wine.

(Opposite) Aristocratic hunting meal.







Grape harvest.



Milking sheep.



(Left) Stewing lamb.



(Left) An herb garden.

(Below) Bridal banquet.



one's social rank. As the centuries progressed, traditional chivalric knights became obsolete in practice and ladies took on more prominent social roles. "Courtesy"—the art of proper public "court" behavior—distinguished the elite.

It took countless people and a vast castle infrastructure to prepare a medieval banquet. Although low in social standing, a skillful cook who could coordinate meals was highly valued. Nobles wanted a cook who resembled "a wizard, ready to work his magic on a handful of ingredients and transform them into a dish fit for a king. Any cook who could do this named his own price, rested on his ladle, and waited to be wooed" (Henisch, 71). Although lowly kitchen boys did the actual turning, the "art" included managing the fire, placing the spit, preparing sauces, and overseeing the decoration.

But what of the poor goose, who made notable, albeit less enthusiastic, contributions to the medieval table? The sentiments of his cousin, the swan, no doubt echo his own. An anonymous thirteenth-century poet records the swan's lament, which is best known for its inclusion in Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (based on the medieval poetry collection of that name).

Aforetime, by the waters wan,
This lovely body I put on:
In life I was a stately swan.

Ah me! Ah me!
Now browned and basted thoroughly.

The cook now turns me round and turns me.
The hurrying waiter next concerns me,
But oh, this fire, how fierce it burns me!

Ah me! Ah me!
(Whicher, 251)

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