

It is striking that a lot of mashing and sieving was going on in medieval kitchens. Peasants prepared their food differently than the nobility. A remarkable difference is that peasants cooked their food over a wood fire while the nobility burned coal. The well-off also had all sorts of pots and pans which their cooks used to prepare their food. The tableware and cutlery not only included stoneware and earthenware but also glass, metal and wooden items. In the case of the poor, the kitchen was characterised by a large fireplace with an adjustable hook to hang a large metal pot or cauldron over the fire. The most common dishes were stews made of different ingredients. They were served as a one-pot meal.

Want to try out a medieval recipe?

1. Medieval bread with fennel and bacon cubes



Few bread recipes have been passed down through the ages, and this is all the truer for medieval recipes. The following recipe is inspired by a description in the cookery book *Nyeuwen cook boeck* by Gheeraert Vorselman. Born in Groot-Zundert in Brabant (now partly in the Netherlands and partly in Belgium), Gheeraert Vorselman was not a cook but a physician. His cookery book was printed in Antwerp in 1560. He borrowed a lot from older texts.

The original recipe:

Take wheatmeal or flour, mix with hot water as required, and knead. Then take fennel seeds and diced bacon, and mix well with the dough until you get a firm texture. Create a round loaf and bake in the oven or over a fire. Instead of bacon you can also use butter or olive oil.

The bread can also be baked in the embers, but without bacon and with salt, fennel and oil.

Modern version of the recipe

For a 1 kilo loaf; preparation time: 2½ hours including rising time, baking time: 45 minutes.

250 gr wholemeal flour

250 gr regular wheat flour

4 tablespoons of honey

1½ teaspoon of salt

2 tablespoons of soft butter

1 tablespoon of fennel seed

2¾ dl warm water

150 gr small bacon cubes

4 teaspoons (approximately 12 gr) of dry yeast or 40 gr fresh yeast

Preparation

Fry the bacon cubes on a low heat and set aside to drain on kitchen paper.

If you use fresh yeast, first crumble it in warm water with some flour and add to the rest of the flour after 15 minutes. The water you use for the fresh yeast is to be deducted from the total quantity of water for the dough.

If you use dry yeast, stir it in the flour with the salt.

Mix the salt, dry yeast and fennel seeds with the flour and wholemeal flour. Stir the honey in the warm water and add to the flour. If you use fresh yeast, add the yeast and water mixture now. Knead until you get a firm and supple texture. Put the dough in a bowl, cover with a moist cloth and leave to rise in a warm place (e.g. on a boiler, in a cooling oven or on a stove). After 45 minutes, knead the bacon cubes into the dough and allow the dough to rise for another half hour. Finally shape the loaf as desired, and leave to rise for another half hour.

Preheat the oven to 200 or 220°C.

Baking

Put the loaf in the middle of the oven and bake for about 45 minutes. To check whether it is done, tap with a wooden spoon. If the loaf sounds hollow, it is ready. Take the loaf from the oven and set aside to cool on a grid. If you have baked the loaf in a mould, take it out after five minutes to prevent the crust from getting soggy.

Serving

This is hearty bread. Of course, you can serve it with medieval dishes, but it is also delicious with a regular cold meal.

2. Cloven nuns



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Who can resist stuffed eggs? The variations on this classic are endless. But how classic is the filled egg? Recipes for 'cloven nuns' can be found in medieval manuscripts from the 14th and 15th centuries. Below you will find my version of a recipe for cloven nuns from the oldest printed cookery book in Dutch: 'Notabel boecxken van cokeryen' published in Brussels around 1514.

'Notabel boecxken van cokeryen'

Although this book was printed, only one copy has been preserved. The cookery book was clearly written for the upper classes if you consider the methods of preparation and ingredients. It mentions various luxury products such as spices, sugar, decorative birds, white bread, almonds and expensive wines. Dishes such as pies, pastries and candied fruit were certainly not affordable for everyone.

'Cloven nuns'

It is not clear where the name 'cloven nuns' comes from. Cloven comes from 'to cleave', to split. This is obvious in case of filled eggs. Nuns are women who live in a convent. A boiled and peeled egg has a smooth, clean, pristine shape and was compared to the virgins who lived under vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. One thing is clear: once you're finished with this dish, there is nothing pristine about the shape. The egg is first boiled, then cut in half and filled with apple and other ingredients, then fried and finally sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. I sometimes call them 'apple pie eggs'.

Ingredients

4 nuns (or boiled and peeled eggs)
a few saffron threads
2 teaspoons of verjuice
3 small leaves of fresh sage
leaves of two 2 sprigs of fresh parsley
a quarter apple
some cinnamon
some ginger
some long pepper
frying butter
cinnamon and sugar for sprinkling

- The filling requires some moisture to stick together. Vinegar or verjuice were often used to obtain the popular sour flavour. Verjuice is an acidic condiment made from unripe grapes or other sour fruit and was already known in Roman times. It was widely used from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century but fell into disuse afterwards. I add some verjuice to soak the saffron in so as to obtain a nice consistency of the filling and to give the dish a fresh touch.

- Long pepper: This type of pepper is elongated, greyish brown and can reach a length of 3cm. The fruits or catkins from this vine are harvested as soon as they are ripe. Then they are dried in the sun. This pepper has a spicy and savoury aroma with a sweet note.

Preparation

Cut the hard-boiled eggs in half and take out the yolks. Soak the saffron in the verjuice until it turns yellow. Heat the verjuice if you want a stronger saffron flavour. Finely chop the sage and parsley leaves. Finely grate the apple. Put the yolks in a bowl and add the apple, herbs, spices and saffron with verjuice. Mash and mix until you get a sticky firm mixture and fill the eggs with it. Heat the butter in a frying pan on a medium heat. Fry the eggs with the filling down, so that it remains firmly in the eggs until the filling is golden brown. Then fry on the other side for a minute. Put the cloven nuns on a platter and sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar to taste.

3. Medieval cheesecake



Cheesecake or custard cake recipes are common in historical cookery books. They can be found in most medieval cookery manuscripts from all over Europe. Eggs, milk or cream (cheese) are often the main ingredient of cheesecake. Simple recipes usually had few other ingredients. A good example is the following recipe from a 15th-century cookery manuscript from Ghent.

Cheesecakes can also be flavoured with herbs and spices for savoury versions or sugar, spices and, from the 16th century onwards, rosewater for sweet versions. Combinations are possible as well. A cheesecake containing both herbs and sugar was not exceptional towards the end of the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, the type of cheese is usually not specified in the recipe, so you will have to guess.

Cheese in the Middle Ages

Various cheese types were known in the Middle Ages. They ranged from very young fresh cheese such as cottage cheese, cream cheese and ricotta (made from whey) to old matured cheese such as Parmesan. Blue cheese and mouldy cheese were already known too. Some of the names of medieval cheeses have even remained unchanged, for instance Ricotta, Parmesan, Roquefort, Brie, Cheddar and Cheshire. Cheese was not only made from cow's milk but also from sheep's and goat's milk.

The recipe from the Ghent manuscript can be translated as follows:

'To make cheesecake

Take fresh cream cheese, egg yolks, flour and some butter, mash it together and put it in the dough.'

This cake has a very rich dairy flavour and is very hearty. However, I find this dish lacking in flavour. I suppose medieval cooks added some condiments to this cake, probably depending on the season and the available budget. For my second cake, I have chosen to add some long pepper, salt and a handful of herbs to the basic ingredients. I just went to my garden and picked whatever I fancied: a bunch of parsley, a few sprigs of sorrel, 2 sprigs of burnet, 2 sprigs of lovage and a sprig of mint for a fresh touch. Make your own version with whatever is available in your garden or on your balcony and what you like.



Ingredients

Dough

250 gr flour

125 gr cold butter

pinch of salt

1 egg

a few tablespoons of cold water

Filling

4 egg yolks
400 gr firm cream cheese
50 gr butter
3 tablespoons of flour
1 big teaspoon of salt
1 teaspoon of long pepper
a handful of fresh herbs

Preparation

Put the flour and butter in a bowl and chop up the butter with a knife. Add salt, egg and water to the flour and knead into a supple dough. Add some cold water if the dough is too dry. Leave the dough to rest for half an hour in a cool place.

Beat the egg yolks and then the cream cheese. Put the yolks and cream cheese in a bowl. Melt the butter. Add the butter, flour and any condiments to the cheese and mix well.

Butter a cake tin. Roll out the dough to a large sheet and line the cake tin with it. Poke a few holes in the dough bottom with fork. Put the filling in the dough and level off. Bake the cake in a preheated oven at 200°C for about 30 minutes.

