

Cooking in a Castle



If you were a lord or a lady who lived in a castle five hundred years ago, you would have eaten very well. You would invite guests to come and dine with you in the great hall. This was a chance for you to show off how rich you were!

What kind of food did the lords and ladies eat?

The day started very early in the morning with a simple breakfast of bread and ale, served to the noble family in their private rooms. The two main meals of the day were eaten in the hall with the rest of the household. Dinner was served mid morning and supper in the late afternoon. Often it was a stew or roast meat or fish.



If there were special visitors, the supper would become a grand feast with many courses including soup, fish, roast meat, pies, amazing puddings and pastries. You might be offered a cockyntrice – the front half of a cockerel stitched to the rear end of a piglet, or models of castles and palaces made from icing!

Where did the food come from?

Today we buy our food from supermarkets or specialist shops. Five hundred years ago things were very different. Most of the food was grown or produced locally. Some of the food came from the lord's tenants, who paid their rent in food instead of money.

Meat came from cows, sheep, goats or pigs which were farmed nearby. Even rabbits were farmed in sandy burrows! Deer, wild boar and game birds like partridges were hunted in nearby woods. Lords had the right to catch fish like salmon or eels from rivers and other fish like herring and oysters came from the sea.

Many castles had dovecots which were special buildings for keeping pigeons in so that there was a supply of fresh meat all year round. Wild birds such as blackbirds were sometimes eaten too. Chickens, ducks and geese provided eggs as well as meat. On special occasions they might eat roast swan or peacock!

Bigger castles had vegetable gardens for growing leeks, cabbages, onions and peas. Some vegetables which we have today, such as the potato and tomato





were not yet grown in Scotland. Some castles also had fruit orchards where they grew apples, pears, plums and quinces. They also grew herbs to add flavours to the food. They grew crops such as barley or rye for making bread and brewing ale.

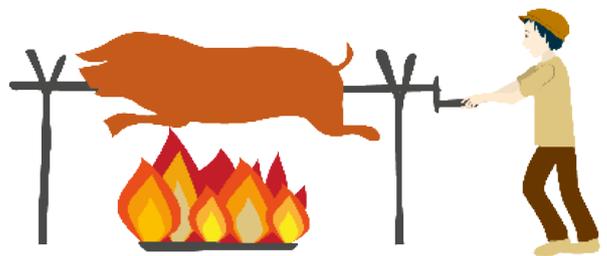
Instead of sugar they used honey as a sweetener, which came from beehives on the castle estate. Some food came from abroad. Spices, such as cinnamon, pepper and ginger were imported and were very expensive. Sometimes more exotic fruits such as pineapples or oranges might be shipped in for a special occasion. Wine was a popular drink among the lords and ladies.

What were kitchens like?

Kitchens in the castles were huge rooms, sometimes with more than one fireplace for cooking. Some kitchens also had a stone oven built into the wall, for baking bread, pies and pastries. Kitchens were lit by the fires and by burning oil lamps set into the walls. Bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling to dry. There might be fish drying around the fireplace, or in the chimney itself. Some castles had a well inside the kitchen but most cooks had to send a boy to the castle well in the courtyard to fetch buckets of water. Most kitchens had a slop drain for dirty water, which was often just a hole in the wall, leading out into the castle ditch. The food would be chopped and prepared on rough wooden boards placed on trestles. It would be very hot, noisy and crowded with cooks and servants rushing around before a big feast.

How was the food cooked?

All the cooking took place over or near the fire in the fireplace. Food was roasted, boiled or baked. Giant slabs of meat were roasted over the fire on huge metal spits, turned by a small boy known as the 'turnbrochie'. Birds and smaller animals were roasted on smaller spits.



There could also be a huge metal cauldron hanging or sitting over the fire which contained lots of different types of food, all cooking together. The different foods - eggs, vegetables, bacon and puddings - were wrapped up separately in cloth bags and placed in boiling water in the cauldron. Then they all boiled away together in the hot water in the cauldron. Bread and cakes were baked in an oven, heated by fire.

How did people keep food?

Almost all the food eaten in a castle was prepared fresh every day. There were no freezers to keep a supply of meals ready to cook. Some castles did have a cold cupboard, which was a cupboard built into the stone wall or floor which was kept stocked with slabs of ice saved from winter in an ice house. In the autumn most animals were killed because there wasn't enough animal feed to keep them alive through the winter. Meat from the animals was kept by drying it or salting, and fish was dried and smoked. Salt was very valuable and many kitchens included a large lockable cupboard just for keeping salt. Vegetables and fruit were pickled and preserved. Supplies of food would be kept under lock and key in huge storage cellars.