

# SCA Feasts vs. Real Medieval Feasts

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By Aislinne of Alainmor, transcribed by Eleanor of Huntingdon, slightly edited for publication. ©Aislinne 2009, used on the Vest Yorvik website by permission.

How does what we do for feasts in the SCA compare to what would actually have been done in Europe in the Middle Ages?

## Layout

Most of our layouts are similar to what would have been used in period; a U-shaped table or rows running the length of the hall, and a dais at the top of the hall for the highest-ranking people present. Where we use chairs, however, they would have used benches. This would have allowed them to crowd in an extra person or so where needed. At SCA feasts, this is not a good idea - the feastocrat often plans to serve a certain number of people per plate or table - throwing extras in throws off the numbers. The tables used would have been trestle tables, much like those we find in community halls in general shape and size. Usually, people were not seated on both sides of the tables - they sat only on the outer side of the table, looking in, and this was partly how they communicated. Also, this kept people's backs from facing someone. (At the time, this was probably a safety issue; but it is likely that our courtesy derived from this habit.)

Having said that, the King and everyone else at the head table sat in chairs - although the majority of the chairs at the time did not necessarily have backs on them. Those who sat "above the salt" probably had a bit more elbow room than those at the lower end of the room. (The term "above the salt" refers to those people at a meal who would have had salt served to them at the table. Salt in the Middle Ages was a spice, and hence a precious commodity.)

In the centre of many of the rooms was a fireplace - this may seem unusual to us based on what we have seen in the movies or what we do in modern homes, but the central location made it easier to keep the whole hall warm. The walls would have been covered in tapestries (stone construction of the time tended to be both damp and drafty), the nicest of which would be behind the dais. As well, there was almost an awning over the dais known as a balbequin or 'Cloth of Estate' - this was a panel of cloth reaching from the floor to the ceiling, which may have had the lord's arms blazoned on it.

During the winter, when it got dark very early, lighting probably consisted of candles on the table or in wall sconces. Lighting may not have been necessary all or part of the time due to when they ate.

## Meals

The main meal was eaten in the middle of the day - late morning or early afternoon. This is something to consider for an SCA event, but it seems unlikely that this would be agreed to. The fast would have been broken in the early morning with some bread and wine, small ale, and maybe some cheese. The nobility eventually moved to the habit of having larger, more complete breakfasts, but they were generally fairly simple. The main meal was eaten at about noon, then there was another, simple meal at the end of the day. This last was probably leftovers from the main meal. Then it was time for bed, as it was dark. It was very expensive to keep candles or other lights burning; even for a rich household. [Don't forget, they had to manufacture most of these themselves - and hand dipping a candle takes *forever!* - Eleanor] If it was a high holy day, or if there was business to be done, perhaps lights might be used and people might stay up later, but not everyday.

## Linens and Tableware

The table linens would normally be carefully placed before the guests arrived: linen cloths across the tables (three for the king's table, one for the others), napkins, and surnaps. The surnaps were used for drying the hands after they were washed between courses of the meal. It has been suggested that the purpose of the three cloths was to make it possible to remove the dirty ones to reveal the clean one below - and ensure that the king need never see the bare table. These cloths, like those on the lower tables, were always white. The surnaps were probably closer to what we call napkins today. The napkins they used were more like a runner which sat on the laps of everyone at a table. As to the idea of wiping fingers on the tablecloths, it seems wasteful, and thus unlikely.

After the guests were seated, the sovereign's napkin, eating bread and trencher loaves were brought forth, along with the principal salt cellar for the king's table, carried by the pantner (the one who serves the "pain", or bread). He was assisted by the ewer and the butler (so called for the bottles stored under his supervision) as he prepared the King's trencher and the ones on which the meat would be carved. Then, an elaborate washing ceremony took place, during which the water was strained and tasted before the King might use it to wash. Next, trusted servants would process in with the chef's creations concealed under silver domes.

Trenchers were slices of bread off of which they ate. The sauces and gravies would soak in, and at the end of the meal, the trencher would be passed to servants, or to alms-seekers at the gate. This would provide them with a relatively nutritious meal. It seems likely that the trenchers were usually shared by two people. A metal platter or "place dish" would be placed under the trencher, to protect the tablecloth. No one actually ate off of this dish. Eventually, they went to wooden platters from the bread trenchers. These may have been shared or used by a single person, depending on circumstances and who or where you were. It would obviously have been better to

share with your lady. (If you were kind, she would get the choice pieces.) Still later, the metal plate came to be used alone. While nothing has been found in the research concerning pottery, it seems likely that it would have been used, at least for everyday ware. It is relatively easy and inexpensive to make and replace.

During much of the period, there would have been a trencher, a maizer cup, and a spoon provided by the host. You were expected to provide your own knife (this would be a single-bladed implement - a double bladed knife was for fighting). In the SCA, we generally use a plate, knife, spoon, goblet or cup, and a bowl. Note: Forks are not actually accurate - they were used mostly as serving utensils (i.e. meat forks) until the renaissance period in Italy. Think of a barbecue fork. They came in in late 1400s; by late 1500s they were in common use. Many of us use forks simply because we find it easier.

To those who ask about inadvertently cutting oneself, you should not use a knife to get food to your mouth. This is the way they ate; they were used to it, and would know how to handle the implements.

## Servings and Food

Another habit, common in the Middle Ages, which we tend to follow, is that of serving in 'messes'. For them, this was a portion for four - we usually serve portions for eight. One thing which been revealed in my research is that the bread was served in a very specific way. Instead of putting whole loaves on the table, a mess was prepared from bread carefully trimmed into four serving sized pieces, which were placed in a covering the join. It may be that there was a sauce of some sort put over the join, but it is not certain.

The reason for the many different messes was not so that everyone could have a taste of everything, but so that you would get something you liked to eat. For example, if three pies came out, a chicken pie, a beef pie, and a fish pie - for various reasons, people would avoid one or more of these. They might be fasting - either for religious reasons or personal penance (for example, I have done wrong, and I will not eat meat on Tuesdays until July). No one at table would go hungry, as all would have choice.

In the SCA, we do not see it this way; we think that we should eat some of everything. This, slice especially, would not have been necessarily proper by Medieval standards. So, if something comes to the table that you don't like, DON'T BITCH - just say. "there's more for everyone else."

A nice way of serving the portions at the individual table might be to offer it to the highest ranking lady at the table to the lowest, then the highest ranking lord on down. That means that someone without an AOA may only get the 'dregs' - if you don't like it, consider it an incentive to work harder and get recognized. Or talk to your influential friends. This is a bit closer to what it was actually like to be Medieval - you have to

give way to someone who is of higher rank. And someday, you will be of higher rank than someone else.

Many bring their own salt. In the Middle Ages, to have salt put on the table for guests was a sign of great wealth, and an honour to the guests because salt, like other spices, was very costly. (We will not mention the insult to the cooks, who have supposedly gone to the trouble of carefully preparing the food and measuring out the spices when people automatically reach for the salt cellar before even tasting what is in front of them...)

Also, do not automatically ask for more bread while the meal is in progress - the feastocrat is planning to feed you a variety of dishes, not fill you up on bread. The bread is there so that the final drops of soup or stew can be collected and savoured - it is not meant to be a dish in its own right. Granted, people probably tend to ask for more bread automatically because they are afraid of what they may be served, but... if you are still hungry AFTER the feast, that is the time to ask for more bread!

### What Is A Remove?

It is not a really a correct term. The proper word is a course. Unfortunately, this causes problems in that today, people think of a course as a single dish. 'Remove' probably came into common use in the SCA in order to eliminate the confusion. Normally, a course should have 5 or 6 dishes; some may have as many as 10 or twelve. (Although, we in Vest Yorvik have learned that 19 dishes in two courses are a few too many...)

### Serving

How to serve? Well there is the old favourite in Vest Yorvik - everything is served out of the kitchen to a flat square with a fifth table at the back of the hall, and tabarded servers pick up one serving for a table of 6 or 8, with two servers for head table. The servers then retreat to their own table and eat their own portion.

Another method, more traditional, was to serve to a central table, and a person from each table went to collect the portion of food for their table and brought it back. The servers were usually a high-ranking squire or knight, and they would serve only the highest-ranking royalty "to the table".

Wine would have been provided in ewers from the bottler or butler, (we provide our own). They had entertainment - there is some disagreement as to whether or not the guests were more polite than we tend to be and the entertainers could be heard through the entire hall, or whether they then - as now - would only entertain those nearest them. Of course, it would help if more of them could be heard through the hall. However, with the larger halls that they had in the Middle Ages, they would normally have only had two rows of tables, leaving an open space between for the entertainers, who would thus have been closer to the guests.

## Availability

Another thing which we do not see much in the SCA is a feast which reflects what produce would have actually have been available to the chef in a given area at the time of year at which the feast is being served.

One part of this that we should consider is animal husbandry. While the Romans knew about breeding to improve the herd and letting the weak stock die off, this knowledge was lost when the Roman Empire collapsed. This resulted in sickly, runted herds. While our cows today produce milk for 11 months of the year; in the Middle Ages, they would have been lucky to get 9 months. And if there was a calf to consider, the herder would only get a part of the milk produced those first few months. By the earliest part of the year, if they had any butter left, it would have been clarified, and any solids obtained would probably have been fed to the animals. Note: the people who got the milk or butter first when the milk did become available were the dairy maid, then the butterer, then the lord.

Thus, don't serve strawberries in the fall, and until you hit April or May, there is no butter available, as the calves need the milk.

While we see a lot of flavoured butter; I have found no evidence to support that anyone did this in the Middle Ages. (As best anyone can tell, this idea originated with the Victorians.) What is known about butter is that the Saxons used it as a relish (read "they buttered their bread"), and then it fell out of use until the fifteenth century, except as it was fed to the elderly, the sick, or the children. Occasionally, it people cooked with it - like lard. Milk is more useful as a cheese or as a drink.

A common misapprehension is that few vegetables were served - this is incorrect. In fact, they were so common that there was no need to mention them. Vegetables were used as stuffings, they were in the soups and stews (potages), and occasionally were seen in salads; but they were seldom served as a separate dish, as we would serve green beans or peas today. Similarly, there are few recipes for roasts or bread, yet we do know that these were a major portion of the food they ate.

It was also a given of life in the majority of Europe that Saturday, Sunday, Wednesday and Friday were 'meatless' days, when fish was eaten (although some of the interpretations of 'fish' were loose - to say the least.) There were also myriad 'days of denial' over the year when meat could not be consumed. These included Lent and Advent.

When you sit down to an SCA feast, think about rank and manners at table; serve the highest lady first , then the other ladies, then the lords from the highest rank down. Have one person cut roasts and such, then serve them - it is easier that way. Also, remember to use honourifics - Milord and Milady are almost always appropriate and appreciated; even if you are not sure whether the person has their AOA or not. Do not

be afraid to try a small portion of a dish you are not familiar with - you might be very pleasantly surprised.

## Bibliography

[Lady Aislinne did most of this one from memory, so there is not a bibliography per se. If you would like some more information on this topic, you might ask to see her collection of medieval recipe books, or her other books on the topic of food and preparation in the Middle Ages. - Eleanor]

