Medieval Cooking for the Beginning Cook
William the Alchymist

Introduction
This is for those who are interested in cooking medieval food, but have limited cooking experience and aren't quite sure if they want to take the plunge.

Tools
The myth: cooking is "gadget intensive". The reality: the items listed below are enough to get you started. The gadgets *are* neat toys, though, and if you get seriously into cooking, you'll want to pick a few of them up. From the most important to the least:

"Markdown" stores (like Marshall's and TJ Maxx) are great places to buy kitchen equipment.

The Knife: The knife is the most important piece of kitchen equipment you will ever own, so it's worth spending money to get a good knife. A good "chef's knife" will serve for most purposes. Size does matter! Get the biggest knife you're comfortable handling (usually between 6" and 10" in blade length).

Don't get a serrated knife! Serrated knives tear food rather than cutting it, which diminishes the quality of the final product.

There is universal agreement that high carbon knives are the way to go, but you will pay (both in money and in maintenance...they cost more, and rust easily). High carbon stainless steel is nearly as good, and doesn't rust. The ceramic knives are very attractive too, if you don't mind the cost and the constant worry of breakage. I've used all of them, and there *is* a difference...but I've gotten along fine with a stainless steel set. ***ALWAYS*** clean your knife immediately after use: it's easier to do so. ***NEVER*** leave the knife in the sink: sharp objects in wet places are accidents waiting to happen.

Shopping Tip: If you have to make a choice, it's better to get *one* good chef's knife than a bunch of mediocre knives.

The Sharpening Steel/Stick: If a knife is the most important tool, a dull knife is the most useless tool. Get a sharpening steel or stick and learn how to use it (see Technique #1, below). Impress your friends, scare your neighbors...

The Cutting Board: You'll want a good-sized cutting board (at least 8" by 12"), but don't get one too big, or transferring (see Technique #2) will be more difficult. I prefer polyethylene or wood.

The knife and cutting board are your scalpel and operating table! Never disrespect them! For example, anyone who stands on their cutting board should be shot...

The Pot: You'll want a 5-quart pot (sometimes called a Dutch oven). Get one that's "oven safe" (no plastic handles) as it will come in handy later.

Shopping tip: Here, it *is* worth getting a set of pots and pans. The main thing that distinguishes cheaper sets from more expensive sets is how easy the pots and pans are to clean; if you follow the notes under "Cleaning", then the price differential is probably not worth paying.

The Measuring Cup (Liquid): Get a 2- or 4-cup measuring cup. Get several: they're useful all-purpose holding devices, and the 4-cup measure is good for mixing things in.

The Measuring Spoons: If you're just adding flavorings, you can get by using teaspoons for a while, but having measuring spoons is easier. If you want to graduate to Baking (as opposed to baking), the measuring equipment is critical.

Colander: Larger is better. I find the ones with handles on both ends easier to use and less likely to be knocked over than the ones with a single handle.

Cheese Grater: Nowadays you can get almost any type of "standard" cheese grated. But a lot of the more interesting (read: flavorful) types do not come grated. I prefer the rotary graters.

Vegetable Peeler: Essential if you're going to use carrots, turnips, or other vegetables that should be peeled before using.

In addition, you'll want some bowls, utensils, and containers to store the finished product; wooden spoons and spatulas; slotted spoons, ladles, and the like; pick up one of the "kitchen utensil kits."

If you get seriously into cooking, your "wish list" should include a food processor, mixer, and crock pot, all of which are immensely useful.

Flavorings
"Flavorings" include things you add to dishes in small amounts to enhance or add flavor: mainly herbs and spices, but this also includes things like salt (if you use it). A lot of medieval spices (e.g., grains of paradise) are hard to find nowadays, but you can do go quite far with the following, which suit most cooking in the "generic European" taste palette:

1. Black pepper
2. Cinnamon
3. Nutmeg
4. Clove
5. Ginger
6. Sage

Parsley is another commonly used herb, but it's easily available fresh, and much tastier that way.

One of the best places to buy spices is in the food section of drugstores (CVS, Walgreens)! Nutmeg and clove can be hard to find in mundane stores out of "season" (roughly Halloween to New Years'), so stock up in the fall. A good place to find some of the oddball spices, like galangale, are ethnic grocery stores, particularly Indian and Chinese. Of course, you can find everything online...but if you're seriously interested in cooking, you've got to go to the store and really get to know the food. Besides, it's fun to walk into a store and smell the spices.

Saffron is a special case: it's used extensively in period cooking. It's not true that it's more expensive than gold...on average. If you find something called "ground saffron" on the market shelves...leave it, it's not "real" saffron. (That is...legally it's saffron, in the same way that "cinnamon" is cinnamon. Long story there...)

To prepare saffron: Take 1 tablespoon of hot water, and add a pinch of saffron (about 1/4 teaspoon, but it's easier just to "pinch" out a few dozen threads). Let sit for a few minutes; the water will turn yellow and smell wonderful. Add the water and saffron to whatever dish you're flavoring.

Ingredients
Having a well-provisioned kitchen is a good idea in any case; the following are the ingredients you should always have on hand.

Eggs: Medieval cooking uses a lot of eggs; a provisions list for Richard II (ca. 1387) includes 14 boars, 14 oxen, 50 swans, 50 capons (chickens)...and 132,000 eggs. A tip on buying eggs: open the container and tilt each egg. If the egg tilts easily, it's fine; if it's stuck, then the egg has broken and will have to be thrown out.

Spinach: Fresh is best, but frozen is adequate and you can stock up and store packages in the freezer. If you buy fresh, fill the 5-quart pot with water, dump the spinach into it, swish it around a few times, pull the spinach out, then dump the water. Repeat this process four times: you'll be amazed at how much sand comes out of the spinach. (The "triple washed" spinach is good but pricey)

Onions: As you probably know, cut onions release an eye irritant. A useful tool is a pair of chemical goggles (available at most hardware stores); be sure to get the ones *without* ventilation holes (chemical goggles, as opposed to safety goggles). Another bit of advice: cold onions outgas less than room temperature onions, so store onions in the refrigerator.

Cheese: Hard cheeses (parmesan, romano) will store for a very long time, and can be bought in quantity. Semihard cheeses (cheddar) will also last for quite a while, but soft cheese (mozzarella, ricotta, farmer's) should be bought as needed, since they mold quickly.

As a *very* general rule: the softer or more Italian the cheese, the more likely it's period. The above cheeses are either period or indistinguishable from period cheeses; other period cheeses include cottage cheese, brie, camembert, emmenthal, and gorgonzola. Be wary of any cheese with a © after its name or that needs to be identified as edible: e.g., Chedar © or "Cheese Food."

Ground meat: Buy it on sale, separate into one pound packages, and store it in the freezer.

Pie crusts: You should learn how to make your own pie crusts...eventually. Until then, I recommend using the premade pie crusts; the ones that come in their own tins are doubly useful, since you won't need to worry about getting pie plates or bringing them back from events.

Butter: Buy the salted variety for daily use, and a pound of unsalted butter for occasional use.

Sugar: After about 1400, Europeans begin adding sugar to nearly everything. Buy "pure *cane* sugar": it tastes better. If that alone isn't reason enough to use it, note that "pure sugar" is made from beets and is post-period.

Dried fruit: Raisins or currants (which are different but interchangeable by most people's standards) are the most commonly specified, but dates, apricots, and figs are all used in period cooking. Get the unsweetened varieties.

Vinegar: An inevitable by-product of brewing alcoholic beverages. Apple cider vinegar is a good, all-around vinegar suitable for many purposes.

Lemon juice: An ingredient called "verjuice" seems to have been the juice of sour fruit (unripe grapes or crab apples). Verjuice has made a comeback, so you can find real verjuice with some effort, but a lot of cooks substitute lemon juice.

Knifework

Culinary students spend their first year learning how to cut (don't panic: most of that year is learning how to cut *quickly* without cutting yourself).

First, there are two "meta-techniques":

1. **Sharpening**: Hold the knife pointed away from you, edge down, in your dominant hand; hold the steel pointed away from you in your other hand. Put the knife edge nearest the handle on the portion of the steel nearest the handle; the edge should make about a 15-30° angle with the steel; the knife should be on top of the steel. "Slice" away (as if you're whittling the steel); repeat about ten times. Switch so the knife is under the steel to sharpen the other side of the blade.

2. **Transfer**: Once you've used the knife, you'll want to transfer. Lift the cutting board over the edge of the bowl or pot. Reverse the knife (so the edge is face up) and let it make a 45° angle with the edge of the cutting board; scrape the choppings into the pot or bowl. You'll want to practice this...the first few times you'll dump food onto the stove or countertop.

Now the basic cutting techniques. The hardest cuts to make are the first, so here's a few suggestions:

1. **Slicing Sticks**: For carrots and other cylindrical vegetables: Keep the tip of the knife on the board and lift the handle. Position the carrot under the knife edge (holding it with one hand), and drop the handle down (like a paper cutter). Lift and shift ("walk" the blade by keeping the point where it is and moving the handle over after each cut; occasionally reposition the point when your slices start to look like wedges). Stop when you get nervous. To keep the slices from sticking to the knife, gently tilt the blade away from the main portion of the food *after* you've completed the cut but *before* you reposition the knife.

2. **Slicing Rounds**: This is the most dangerous type of cut, so be careful. For apples and other "round" objects. Position so the "core" is oriented vertically. Slice down on one side of the core. Note this will give you a flat surface; reposition so that the core points towards you and the flat surface is on the cutting board; cut off the next quarter and repeat, rotating the round until you've cut off all the sides.

3. **Slicing Leaves**: For fresh leafy vegetables (lettuce, fresh herbs): Put several leaves on the cutting board. Put the knife point down on the far side of the leaf, then drag the point across the leaves towards you (this works best for particularly delicate leaves).

4. **Slicing Meat (steaks and cutlets):** Place the point of the knife down on the cutting board on the far side of the meat. As you drop the handle, slowly push the knife away from you (so you are slicing the meat). To slice the meat very thin, put it in the freezer for 15 minutes before cutting to solidify the meat, but **BE CAREFUL** when you cut the meat afterwards, as you're exerting a bit of effort to cut through the frozen meat, and a slip of the knife can be very dangerous.

Once you've made the initial cut, you will probably want to do further cutting (a general rule, much used in Asian cooking: the smaller the pieces, the faster the cooking). "Dicing" means to cut into small, recognizable cubes; "mincing" means to cut into smaller, unrecognizable cubes. Hold the knife so the point faces right or left (depending on whether you're holding it in your left or right hand), and put the point on the cutting board. Place your free hand palm open and facing down on the back side of the knife, about 1/3 of the way from the tip to the handle, and use the "paper cutter" motion to cut the pieces, with your palm open hand keeping the knife vertical. "Walk" the knife across the items to be cut. Occasionally rotate the cutting board (you can also use a wooden spoon to clear the stuff off the knife).

Food Safety
No one relishes getting food poisoning. Fortunately a few very basic precautions will reduce your chance of accidentally poisoning someone to just about zero:

1. **ALWAYS** wash your hands before, during, and after cooking.

2. **ALWAYS** cook egg and meat dishes all the way through. To this end, you may want to pick up a meat thermometer (the "instant" kind are the best).

3. **ALWAYS** keep cooked and uncooked foods separate.

4. **NEVER** cut vegetables and meat on the same cutting board without washing it in between uses.

5. **NEVER** leave food in a hot car or warm, moist place.

Cleaning
Cooking leaves the kitchen a terrible mess...if you do it wrong. The key to fast, easy clean-up is *clean as you go*. Water will boil and the oven will heat in its own time; use the waiting time to clean your equipment.

Knives, Cutting Boards, Measuring Cups:
ALWAYS clean these items immediately: if you let food dry onto them, they will become much harder to clean. Cleaning them immediately also means they are ready for use.

A tip on cleaning knives: take a rectangular sponge and fold it across the back of the knife, holding it tightly against the knife *side* (not the edge!). Swipe to clear off the gunk, repeat if necessary.

Pots, Pans, Tins: If material has stuck to the pot, soak it in hot water to loosen it; move on to cleaning something else.

For gunk that's really stuck: Fill the pot halfway up with water, put it on the stove, and let it boil for a few minutes. (Don't add soap, or it'll boil over and make a soapy mess)

Stove and Oven: Wipe up spills while still wet, if possible (for obvious safety reasons, don't do this while the oven or stove is still on!), because the heat will dry the spill onto the surface and make it very difficult to clean.

Oil spills should be cleaned as soon as possible: they can ignite and in any case will smoke and annoy everyone. Also, the grease will attract dust, grit, etc., making the stove truly unpleasant to be near.

Technique: Boiling and Parboiling
Boiling is the easiest, most forgiving cooking technique. Boiling water is always at the same temperature (100 °C at sea level), so boiling allows for very precise control of cooking times; it's why you can time pasta (though you should learn to cook pasta by feel).

Never let a pot boil dry! First, you will burn whatever's in the pot; second, you will likely make the pot a hard-to-clean mess; and third, the pot will be much hotter than it would be if there was boiling water in it, making a dandy safety hazard. (Pots with boiling water in them are always at around 100 °C)

Modern cookbooks talk about "reduce to simmer"; this simply means you want to reduce the heat so that the liquid is just barely boiling. The temperature is still 100 °C; it's just that the chance of the pot boiling dry is greatly reduced. Be careful with gas flame stoves: at the lowest setting, a gust of wind can blow out the flame, allowing the kitchen to fill up with gas.

If you boil with the lid on, always remove the lid by first tilting it *towards* you (allowing the steam to vent *away* from you).

Parboiling is simply boiling something for a short period of time; generally, you parboil foods that are added to other foods and cooked. (Just to confuse things a little, the term is also used, in period, to mean "boil completely", so it's either "boil partially" or "boil completely") As a general rule, overboiled foods are best suited for those with few or no teeth.

Fill the pot half full with water and bring it to a boil; *carefully* drop the items to be parboiled into the water. If you're timing, measure from the time the water starts to boil again.

Remember: The higher the drop, the greater the splash. You're less likely to get splashed by boiling water if you drop the items in from just above the water.

Parboiling Vegetables

For carrots, onions, and other "solid" vegetables, boil just long enough so that a fork can be pushed through them with a little effort. For leafy vegetables, boil until the leaves wilt (this happens very quickly).

Onions taste better if they're fried in a little butter, which caramelizes them (they taste sweeter), but most period recipes call for them to be parboiled.

Parboiling Meat

The boiling time will depend on the type of meat and the what's going to happen to it afterwards, but as a general rule, you'll boil it until it "looks done" (in other words, looks like cooked meat).

Meat also tastes better if it's fried or roasted. It's *not* true that searing meat "seals in the juices" (ask any burn ward nurse); what it does do is induce a chemical reaction similar to caramelizing onions. Again, a lot of period recipes call for it to be parboiled, something that causes a lot of us to cringe.

More Techniques

So you're looking through a recipe book and want to try out a new recipe? Excellent! But it can sometimes be difficult to tell how easy or hard a recipe will be just from the instructions.

One way to judge difficulty level is to note the primary cooking technique: some are trickier than others. Use the following as a rough guide to cooking techniques:

1. **Boiling/Parboiling**: Discussed above.

2. **Baking/Roasting**: This is the second easiest cooking technique. It's reasonably forgiving: you might burn the food if you overcook it, but there is usually a reasonable margin of error. Note there is a difference between a cook who uses the oven to bake something, and a baker (roughly speaking it's the difference between sewing and embroidery).

3. **Frying**: Frying is much less forgiving way to cook. It's easy to burn the oil, and if you don't pay constant attention to the frypan, you can burn the food (or yourself!) as well. Do nothing else while you're frying!

4. **Deep Frying**: As with frying, but even more so, because it requires fairly precise temperature control. It also makes a horrible mess of the kitchen. (My rule: deep fry large batches. That way the mess you clean up is proportional to the amount of food that you've made)

5. **Broiling**: The most unforgiving technique, as food can go from underdone to incinerated in as little as 15 seconds.

Some Final Words of Advice

To become a good cook, make a thousand salads: you will hone your knifework, you will learn what good (and bad) ingredients are, and you will learn about ingredient balance. (It's worth noting that salad making is what the most junior cooks in restaurants are assigned to do)

It's as easy to cook for several as it is to cook for one: invite your friends over when you make something. This will also teach you about meal planning: if your friends include vegetarians, diabetics, and people who are allergic to different ingredients, you'll want to plan your meals so *everyone* has *something* to eat. This also guarantees a wider variety of food.

Watch the sales and get to know your local produce. As a rough guideline, if something is on sale, it's in season...and seasonal food is good food. Don't waste your money or palette buying grapes in March or oranges in July. Not only will you eat better, you'll eat cheaper.

Recognize you will fail. In the beginning, you'll fail a lot and end up with inedible dishes. After you've gained experience...you will still fail and end up with inedible dishes. The only cooks who never fail are those who only cook the same thing over and over again. Fail...but learn from your failure.

Further Reading

You should have at least one modern cookbook; I recommend *The Good Housekeeping Illustrated Cookbook*, which includes illustrations of kitchen equipment, basic techniques, and lots of detailed recipes. You may also want to visit online sites like www.foodnetwork.com, where you can find information on basic cooking terms and techniques.