

Medieval Recipes for Beginning Cooks: Tortes, Pasties, and Salads
William the Alchemist

Introduction

There are thousands of available medieval recipes, some of them redacted and others not. I've picked the following recipes based on several criteria: how easy it is to obtain the ingredients; lack of "objectionability" of the ingredients (for timid eaters, or those with serious food allergies); ease of cooking; portability; and palatability when cold. Unless otherwise indicated, the redactions are my own.

The recipes are mostly vegetarian (though, emphatically, *not* vegan). This has nothing to do with philosophical bent; rather, it's difficult to find meat recipes that are easy to make, portable, and taste good cold (most fail on the last category: the fattiness of meat is accentuated by coldness).

Quiches and Pasties

Many medieval recipes describe "tortes", "tartes", "pies", and so on; these are portmanteau terms that mean pretty much anything: pies may include 0, 1, or 2 crusts; might be baked, boiled, steamed, fried, or uncooked; and so on.

Many of the recipes do describe what modern cooks call a quiche. Here's your basic quiche recipe:

Basic Quiche Recipe

1 pie crust
4 eggs
"stuff" (see below for possibilities)

Beat eggs. Add "stuff" and mix. Pour into pie crust, and put into oven set to BAKE at 350 °F. Bake until a knife stuck into the center comes out clean (between 40 and 60 minutes: start checking at 40 minutes, and every 10 minutes thereafter). Remove from oven and let cool. If you're not going to eat it right away, store in refrigerator.

Most quiches taste better after they've been refrigerated; the extra time sitting allows the flavors to blend.

There are also "eggless" tarts: Since the eggs provide a way to find the ingredients together, these tarts must be sealed to keep the ingredients inside. The result is either a double crust pie, calzone, or what the English call a pastie (pronounced PAH-stie):

Basic Pastie Recipe

1 pie crust (*not* the ones in the tins)
Water
"stuff" (see below for possibilities)

Lay out pie crust. On bottom half of pie crust add "stuff", being careful not to put any of the filling on the rim of the pie crust (if some does fall there, remove it). Wet the edge of your finger and rub along the outer edge of the lower half. Gently fold the upper half onto the lower half; when in position, gently press along the edges to seal the pastie. Place in oven set to BAKE at 350 °F; cook for half an hour or until the pie crust is golden brown. Remove and let cool. For food safety reasons, refrigerate if not being eaten that day.

There is an enormous range of possibilities for the "stuff". Here are a few. Feel free to vary the spicing based on availability (i.e., "What do I have in the kitchen today?"), cost (in particular, feel free to omit saffron if you're not ready to take that step), and individual taste (some people don't like marjoram, while those who like nutmeg REALLY like nutmeg...). Be careful with cloves and pepper: it's very easy to add too much. For meal planning, I've indicated whether the quiches are "sweet" (D) or "savory" (S), though note that even the savory recipes tend to have sugar. The recipes given assume you're making a quiche; modifications for pasties are given at the end of each recipe.

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Cheese (S)

A Proper newe Booke of Cokerye, mid-16th

2 cups cheese, shredded
1/2 cup of milk
1 tablespoon sugar
1 tablespoon soft or melted butter

Most modern quiches include cheese, but quite a few period recipes are cheeseless. This recipe specifies "hard cheese"; cheddar is a good, unobjectionable option, but the result is fairly bland; experiment with more strongly flavored cheese would be good.

Mix 2 cups of shredded cheese, 1/2 cup of milk, 1 tablespoon of sugar, and 1 tablespoon of melted butter together. Use as "stuff" in basic torte recipe. I wouldn't use this as a pastie filling (it's too boring), but if you want to, omit the milk and double the recipe.

Spinach (S)

The Good Housewife's Jewel, 1591

1 ten ounce package of spinach
1/2 cup milk
1 tablespoon soft or melted butter
1 tablespoon sugar

If the spinach is fresh, fill a large pot with water and dump spinach in; swish around a few times. Remove spinach and drain pot; repeat several times (until the rinse water is not filled with sand). (Rinsing spinach in a colander doesn't work very well).

Bring 2 cups of water to a boil. Drop spinach in, and cook until the leaves wilt (if you're using frozen spinach, cook about 5 minutes). Drain spinach into a colander and run cold water over it until it is cool enough to handle; squeeze as much water out of it as you can.

Drop the butter into the (now empty) pot used to cook the spinach and let melt (you can turn the heat on low, if you like, but the residual heat should be enough to melt the butter). Add 1/2 cup of milk, 1 tablespoon sugar, and stir until the sugar dissolves; mix in spinach and use as "stuff" in basic quiche recipe. For pasties, double the recipe and omit the milk.

Variation: Another period recipe adds a few apples. If you want a sweeter spinach quiche, take 2 medium apples cut into wedges; parboil 5 minutes. Remove and run under cold water. When cool enough to handle, use a spoon to scoop the apple flesh from the skin. Mince the apples finely and add to the remaining ingredients.

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Vegetable (S)

The Art of Cooking, 16th century

1 cup of vegetables
1 cup soft cheese (ricotta)
1/2 cup Parmesan cheese
1/8 teaspoon pepper
Pinch saffron

Cauliflower and Parmesan are specified in the original, but you can substitute almost any vegetable for the cauliflower: I recommend broccoli or asparagus. Always wash fresh vegetables before use, to get rid of residual dirt and pesticides.

To prepare cauliflower or broccoli: Cut the florets off just below the "flower" part, separating into pieces about the size of the end joint of your thumb. Mince the remaining part of the stems (if using broccoli, use the vegetable peeler and remove the outer part of the stem). Parboil 5 minutes; drain and let cool.

Take 1 tablespoon hot water and add the saffron; let sit for a few minutes until the water turns yellow and smells wonderful. Mix the parmesan and ricotta together; add the pepper and saffron water, then the cauliflower (or broccoli). Use as "stuff" in basic quiche recipe or in pastie recipe.

Meat (D)

The Forme of Cury, 1390

1 pound ground meat (pork, beef, chicken, or a mixture)
1/4 cup raisins
1/4 cup prunes
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
1/4 teaspoon ginger
Pinch saffron

Parboil the meat until it is cooked (it will separate into distinct bits); drain and let cool.

Mince raisins and prunes (other dried fruits can be substituted: apricots or dates make acceptable substitutions for prunes).

Take 1 tablespoon hot water and add the saffron; let sit for a few minutes until the water turns yellow and smells wonderful. The water should turn yellow and smell wonderful (if you like saffron).

Mix meat, fruit, saffron water together. Add spices, and use as "Stuff" in the basic quiche recipe. For pasties, add a hard boiled egg (or not, depending on whether you like eggs).

Note: The mixture of minced dried fruits is very common in medieval cookery, especially with meat recipes (think mince meat).

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Salads

Even today the term "salad" means a wide variety of dishes only a few of which are mixtures of raw vegetables. Here's a partial list of things that went into salads (compiled from various sources) that are easy to find. Salad dressing was mainly a mixture of oil, vinegar, salt and sugar (your basic "Italian dressing" of today).

Some basics: always wash your vegetables before using (even if you're going to peel them): this gets rid of the residual dirt and pesticides. Always cut, never tear: torn vegetables wilt faster. Peel, don't scrape: again, torn vegetables wilt faster. Keep the salad dressing separate from the vegetables and pour it on just before eating to keep the salad as crisp as possible.

Vegetables available at your local supermarket:

Arugula ("rocket", as it is still known in French)
Watercress
Cucumbers
Carrots
Lettuce (often boiled, but occasionally raw)
Spinach (almost always boiled)
Endive
Mint
Parsley
Sage
Onions
Leeks
Garlic
Lemons
Olives
Capers

Non-vegetables

For health reasons, keep these in a separate container and add them just before eating.

Herring (probably pickled)
Salmon (boiled)
Chicken (boiled or baked)

Eggs (hard boiled)
Shrimp (boiled)

Available (dried) at your local health food store:

DO NOT buy flowers from a florist to eat! First, it will be far more expensive; second, it they have most likely been sprayed with pesticides. To reconstitute dried flowers, soak them in water for half an hour.

Violets
Rose hips

Other Items:

Skirret: This is a type of water vegetable; try substituting water chestnut.
Tansy: Try substituting chrysanthemum or mizuna.

TOXIC! DO NOT USE!!!

Oleander: **TOXIC**, do not use!
Pennyroyal: **TOXIC**, do not use!

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Boiled Salad

(*Book of Cookerie*, 1591; a different recipe from a different source can be found in Cariadoc's *Miscellany*)

1 ten ounce package of spinach
1/4 cup currants (or other dried fruit)
1 tablespoon butter
3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon sugar

If the spinach is fresh, fill a large pot with water and dump spinach in; swish around a few times. Remove spinach and drain pot; repeat several times (until the rinse water is not filled with sand). (Rinsing spinach in a colander doesn't work very well).

Bring 2 cups of water to a boil. Drop spinach in, and cook until the leaves wilt (if you're using frozen spinach, cook about 5 minutes). Drain spinach into a colander and run cold water over it until it is cool enough to handle; squeeze as much water out of it as you can.

Drop the butter into the (now empty) pot used to cook the spinach and let melt (you can turn the heat on low, if you like, but the residual heat should be enough to melt the butter). Add the apple cider vinegar and sugar; stir until the sugar dissolves. You may want to adjust the sugar/vinegar mixture to your own tastes: this will give a fairly tart mixture, but if you prefer sweet, add more sugar.

Mince the raisins finely. Add to liquid ingredients; add spinach and mix well. Let cool, and use as a spread to put on bread, crackers, etc.

Bibliography and Cookbooks

For a good "one-stop" shopping site, go to Greg Lindahl's site (www.pbm.com/~lindahl/food.html), where you can find all sorts of period and redacted recipes. In particular Cariadoc's *Miscellany* includes tested redactions of hundreds of recipes as well as general guidelines (should you wish to do so) for redaction. Useful links may also be found at Cindy Renfrow's site (www.thousandeggs.com). Offline, there are:

Fabulous Feasts, Madeleine Pelner Cosman. George Braziller, 1976. This gives a good overview of the history of food, but it's not a good cookbook for the beginner (and its redactions leave much to be desired from a historical standpoint).

The Good Housewife's Jewel, Thomas Dawson, 1596. Reprinted 1977 by Theatrum Orbis Terrarum and Walter J. Johnson. A facsimile of the 1596 printing. A warning: the lettering is in the "Gothic" style and the spelling is Shakespearean English, so it can be difficult to read without practice.

The Art of Cooking, Maestro Martino (translated by Jeremy Parsen). University of California Press, 2005. This is a 16th century Italian cookbook with some very interesting recipes.

Food in History, Reay Tannahill. Three Rivers Press, 1995. A very nice source for general information.