

# Introduction to Period Vegetarian Cooking

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## **I. Catholics, Heretics, and Physicians: Historical Precedent**

While cultures and personas abound in the SCA, the dominant cultural force in medieval Western Europe was the Catholic Church. The Church dictated different diets for three types of days: meat days, fish days, and lean days. On meat days, all foods could be eaten. On fish days, meat except for fish was removed from the diet, while on lean days all animal products were forbidden. Generally such days were spread throughout the calendar, however, the entirety of Lent was “lean”. Furthermore, some people took religious vows that required them to abide by dietary restrictions at all times. This gives the current medieval person ample historical reason to seek vegetarian and vegan (free from animal products) recipes, and dictates that such recipes do exist.

Vegetarianism as a constant rather than occasional state is more difficult to document. A very pious person, particularly a hermit or anchoress, may have taken religious vows to lead a vegetarian or vegan life. For example, in her account of her life, Margery Kempe reports that in a vision Christ commanded: “you must forsake what you love best in the world, and that is the eating of meat. And instead of that flesh you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the very body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar.” (Staley 14) It bears noting that Margery’s life appears to have been otherwise exceptional, so this may not have represented common practice. Also, many years and adventures later, Christ tells Margery “Now, daughter, I will that you eat meat again as you were wont to do.” (Staley 118)

Another interesting medieval idea linking vegetarianism and sanctity was the belief that before Noah’s flood, mankind ate no meat (including fish). In his study of Middle English historical texts (see references), James Dean (no, not *that* James Dean!) gives several examples of medieval historians expressing beliefs that men were vegetarian prior to the flood and also lived longer. This fits nicely with the generally held medieval belief that things were better in the past. If you have a European Catholic persona, you could potentially mine this for a justification of vegetarianism.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, several heretical sects were associated with vegetarianism, notably the Bogomils and Cathars. Vegetarians may be interested to look at these cultures for personas. The Bogomils were active in Bulgaria and the Balkans from the 10<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>i</sup>. The Bogomil heresy began among peasants who objected to the excesses of both the Eastern Orthodox Church and the monasteries. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Bogomil missionaries came to Western Europe, inspiring what would become the Cathar heresy. The Cathars were active from 1150<sup>i</sup> (when the first Cathar bishopric was established in France) to their final eradication in the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>ii</sup>. The Cathars and Bogomils are both noted for their rejection of the physical world. Bogomils

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<sup>i</sup> Spencer puts them even earlier, with a 1030 community at Monteforte in Northern Italy (Spencer 162).

forbade the eating of meat, cheese, eggs, and the like, suggesting a vegan diet. Cathars never ate meat, but nothing is said of eggs and dairy (Spencer 163).

The medieval physician advised his clients on how to live well for optimal health. It is beyond the scope of this class to fully discuss dietetics, but it is worth noting that proscriptions advising clients not to eat meat (generally in times of severe illness) do exist. For further general research on medieval medicine, try reading Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna.

## **II. The Great Debate: Just How Much Meat Did Most People Eat?**

(Historical Precedent Part II, a case study of early medieval Europe)

It is easy enough to postulate that, meat being expensive and hunting generally reserved for nobility and royalty, the average peasant may have eaten a primarily vegetarian or even vegan diet. However, this is difficult to document.

One study of early medieval food, “Nutrition and the Early Medieval Diet” (see references) addresses this issue explicitly. This study notes that there are two types of peasant diet during the early middle ages: some early settlers practiced “sedentary pastoralism” (2) where animal products were more important than grains. This was most prevalent from the fourth through eighth centuries, while after this (in about the seventh century along the Rhine and north of the Loire and spreading outwards from there) patterns of land use changed and a greater effort was put into grain cultivation. These grains went on to form the bulk of the peasant diet, along with legumes. The author of this study states that that given the agricultural limitations, high consumption of meat and milk “appears virtually impossible,” (22) and meat remained “highly prized” (6). Based on these limitations, it seems fair to assume that the diet of common people was predominately vegetarian, built around grains, legumes, and vegetables, supplemented by meat only when available.

What about nobility? If you read through a surviving recipe collection, or a list of dishes served at a feast, you will find an extremely high proportion of meat dishes. It is possible that this is an accurate reflection of the diet of privilege. It is also possible, though, that recipe collections are skewed this way not because vegetables weren't eaten but because vegetable recipes weren't written down. Additionally, feasts important enough to have a record made may be exceptional (consider what future historians will make of us if all they have to go on is our notes on Thanksgiving dinner).

It is also important to note that no one really knows how well fast days were observed. Even assuming perfect observance of the official calendar, and adding 10 additional days of penance each year for the extra pious, that still leaves 268 days per year of meat eating.

## **III. What's a vegetarian, anyway?**

Why would anyone care about period vegetarian recipes? Aside from the historical reasons listed above, the most obvious (and most likely) answer is that you are a vegetarian or are cooking a large feast and want to include vegetarian dishes. For the

latter group, here follow brief definitions of the major types of vegetarians and how to please them.

A vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat. Most vegetarians are ovo-lacto vegetarians, meaning that they eat eggs and dairy. There are some vegetarians who eat fish (sometimes referred to as "pescatarians"), but it is dangerous to assume that all vegetarians eat fish. Very stringent vegetarians will tell you that a true vegetarian will not eat many varieties of cheese (made with rennet, which comes from the lining of a calf's stomach) or gelatin. You, the feastocrat, will probably find it easy to keep gelatin out of the feast by avoiding prepackaged foods. The rennet issue is somewhat more difficult, but worth pursuing if you want to make vegetarian diners extra happy. Many cheeses are made without animal rennet. Look for cheese labeled Kosher, or marked as containing "no animal rennet" or "microbial rennet" or even "microbial enzymes." It's not actually as hard as it seems -- the Tillamook Cheese company uses only microbial rennet in all its cheeses except in the Vintage White Cheddar cheese.

A vegan is someone who does not eat or use any animal products, including meat, eggs, dairy, leather, gelatin, or any derivative thereof. Vegans are rare in the SCA, but they do exist. Keep in mind that vegans often do not eat foods that many people take for granted, such as honey (comes from bees) and sugar (beef bones are used in the processing of cane sugar). The best way to make vegans happy is to find out if there will be vegans at your feast and contact them personally to find their preferences. Remember that while it might not be possible to manage an entire vegan feast, you can probably manage a few dishes (perhaps a soup). Even vegan medieval desserts are doable – a pottage of apples is easy and vegan, and will be palatable to non-vegan diners.

Polite vegetarians of all stripes (or anyone else with dietary restrictions) are likely to contact you, the feastocrat, in advance to request a copy of the menu / recipes planned for the feast. It's a good idea to have this available well in advance of the event. Normally they aren't looking for a fight, they're just trying to decide for sure if they want to attend your feast. Don't panic if you get a request like this.

Planning a balance of dishes that meet a variety of diets is a good idea. The real key is to look with a critical eye at your plan (Does the soup really need chicken broth when everything else in it is vegetarian? Could I make some of the quiches without bacon?) and remember that you can't please everybody, but your efforts will be appreciated.

#### **IV. The Basics**

Here follow some general tips. These primarily assume that you are a reasonably experienced period cook, and not a vegetarian but trying to accommodate vegetarians at a feast.

When looking for period vegetarian recipes, look for recipes marked "For a fish day" or "Lenten" or "Lean". If the recipe is for a fish day, take out the fish. Look at all recipes with a critical eye: does the recipe include lard, meat broth, gelatin (aspic), or some other animal derivative? Does it absolutely need it, or can you find a substitute? If you are using a modern edition of a period cookbook, the best place to find vegetarian recipes (or easily modified recipes) is in, (no surprise) the section on vegetables. Keep in mind, however, that vegetables should not be the only vegetarian dish at a feast – vegetarians do often get sick of salad.

Building a vegetarian meal: base the meal around beans or eggs; these are the (period) vegetarian protein staples. For a feast, plan on having one vegetarian main dish (egg tart, for example). Add to this a vegan soup, and you have two filling dishes for vegetarians, which are also tasty for other diners. Including a vegetarian or even vegan dessert will round out the meal. The staples of vegetarian cooking are beans and other legumes, barley, vegetables, almond milk, vegetable broth, spices, cheese, and eggs. Easy period dishes include pottages, pearled barley, and lentils. Somewhat more difficult, but worth making for a large feast, are egg and/or vegetable based pies. Keep in mind that most desserts are probably vegetarian or easy to make so, but that the same rule for vegetables applies to desserts (shouldn't be the only vegetarian food on the menu).

Here are just a few of my suggestions to use as a starting point:

**Snacks and Finger Foods:** fresh or dried fruit, nuts, cheese, bread, dates, olives, candied ginger.

**Side Dishes:** Frumenty or plain cooked barley (no meat broth or butter), salad, garbanzo beans cooked with garlic, armored turnips (turnips cooked with cheese and butter), couscous, hummus, etc.

**Main Dishes:** Stuffed pasta such as ravioli or tortellini, cheese gnocchi, quiche / egg pie, pea soup.

**Desserts (vegan):** Marzipan, gingerbread, fruit glop.

## V. Recipes

Here are a couple of recipes to get you started.

### Cherry Pie

Odd at first but strangely compelling.

One 1lb bag frozen cherries (sweet dark cherries, not pie cherries)

1 c ricotta cheese

1/4 c sugar

2 eggs

Spices to taste: cinnamon, ginger, and pepper

1/2 c parmesan

Crust:

1 stick butter

1.5 c flour

Pinch salt

2 tsp sugar

Some cold water

Let the cherries thaw in the 'fridge overnight, then drain off any liquid before you start. Make your pie crust (cut the butter into the flour/salt/sugar, add cold water until you can form a ball). Roll the crust out to whatever size pie you want and put it in your pan. Mix cheeses, eggs, sugar, and spices together and pour into your crust, then place the

cherries on top. (This is a much more modern presentation than the glop filling suggested in the period recipe, but I like it.)

### **Gnocchi**

No potatoes in these! In period gnocchi were eaten with a single pointed stick, kind of like a chopstick.

1 (fifteen-ounce) container of ricotta  
1 egg  
1 cup flour  
1 tsp salt

Mash the salt into the ricotta using a fork. Beat in the egg, then the flour. Drop by spoonfuls into gently boiling water, only a few at a time, cook 4-6 minutes per batch. Stirring seemed to break them up rather than do anything useful. Fish them out and let them drain in a colander. Serve with olive oil or butter and grated cheese. Easily scaled up.

Very nice with nutmeg and parmesan added.

### **Ravieles**

There's a 13th century English recipe for ravioli that reads:

"Take fine flour and sugar and make pasta dough; take good cheese and butter and cream them together; then take parsley, sage, and shallots, chop them finely, and put them in the filling. Put the boiled ravieles on a bed of grated cheese and cover them with more grated cheese, then reheat them."

(This is found in *Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections* by Hiatt and Butler)

I have made this several times with great success, although I have yet to pin down proportions (I always end up with too much filling). For the dough, use any basic fresh pasta dough recipe but add a pinch each of sugar and ginger. For the filling, the cheese I prefer is soft farmer's cheese (it's very similar to -- and can be replaced by -- ricotta).

### **Greens Tart**

You can use any greens you like.

One 9" pie crust

1 standard salad baggie of baby spinach (or chard, or mixed salad greens, or...)  
One small onion, chopped  
6 eggs  
1/2 cup fresh cheese (ricotta or farmers cheese)  
1/2 cup (or more) grated cheese (cheddar, mozzarella, etc.)  
To taste: salt, pepper, fresh rosemary or other herbs.

Chop the spinach and fresh herbs as finely as you can. Slice the onion. Put the onion and grated cheese at the bottom of the shell, lay the spinach over this. Beat together the eggs and fresh cheese and pour over spinach. Bake for approximately 45 minutes at 350 degrees.

### **Yellow Pea Soup**

1 large onion, chopped  
2 cups yellow peas (un-split if you can find them)  
2 quarts water  
To taste: salt, pepper, bay leaf, other dried or fresh herbs (sage is good)

Wash and sort the peas, soak overnight. Discard soaking water. Place all ingredients in a pot (works well in the slow cooker) and simmer until peas are soft (often several hours).

### **Basic Barley**

1 cup pearled barley  
3 cups water  
Salt to taste

Simmer for 1 hour. Also works well in the slow cooker. Plain barley is pretty dismal – I recommend having an assortment of things on the side that diners can add to it, like butter, honey, herbs (especially chives), sour cream, grated cheese, etc.

### **Apple Glop**

You can make glop from almost any fruit like this. I happen to like fruity glops.

4 apples, sliced and cored (they need not be peeled)  
4 cups water  
1 cup ground almonds  
1/4 cup sugar or honey (or more to taste)  
Spices to taste, depending on the fruit (my favorites with apple are cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves, or try peaches with ginger)  
Optional: coloring agents such as saffron (or modern food dyes)

Boil the water and add the almonds. Steep 10-15 minutes, strain and discard almond bits. Simmer the apples and almond milk, covered, until apples are soft. Blend with a stick blender or pass through a sieve. Add sugar and spices and continue cooking until glop thickens sufficiently. You may wish to add coloring agents – apple glop would have usually been colored red in period.

## **VI. References / Further Reading**

### **References:**

Dean, James. "The World Grown Old and Genesis in Middle English Historical Writings" in *Speculum*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Jul., 1982), pp 548-568

Pearson, Kathy L. "Nutrition and the Early-Medieval Diet" in *Speculum*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), pp 1-32

Spencer, Colin. *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism*. Hanover, New Hampshire, USA: University Press of New England: 1995.

Staley, Lynn (trans./ed.). *The Book of Margery Kempe*. New York, New York, USA: W.W. Norton & Company: 2001

### **Recipes:**

My website: <http://www.geocities.com/shadowdryad/SCA/food.html>

A Boke of Gode Cookery, online at <http://www.godecookery.com> This is my favorite online resource, with many recipes in an easy to browse format.

Scully, D. Eleanor and Terence (illuminations J. David Scully). *Early French Cookery: Sources, History, Original Recipes and Modern Adaptations*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA: University of Michigan Press: 1995

Santich, Barbara. *The Original Mediterranean Cuisine: Medieval Recipes for Today*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Chicago Review Press: 1995

Redon, Odile, Françoise Sabban, and Silvano Serventi. Translated by Edward Schneider. *The Medieval Kitchen: Recipes from France and Italy*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: University of Chicago Press: 1998

### **Some web resources graciously sent to me by Aetheria:**

The Florilegium:

<http://www.florilegium.org/files/FOOD/vegetarian-msg.html>

Medieval food for vegetarians:

[http://elizabethangeek.com/katrowberd/articles/veg-cooking\\_mhtml](http://elizabethangeek.com/katrowberd/articles/veg-cooking_mhtml)

Draws most of the same conclusions I have about the history of vegetarianism and has some additional definitions of types of vegetarians.

Some Recipes of al-Andalus:

<http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/articles/veggie.html>

Food in England since 1066: a vegetarian evolution?

<http://www.ivu.org/history/renaissance/food-england.html>

Asserts an increase in human sensitivity toward animals over time.

Medieval veggie feast ideas:

<http://www.theparentperspective.com/boards/printer-friendly.asp?threadid=57912>

From a mundane message board, includes some recipes.

Edinburgh University Medieval Society, Newsletter, Medieval Recipe, Food:

<http://www.lothene.org/feudalist/recipe2.html>

Some recipes, some of which are vegetarian.

SCA Cooking (Vegetarian Delights)

<http://www.midrealm.org/darkriver/section5.html#vege>

Still more recipes!

Cooking in Ostgardr:

<http://www.ostgardr.org/cooking/>

Lots of links, some of this may be useful, I haven't sifted through it personally.

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<sup>i</sup> Columbia Encyclopedia online: <http://www.bartleby.com/65/bo/Bogomils.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Western Christianity Flowchart: <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/christ/west/cathar.html>