

# A Storm in a Saucepan; Setting up a Cooking Group

## Introduction

For some reason, you've decided to set up a local SCA cooking group. Maybe you want to start running authentic feasts. Perhaps Heston, Ruth Goodman or the Supersizers inspired you. Or possibly, you've been reading about other peoples' cooking adventures on Facebook and you'd like to give it a try! This collegium is designed to give you some tips in how to go about setting up a cooking group, whether you're a beginner or more advanced.

## Getting Started

Firstly, you need a group of people, and somewhere to meet. It's best to have a group of people so you can get opinions on what you produce; it also helps in the prep. If you get at least one person in the group that knows a bit about cooking, it will also help.

If you are lucky, your SCA group will meet in a location that has a kitchen attached, or you might know of a community kitchen that's available for a small fee (or even free, you never know). However, you'll probably find you need to meet at someone's house. Regardless of what kitchen you use, it needs to be of a reasonable size (say, large enough to have 3-4 people working in it at once), AND be decently equipped. Trust me, it's no fun hauling boxes of equipment around because the host of the cooking group only has 2 saucepans and a frypan.

## Choosing What to Cook

When the SCA first started, there was almost no printed material about medieval cooking. There were a few obscure texts or journals around, but what material there was, was hard to get hold of. These days, food history is a growing field of interest, and there are many reputable works about medieval food available, there are reproductions of period cookbooks, there are even a number of books containing redactions (a modern style recipe produced from a period source). And if you can't afford to buy books, there's the Internet. More and more SCA-related cooking sites are springing up, as are general food history sites.

When you are starting out exploring medieval food, it's best to stick to other people's redactions at first. Medieval cooking is quite different to modern cooking. For one thing, they used a lot more spices than modern western cooking does, and some of the combinations of ingredients can take some getting used to. Medieval cookbooks can also be confusing – unlike modern cookbooks, they were intended to be more aids to memory, or suggestions, to experienced cooks. They may not have been used by cooks, but rather by estate managers, who were in charge of provisioning feasts. You rarely find quantities or

cooking times, and even some of the methods can be obscure. However, if using someone else's redaction, try and get hold of the original recipe. This way, you can become accustomed to working out redactions – and you can think about whether you'd change it.

It's best to start out simply – one or two dishes, that don't take too long to cook. This brings up another point – pay attention to timing when picking recipes. For instance, if you meet of an evening, bread is probably not a good option as you will need a few hours to devote to the whole process. A jelly also needs a minimum of 4 hours to set, and most stews need at least 2 hours' cooking. You really don't want to still be cooking late at night if people have to go to work or school the next day.

I would also suggest keeping to a theme – by this I mean sticking to a specific time and place for choosing recipes. This will mean you build up a familiarity with that cuisine, and it will make it easier to design cohesive feasts.

## Getting the Ingredients Together

Once you've decided what to cook, you need to get the ingredients together. You can either divide the ingredients up between the attendees, so everyone has to bring something, or have one person, usually the host, buy all the ingredients and everyone chips in.

Over its history, the Mordenvale Company of Cooks has used both methods, and I think the second method works better. With the first method, if someone can't come, someone else has to get their ingredients as well as their own, or the cooking is delayed while they are fetched. Invariably, one person winds up getting all the expensive ingredients, while others pay virtually nothing, and things can get forgotten. With the second method, the host can look at what's in his/her pantry and buy accordingly. You aren't relying on one person to bring a crucial ingredient, and if you get unexpected attendees, they don't get out of paying for food.

## While You're Cooking

If you're trying out medieval cooking, you probably want to look at running feasts in the future. Or if you're running a feast in the future, you definitely want to try the recipes first to make sure they are edible and achievable. So while you're cooking, consider the following:

1. *Is this easy?* Most cooking groups contain a small number of people; probably less than 10. For most feasts, you're looking at a lot more people than that. Just about every SCA cook has dishes they've tried at feasts without thinking about scaling preparation. For instance, preparing broad beans for under 10 people is tedious, but doesn't take too long. Preparing enough broad beans for 50 people is going to take at least an hour, with 3 people. And incredibly, turning 20kg of pork

- mince into meatballs takes rather longer than 500g.
2. *How can I make this easier to prepare at a feast?* There may be shortcuts you can use that would save time during feast preparation. For instance, most medieval chicken recipes use an entire bird that you break up. SCA cooks often buy chicken wings or drumsticks, which are a lot easier to serve and can be treated the same way as a whole bird. There may also be steps you can do well ahead of time.
  3. *Are people going to eat this?* There are many period recipes that are very similar to modern dishes. There are others that will make you feel nauseous just looking at them. Medieval thoughts about food and nutrition were very different to ours, and by necessity (perceived or actual) they prepared and ate foods we don't today. You may also have an absolute passion for a particular type of food that very few other people enjoy. If you serve it at a feast, you're going to have a lot left over (and that's wasteful).
  4. *What sort of equipment would I need for this?* Make a note of what sort of equipment you need for recipes. You will need to take equipment into most offsite kitchens when preparing feasts, so keeping note of required equipment will allow you to get it together easily when preparing for a feast. Also, if your initial plan for a feast includes four dishes for the same course that need ovens, you can check in advance whether your venue can cope, and change accordingly.
  5. *If cooking from another person's redaction, do I agree with their interpretation?* This is why you should always try and get hold of the original recipe. You may find they have omitted some steps, or used a shortcut/replacement ingredient you wouldn't have used. They may have added ingredients, or used them in a quantity you don't think is right.
  6. *Is this going to suit the requirements of my group?* Does your group contain a few vegetarians? Coeliacs? Allergy sufferers? It's a good idea to think about their needs as well, so you can start to cook dishes that are going to satisfy everyone. I'm not suggesting eliminating ingredients entirely, but you should think about who can/can't eat everything you're preparing, and if you can change things so they can. It does help if you know about these people ahead of time.

## Doing Your Own Redactions

Eventually, you'll get to the stage where you want to make your own redactions. For some cuisines, you'll have no choice, as we have the original recipes available, but no easily accessible redactions.

This is where having a working cooking knowledge will come in handy. If you know what to look for, you can get some idea of the main techniques involved in a dish, and this will give you specific ingredients and cooking times (sometimes temperature). For example, you will often come across an instruction to "seethe" or "boil" your meat. From this you can extrapolate a casserole or braise, which means you need specific cuts of meat, which is going to be cooked in a liquid, over a slow fire, for a

long time.

You can also get an idea of what the final dish is meant to be like from the ingredients, even if there are no instructions. An example of this is Apicius 9.6, a Roman dish that's a sauce for shellfish. The "recipe" just lists ingredients - pepper, lovage, egg yolk, vinegar, *garum*, oil and wine. The key here is the egg yolk and the oil; the primary ingredients for mayonnaise. The French might have given the name to the sauce, but the Romans beat them to the recipe by a couple of thousand years.

You will inevitably find you need to change things. Ancient and medieval cooks used ingredients such as herbs and spices we now know to be toxic, or that can't be obtained easily. In cases like these, make a note of what the substitution is, and why you made it.

## Conclusion

A lot of people think medieval food is yuck and won't try it. Others would like to give it a go, but aren't sure where to start. Hopefully in this class I've given you a few tips to get you started in the wonderful world of medieval cooking.

## Further Reading

The following is a list of books you might find useful in starting your culinary journey. If I have to pick 2 to recommend for starting your library, it would be [Pleyn Delit](#) and [The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages](#).

### Books with Recipes/Discussions of medieval food

Brears, Peter. [Cooking and Dining in Medieval England](#). Prospect Books, 2012.

*An exhaustive look at how food was produced and prepared in medieval England, with many recipes. However, Brears, while he cites his source recipe, doesn't the source recipe, and some of these manuscripts aren't easy to get hold of (and sometimes he CHEATS).*

Brears, Peter. [All the King's Cooks](#). Souvenir Press, 2011.

*Concentrates on the running of Henry VIII's cooking, based on Brears' experience in reviving the Hampton Court kitchens. Again the source recipes aren't included which is a gripe.*

Butler, Sharon, Hieatt, Constance and Hosington, Brenda. [Pleyn Delit](#). University of Toronto Press, 1996.

*A collection of mostly English and French recipes, using very few shortcuts or substitutions, with some good information about how medieval kitchens worked. Constance Hiett was one of the pioneers of medieval food research, and if you see her name associated with a publication, you know it will be good.*

Giacosa, Iaria Gozzini. [A Taste of Ancient Rome](#). University of Chicago Press, 1992.

*An English translation of an Italian classic, and a good introduction to Roman food in general, with a wealth of redacted recipes. However, some of them take shortcuts that aren't in the text, and leave out/substitute ingredients.*

Grainger, Sally. [Cooking Apicius: Roman Recipes for Today](#). Prospect Books, 2006.

*A companion to the Apicius translation. Great for examining the pitfalls in reconstructing Roman recipes.*

Monroe-Cassel, Chelsea and Lehrer, Sariann. [A Feast of Ice and Fire](#). Random House, 2012.

*OK, so this isn't precisely medieval food, but an interpretation of the food in George R.R. Martin's *A Feast of Ice and Fire*. But they use medieval recipes as their basis, and explain their redaction process.*

Renfrow, Cindy. [Take a Thousand Eggs or More \(vols I and II\)](#). Royal Fireworks Publishing Company, 2011.

*These books show the standard you should be aiming for in redactions. Renfrow is a SCAdian, and these recipes are taken from two C15 English manuscripts. Volume 1 has the original recipe, a translation, and a redaction, with notes explaining the redaction process. It also has menus and a glossary. Volume 2 is the recipes and translations from the C15 manuscripts that haven't been redacted.*

Scully, Terrence. [The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages](#). Boydell Press, 1995.

*An absolutely essential book in any SCA cook's library. Contains information about the production and preparation of food, and the scientific ideas behind food of the time. Terrence Scully is one of the pioneers of medieval food research, and while he is primarily interested in dealing with the text, he likes to cook as well.*

Scully, Terrence. [Early French Cookery](#). University of Michigan Press, 2002.

*Discusses how French cooking influenced most of medieval Europe, and has recipes from the non-nobility as well as the nobility.*

## **Anicent and Medieval Cookbooks**

Grocock, Christopher; Grainger, Sally. [Apicius](#). Prospect Books, 2006.

*The most recent (and best) translation of Apicius. The translators are a scholar and a re-enactor cook, so they don't mistranslate as others are wont to do.*

Hieatt, Constance and Butler, Sharon. [Curye on Inglysch](#), Oxford University Press, 1985.

*A collection of 14<sup>th</sup> century English cookbooks, the earliest known in England. An essential starting*

*point for exploring English cooking.*

Nasrallah, Nawal. Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens. Brill, 2010.

*This isn't a book – it's a TOME. Contains a manuscript from C10, along with an absolutely exhaustive discussion of food production and service at the time, and an extensive glossary of cooking terms. If you get this book, do yourself a favour and spend the extra money on the hardcover edition.*

Rodinson, Maxime (ed). Medieval Arab Cookery. Totnes: Prospect Books, 2006.

*A collection of essays about medieval Arab cookery, food and eating, and translations of several cookbooks. Essential for people with Middle Eastern personas.*

Santanach, Joan and Vogelzang, Robin. The Book of Sent Sovi. Tamesis Books, 2008.

*A manuscript from the fourteenth century court of Aragon.*

Scully, Terence. The Viandier of Taillevent. University of Ottawa Press, 1988.

*The earliest cookbook from medieval Europe where the author is known. It was extremely influential on medieval cookery, and should be in the library of any serious SCA cook. Out of print, but still reasonably easy to find second hand.*

## Websites

<http://godecookery.com/>

*A jumping off point for all SCAdian cookery, with articles about food, menus and recipes for all levels.*

<http://www.medievalcookery.com>

*An excellent collection of recipes, links to online period cookbooks, and articles about period food.*

<http://www.daviddfriedman.com/Medieval/Medieval.html>

*Not just recipes, but translations of cookbooks, and general SCA articles, collected by Duke Cariadoc of the Bow, one of the fathers of the SCA.*

<https://sites.google.com/site/medievalcuisine/>

*A series of blogs and articles by a number of SCA cooks.*

<http://www.foodtimeline.org/>

*Details when various foods started being used, along with articles about food history.*

<http://leobalecelad.wordpress.com/>

*My blog, with recipes.*