

Victuals During the Reign of Our Beloved Queen Elizabeth

By our beloved Cooke Johnstone (Tracy Johnston)

Our beautiful island has long had an abundance of fish both freshwater and from the sea. It has also a lovely variety of food plants and beasts. Our culinary heritage has been influenced over time in many ways, including by changes in the weather and by the arrival of other cultures. When the Romans conquered our lands, they brought many new and different foods and ideas with them. Some of those items stayed here after the Romans left, while others disappeared. Today our eating habits are not as influenced by church dictates as they used to be, but they are influenced by the requirements of our Beloved Queen as well as imports from the Indies, Cathay and the New World.

Meat is important to us, whenever we can get it. Beef, brawn from boars, fowl of all sorts, fish, eel, shellfish (especially oysters), and rabbits are served roasted or boiled and with sauce, baked into hearty pies, or mixed with other ingredients to create "made" dishes. The wealthy can have elaborate feasts where whole peacocks are roasted then served with their skin and feathers replaced, while the poor feel blessed to have a rabbit or coney cooked on a spit and served with only salt as the sauce. To preserve a bounty of meat we soak it in salt water, dry it, smoke it, turn it into sausages, or even pot it, which means chopping it fine, covering it with melted fat, and storing it in a crock.

Sauces can be as simple as a sprinkling of verjuice (the juice of unripened grapes or crab apples fermented to a sharp vinegar) to as complicated as a concoction of ground almonds, broth, spices, and herbs. Cameline, a typical sauce, is made from warmed red wine, some sugar, cinnamon, dried raisins or currants, and perhaps a bit of

butter. Bits of meat are dipped into the sauce just before they are eaten.

We use milk and cream in our cooking, but only sparingly because it is difficult to know if those ingredients are clean and unadulterated. More often we use butter, which can be challenging to obtain, and cheese, which is very common. Eggs are preferred, too, especially when we can raid the nests of nearby waterfowl. Instead of cow's milk, we use almond milk, created from steeping ground almonds in hot water, broth, or wine.

Sugar, a New World import, is becoming a popular cooking ingredient. While still expensive, the cost is lowering so we sugar everything from our meats to our vegetables and fruits to our wines. At least the wealthy do! Most common folk have never tasted sugar, and sweeten their food with honey when they can.

But the bulk of our diet comes from grains in the form of bread, pottages (stews thickened with grains or seeds), porridges (cooked grains), and the dish that sets our island apart, the pudding. Most often cooked by boiling, but alternatively by baking or steaming, the pudding usually has a base of breadcrumbs, flour, oats, or rice, which is mixed with eggs, cream, spices, meat, dried fruits, and even butter, depending on the budget of the maker. It might be stuffed into animal guts, but mostly we use pudding cloths, which are tied loosely around the pudding before it is put into a pot of boiling water for several hours.

You can see that our food choices are rich and varied. Our cooks are talented and creative, and we heartily enjoy what we eat!



COUNTRY LIFE - Facsimile of a woodcut in a Folio Edition of Virgil. Pub. 1517