

Cooking the Books: A cautionary tale of material culture and the recreation of historic recipes for public viewing.

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For the past twenty five years the historic Kitchens at Hampton Court Palace have seen the reconstruction of hundreds of historic recipes with the aim of using them and their associated material culture, as a tool to better engage with visitors and a lens through which we can view and understand the past. One should be clear that the intention over this quarter of a century of public presentation has never been to present these recreated recipes as being examples of what food tasted like, or indeed looked like in the past, but rather as the end products in the investigation of the processes that would have been gone through by the cooks of Henry VIII's Court and their counterparts through history. Taste is subjective, difficult to articulate in writing and lacking in surviving evidence, as such it was decided early on in the project that the end result, no matter how tasty it could be, was of less importance than the journey to get there. Improvements and alterations to ingredients through the centuries from crossbreeding to the absorption of chemicals and nutrients into the food chain that were never present in the past, mean that attempting to create an 'authentic taste of the past' is all but impossible, no matter what equipment or spaces are available. We should however not be down hearted about this as the journey; the tools, the things, and the methodology, are actually far more interesting than the rather transitory finished dishes themselves.

So, how to go about cooking historic recipes? At the most basic of levels all that is required are three things; a recipe, ingredients and equipment, with the latter two hopefully indicated within the first. The more adventurous may wish to add a dash of context to the mix, and we'll return to that later, first though let's keep things simple and look at a recipe; this one for allows of beef or mutton from Harleian M.S. 279 circa 1430ad.

¶ *Alows de Beef or de Motoun.*

¶ *Take fayre Bef of þe quyschons, & motoun of þe bottes, & kytte in þe maner of Stekys; þan take raw Percely, & Oynonys smal y-scredde, & olkys of Eyroun soþe hard, & Marow or swette, & hew alle þes to-geder smal; þan caste þer-on poudere of Gyngere & Saffroun, & tolle hem to-gederys with þin hond, & lay hem on þe Stekys al a-brode, & caste Salt þer-to; þen rolle to-gederys, & putte hem on a round spete, & roste hem til þey ben y-now; þan lay hem in a dysse, & pore þer-on Vynegre & a lityl verious, & poudere Pepir þer-on y-now, & Gyngere, & Canelle, & a fewe olkys of hard Eyroun y-kremyd þer-on; & serue forth.¹*

¹ Alows de Beef or de Mouton recipe from Harl. M.S. 279 in Austin, T. ed. *Two Fifteenth Century Cookery-Books*, London, 1888, p40

Here we are instructed to take beef from the shoulder joint or mutton from the butt and cut it into steaks. Next take raw parsley, shredded onion and hard boiled egg yolk along with bone marrow or suet and mix this all together. Then add ground ginger and saffron and once mixed with the other ingredients, take some of the mixture and spread it onto one of your steaks; sprinkle on some salt then roll up and put on a round spit to roast until done. All good stuff at first glance, especially if you understand what it's telling you to do, but after a little thought there is much missing from this recipe when compared to what a modern cook expects. Where are the quantities? What do you mix the filling in? What was the egg hard boiled in? What is the spit made from and how big is it? How long is "*til bey ben y-now* [until they are done enough]"?

Realistically, it is only the lack of quantities, and perhaps cooking times, that are different from a modern recipe. The questions regarding equipment needed for the cookery are still as valid if we look at a modern recipe for the same dish, this one taken from the Jamie Oliver website. There is still a large degree of leeway available in the interpretation of the material culture it describes or rather implies in most cases, the difference being that we know what modern tools and equipment look like or are available in a modern kitchen and thus understand in our mind's eye the things being referenced:

Ingredients

- 4 topside steaks, seasoned and dusted with flour
- 300ml beef stock
- 300ml of red wine

For the stuffing

- 150g smoked bacon, finely diced
- 150g minced pork
- 1 small onion, peeled and finely diced
- 1garlic clove, peeled and crushed
- 50g fresh breadcrumbs
- 2 tbsp finely chopped sage
- A good pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

For cooking the beef olives

- 1 tbsp beef dripping (or olive oil)
- 2 onions, peeled and sliced
- 4-5 large carrots, peeled, or 2 handfuls of chantenay carrots

Mix all the stuffing ingredients in a bowl until well combined. Shape into 'sausages' and place onto each steak. Roll up to make large hearty parcels and secure with wooden skewers or string to hold the stuffing in.

To cook, heat the dripping or oil in a cooking pot over a medium heat and brown off the beef olives. Once done, fry the onions, whole carrots until well coloured, then add the beef stock and wine. Cook gently, either on the hob or in the oven (preheated to 170°C/Gas

mark 3), for 2½-3 hours until tender and giving. Serve hot, with creamy mash or just thick slices of bread and butter.²

We are now used to a recipe format that conforms to the definition given by the Collins English dictionary: “a list of ingredients and a set of instructions that tell you how to cook something”³; set down in a format that separates the ingredients from methodology, so that we can see in one list what is required followed by instructions, usually including the uncommon tools needed, to combine those ingredients together into a repeatable and consistent finished dish. Historic recipes are in the main more narrative, they include the ingredients needed only when that stage of the recipe is described and can often meander and wander, suddenly mentioning an important ingredient that you must not have forgotten to add two steps previously.

From the Jamie Oliver recipe above we can see that the methodology calls for a bowl and a cooking pot, but thanks to the quantities in the ingredient list and because of our familiarity with the pots and bowls in our own kitchens we can make educated presumptions about the size and materials of these items; something that is more tricky to do with the medieval recipe due to our unfamiliarity of the equipment of the time. In the modern version, we can also see that measuring equipment such as scales and spoon measures, knives for chopping and a grater for the nutmeg will be needed, but these, along with the countless other items we would actually use when cooking this dish, are not part of our conscious thought process. We think about the cooking pots, bowls and other tools mentioned or implied within the medieval recipe because they form an equal part of this unfamiliar whole, the ingredients and the material culture required to combine them. These things though have a familiarity to them; we may not know exactly what they look like, but they are understandable; a bowl and knife perform the same function today as they did six hundred years ago. The alows though, are to be roast on a spit, a tool that most modern cooks, or indeed historians, are sorely lacking in their kitchens and thus we are not sure of how big this should be, what should it be made from and how does it work? Here is where the context mentioned earlier comes in, but with a healthy dose of caution at the same time.

If we look at spits from medieval imagery or the fireplaces in surviving historic kitchens such as those in the kitchens at Hampton Court Palace, with a view to recreating a roasting spit, we could make an educated guess as to how big the tool might be, and thus how large the final alows in the recipe may be. Using the fireplaces at Hampton Court we find that they are around 5.5m across and support spits of 2.5m in length or more. For a metal bar to be that long without flexing under its own weight it needs to have a degree of thickness which when looked at in the context of this recipe would lead us to think that perhaps each allow may be several tens of centimeters long and proportionately thick to allow the spit to fit within it. Clearly this is not going to be the case as beef steaks simply do not come in that sort of size; the simplest answer is that the spit would be

² Beef Olive recipe from the Jamie Oliver website <http://www.jamieoliver.com/news-and-features/features/beef-olives-true-comfort-food/> accessed 26/04/17

³ Collins English Dictionary <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/recipe> accessed 15/04/17

much smaller and thinner than we may at first think but because we are unused to this style of cookery and equipment and have physical historic examples to relate to, that solution may not be the first to spring to mind.

Perhaps the first question we should have considered is does the equipment matter to the cookery? Will having the 'right' pot, bowl, spoon or spit actually make a difference to the finished result? In truth, probably not if having something tasty to eat is the end goal of the cooking. Thousands of people across the globe cook historic recipes at home for their own pleasure and we would never consider that they must be using replica tools and equipment from their chosen recipe period to do so successfully. So saying, some specific equipment is essential if some dishes are to be recreated; roasting for example is not the process undertaken within an oven but rather the application of radiant heat using primarily a spit and fire, without a spit of some form the task is not possible. But in most cases when cooking historic recipes, a modern approximation of the required tools and equipment will render very similar results as if using the 'real' thing. It is when looking at the process and method of the cooking task that having the same equipment as would have been used by the cooks who created the original recipe is of relevance; more so if a primary aim is showing people a slice of the past in action. Here, size, weight, look and feel all impact on the physical interaction with the material culture. Looking at the 1430 recipe for *alows* again but thinking in terms of how a medieval cook would have approached it and thus, how can we best replicate that method is a different matter:

¶ *Alows de Beef or de Motoun.*

¶ *Take fayre Bef of þe quyschons, & motoun of þe bottes, & kytte in þe maner of Stekys; þan take raw Percely, & Oynonys smal y-scredde, & olkys of Eyroun sobe hard, & Marow or swette, & hew alle þes to-geder smal; þan caste þer-on poudere of Gyngere & Saffroun, & tolle hem to-gederys with þin hond, & lay hem on þe Stekys al a-brode, & caste Salt þer-to; þen rolle to-gederys, & putte hem on a round spete, & roste hem til þey ben y-now; þan lay hem in a dysse, & pore þer-on Vynegre & a lityl verious, & poudere Pepir þer-on y-now, & Gyngere, & Canelle, & a fewe olkys of hard Eyroun y-kremyd þer-on; & serue forth.⁴*

If we presume to make *alows* of mutton for visitors to Hampton Court Palace to watch, first off we need mutton to cut into steaks, which implies a cutting tool and something to cut on; not just a board, but a table too. We'll then need a bowl to mix the ingredients for the filling in and possibly a mortar and pestle for producing ground ginger. Then comes the round spit, which will need a rack to rest it on and fire to roast in front of, and when these are cooked, a dish to dress and serve them in. On top of these things we must consider the other components of the material culture that may impact the reconstruction such as the clothes worn by the cook which will have an influence on how items are picked up, held or worked with, the space used for cooking within and perhaps even the recipe itself; especially if we are looking at showing visiting public the work being undertaken.

⁴ *Alows de Beef or de Mouton* recipe from Harl. M.S. 279 in Austin, T. ed. *Two Fifteenth Century Cookery-Books*, London, 1888, p40

How will we show people which recipe we are cooking? Will they trust us to recite it to them by rote, and if so is that didactic presentation an acceptable way to allow visitors to interact with the information? If we choose to have the recipe in a written format then we allow the visitor to choose how and when, or indeed if, they wish to interact with the recipe and its reproduction rather than relying on the interpreting cook to instigate that part of any conversation. Visitors can see the same information that the interpreter has to work from and offer suggestions or questions regarding the work. If it is written down though, what form should it take? Do we simply print a modernised transcription or a character for character copy? Should this be on modern paper or in a modern book or should an attempt be made to present the recipe as it may have been recorded in period? All of these questions, simply for how we should let visitors have the information about what they are watching being cooked in front of them, and none of these questions touches on the original context of the recipe. Who was it written for? How common would it have been? Was it actually ever cooked? Would a cook have had a written record of recipes or are surviving texts for a wealthy non-cooking elite? All questions asked by visitors prompted by the varied ways of presenting the recipe information to them and this before we consider how we might obtain the rest of the tools required for any actual cookery to take place.

Reproduction pots, pans, spits, tables, clothing, books and bowls can all be sourced or rebuilt to enable these recipes to be reconstructed. The historic details needed to be considered such as shape, pattern, material and construction technique are all well understood, even if not always respected; and a plethora of talented craftspeople exist across the world ready to produce excellent reproductions of the things, both big and small, needed to fill a reproduction historic kitchen. It is more often though, that it is the context that is ignored and items are remade or chosen for use simply because we know that they 'had them then' rather than considering if the context for the item is correct; in short, treating the material culture of the past as if it were in a huge historical Argos or Sears and Roebuck catalogue, to be picked and chosen at will! An example of such thinking might be using a drinking glass to cut out pastry shapes when demonstrating medieval cookery as one might use one in a modern kitchen; after all, they had drinking glasses then.; though this ignores the value and relative rarity of such an item in an average medieval household. Worse is when presumptions are made based on later or even modern evidence and preconceptions, and in my opinion, kitchen spoons are a good example of this. In his book '*A History of Cooks and Cooking*' Michael Symons quotes French chef Raymond Oliver and says:

Cookery books are so consumable that ... Oliver compares them to wooden spoons: 'one is astonished at the number which have disappeared'⁵

But this supposes that a lack of kitchen spoons surviving from history is based on them having disappeared or not survived, as opposed to the

⁵ Symons, M. "*A History of Cooks and Cooking*" Illinois, 2004 pIX

simpler presumption when looking at the evidence; that they never existed in the first place! Archaeological evidence for spoons before the early modern period is slim, with those that do survive being, in the main, high status dining spoons made from precious materials. Simpler cooking utensils are conspicuous by their absence; something which is often explained with the presumption that being likely made from wood they may not have survived archaeological deposition and would have rotted away, or that they would have suffered catastrophic destruction in use and, being wooden, simply became kindling or fuel for the cooking fire.

Unfortunately these explanations, however plausible they sound, simply don't tally with the evidence or experience to hand. Wooden household items from the medieval period do survive archaeologically, not in huge numbers, but in sufficient quantities to indicate that any spoon would be as likely to survive as for example a broken bowl or knife handle would.

Medieval illustrations of spoons in use by cooks are rare, mostly depicting large, deep bowled tools associated with serving or as likely as artistic shorthand for the cooking task; and large sized wooden spoons do exist in museum collections across the world, just in very small numbers. In over twenty five years of demonstrating historic cookery with open fires and the chance of accident ever present, the only time a spoon has suffered catastrophic damage sufficient to render it unusable, and more importantly, unrecognizable as a spoon, has been where such damage was purely intentional; something that would match well with the wooden spoons that each member of the cookery team has in their personal kitchens at home too. Put simply, they last for years with minimal damage happening to them.

One must consider what a spoon might be used for in a kitchen and investigate the incidences of such a task being performed through history as implied through surviving recipes. Jobs that may require a spoon to be used could include mixing, stirring, tasting or checking and serving, but in actuality most of those tasks can be performed by a simpler stick or flat spatula shaped implement such as those illustrated in the Museum of London publication of *The Medieval Household: Daily Living c1150-c1450*, and when looking at modern wooden spoons in our kitchens at home we find that they are closer to a paddle shape rather than a specifically deep bowled tool. Serving could be the most likely candidate for a task requiring a spoon, but medieval recipes seem to be either dry enough to lift by hand or spatula, or wet enough to pour, a tool only being required to scrape around the cooking pot to coax the last remnants out into the serving dish. If they existed in great numbers in the past, there should be evidence to support that, and there is not; yet reconstruction work of cooks and kitchens would have us believe that the humble wooden spoon was as ubiquitous a tool in the past as it is today.

This same paucity of evidence is true of spoons for eating with, yet they are very common when it comes to reconstructed material culture. If the larger numbers of low social status 'peasants' were only dining on a runny pottage as beloved by medieval re-enactment kitchens and modern food histories then surely there should be a much larger number of surviving low status spoons, or at least an indication of them. However, spoons are only needed if we reconstruct dishes to fit the preconception that they need to be eaten with spoons. Make the dish less runny, and suddenly spoons become less essential, the task being able to be performed by slices of

bread or flatbreads, or indeed the fingers as is the case in many cultures around the world. Are we looking at a case of the material culture tail wagging the historic interpretation dog?

When looking at making the things people owned and used, we must remember those people; and people are neither identical or rational. Why do we have this object to copy? Why has it survived through the centuries? Was it discarded by accident, leaving us an object to recreate that was loved, had purpose and was a good example of its type, or was it a piece of rubbish, thrown away because it was unfit for purpose; and that's what we have now recreated? I have two wooden spoons in my kitchen at home; I choose to use one of them over the other because one has a bent handle that irritates me. It's an irrational annoyance; it makes no difference to the function of the spoon itself, but it's not the one I choose to use. If that bent one was the only spoon to survive into future years, would someone who recreated it for use in demonstrations of cookery in the 21st century be presenting an accurate use of the material culture of our time? Likewise any reconstruction based on fragmentary evidence, especially of the archaeological kind. Yes it is true that we can extrapolate the shape of a bowl from a surviving fragment of a rim, but what if the bowl originally had a lip for pouring which did not survive, or decoration that indicated its function now long since lost. Whilst these are not thoughts that should stop any recreation and re-use of material culture from history, these are warnings that should be taken into account when considering the recreation of the things of the past.

The reconstruction of the things of the past, whilst probably one of the most accessible ways of interpreting and understanding history, is one that is fraught with problems; where it is all too easy to create false evidence and information about the past based on poor reconstructions or incorrect contextual use of items.

The spit rack in the kitchen at Hampton Court is an excellent example of this. Since modern cookery began in the Henry VIII kitchens in 1991, the roasting rack has seen regular use demonstrating its function. Spits can be moved up and down in front of, as well as towards and away from the roasting fire, giving the cook a huge degree of control as to the cooking temperature of the meat without having to resort to manipulating the fire itself. Countless thousands of visitors are happy with how the system would have, and does work, satisfied that the metal supporting racks could hold multiple spits laden with meat, spread out in front of the fire. Unfortunately, it is not Tudor and spits most likely never filled the fire from top to bottom, the surviving racks bear no resemblance to anything used for roasting in the sixteenth century, appearing more to have been made up out of a random assortment of parts from early nineteenth century ranges and made to fit a specific purpose now lost to us. Roasting in the sixteenth century sees an explosion in height, with racks becoming much taller than they had been in earlier centuries, but still nothing with the forward and backward movement that the current racks allow. Unfortunately, twenty five years of use appears to have leant them some credibility, and we now find the racks being used as evidence for what kitchens would have looked like in other historic properties. Will we be able to correct this? I suspect not, and it serves as a good reminder to us that

the work we do has an impact on the way material culture is viewed by others and will be viewed in the future.