"The Joy of Medieval Cooking"

This year's expedition in browsing the bookstalls of the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds for a gift to bring home to my husband resulted in the acquisition of a wonderful book, "Pleyn Delit; Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks" by Constance B. Hieatt, with the collaboration of Professor Brenda Hosington. Published by Canada's University of Toronto Press in 1996, this is an "updated" second edition of the original book published in 1976 by Hieatt and the late Dr. Sharon Butler.

There have been a number of medieval cookbooks published over the years, which the authors list in their Bibliography. Even cookbooks which aren't principally about medieval cooking, such as Roy Ackerman's "The Chef's Apprentice" (Headline Books, London, 1988), based on a television series, provides general history along with ten recipes for medieval dishes. And while Reay Tannahill's "Food in History" (Stein and Day Publishers, New York, 1973) doesn't list recipes, it remains, in my opinion, one of the most comprehensive and interesting books on the history of food.

"Pleyn Delit" is definitely a user friendly cookbook. Each recipe is numbered, all 142 of them. The chapters are divided into seven different categories: hor d'oeuvres, eggs and cold dishes; soups and potages; sauces; brquets, stews, and other boiled fish; poultry and meat dishes; broiled, baked, and roasted dishes; desserts and a final chapter on subtleties. Each recipe is given in its original English wording (or from the translation), with a modern interpretation following, with modern measurements and cooking instructions, including microwave times, which one assumes isn't too "medieval".

So what was medieval cooking like? What did the Italians eat before the importation of tomatoes? What did the Germans do without potatoes? What did the Belgians satisfy their sweet tooths
with before chocolate and vanilla? One might have thought medieval cuisine must have been boring. One would be dead wrong. Why not review the recipes instead of just the book? For a week, my husband and I decided to "test drive" a few of the recipes. Some of them had some rather unappetizing titles such as "Garbage", which included chicken heads and feet, "Compost", a vegetable-fruit chutney which didn't sound too bad, and "Creme Bastard", which might be the precursor of "creme anglais." In France, I wouldn't be surprised.

We began with "Haedus in Alio", based on an early 15th century Italian recipe from Bartolomeo Platina. The original recipe calls for kid, rather difficult to find, so the authors suggest substituting lamb. As an entire leg of lamb is a bit much for just two people, we had our butcher prepare a shoulder of lamb, with the scapula removed. The authors recommend rubbing the meat with a cut clove of garlic with optional fat or olive oil. I found that a mixture of crushed garlic with olive oil is easiest to spread on the lamb, since the garlic will be used in the basting sauce anyway. The lamb shoulder was placed in a preheated oven and cooked for half an hour while I made the basting sauce. Crushed garlic was used to make a paste with ground rosemary and saffron ("Wow!", my husband exclaimed on returning from his search for saffron, "This stuff isn't cheap, is it?" Nor was it in the Middle Ages, and used sparingly). The juice of half a lemon and two egg yolks (save the whites, there are recipes in this book to use them up with, such as the afore-mentioned Creme Bastard!) were blended into the paste. The drippings from the roasting pan completed the basting sauce and the lamb was basted every fifteen minutes, adding more and more drippings to the basting sauce each time, until the lamb was done. We prefer our lamb fairly well done, although the authors warned not to overcook it. Apparently we didn't, because it came out crusty on the outside and juicy on the inside. My husband declared this to be the best lamb he had ever eaten anywhere in his life, and it is now the de rigueur way to prepare lamb in this household!

With the lamb, we tried "Cariota", also from Platina. It is an incredibly easy way to cook carrots, just one I'd never thought of. Scrape the carrots, brush with olive oil and roast them until tender.
Although the authors gave times for microwaving, we weren't sure how long to cook them in a conventional oven. They didn't come out cooked quite long enough, in our opinion. Serve with a dressing of chopped fresh herbs in white wine and vinegar. The authors list white wine vinegar, but we used red and it was lovely.

The next day, we had lots of leftover lamb. Perfect for "Maqlua al-shiwa". I simply tossed all the leftover bits of cooked lamb into my nearly medieval food processor, along with walnuts, ground coriander (seeds, we assumed, although it wasn't specified), ground cumin, cinnamon, pepper, fresh mint leaves, one egg and salt. Give it a good whirl, shape the resulting mix into small cakes, fry in olive oil, sprinkle with lemon juice and serve hot. While this recipe is listed under hors d'oeuvres, the cakes were plenty filling on their own. It may be that our lamb wasn't fatty enough, but we found the cakes a bit dry and crumbly, and would try adding a bit of oil or another egg to the mix.

We had leftover carrots, and tried roasting them again, this time until they just began to carmalize. Fab! Although the book has two recipes for yogurt dishes, I served one of my own as a side dish: yogurt mixed with fresh chopped mint and paprika, which I don't think would have been too out of place in the Middle Ages. The next morning, my husband made "Payn Purdew", fayre brede & kutte it as troundez rounde, than wyl thin in the eyroun, putte hem in the pan & whan it is fryid, ley hem on a dysshe & serve it forth. Otherwise known as "French toast". Some things have survived pretty much the same over the centuries, although this is in the dessert section. But while I chose to be a purist and eat them with honey, my husband opted out for Canadian maple syrup. Traitor.

That evening we tried "Mishmishiya", again with lamb, this time stewed in apricot sauce. Boneless lamb chunks were cooked with chopped onions, ground coriander, cumin, pepper, cinnamon and ginger. Dried apricots were soaked and pureed in my venerable food processor, then added to the lamb along with ground almonds and a pinch of saffron. While this was simmering, "Ryse of Flessh" was being made, rice cooked in chicken broth (we cheated and used stock cubes), almond milk and saffron. Almond milk was a staple of the medieval cuisine, with clear instructions in the foreward on
how to do this properly. The leftover almond powder used to extract the milk from can be used in the Mishmishiya above, so nothing goes to waste. It was delicious, and our guest for that evening, a lady from the Philippines, remarked on how similar it was to a dish common in her own country, although they used coconut milk rather than almonds!

I then tried "Egurdouce", sweet and sour lamb. (Or kid, or rabbit, whichever takes your fancy. We opted for rabbit, as we were getting a little tired of lamb). Rabbit is inexpensive and easy to find in Paris. And while this recipe was a bit complicated, the results were lovely. Brown the rabbit, add parboiled currents (I substituted Corinthian raisins when I couldn't find currents), chopped onions, and fry. Then add wine, vinegar, sugar (we used brown), ginger, cinnamon, salt and pepper. Simmer for 45 minutes. The authors recommended thickening the sauce with the medieval technique of bread crumbs mixed with a bit of the sauce, but while I followed the directions and did so, it really wasn't necessary. Served with turnips baked in Raclette cheese with butter and ground nutmeg, we had a feast fit for a medieval baron.

Leftover rabbit bits came in handy the next evening for the "Ceci con ove", chickpeas made with either cheese or meat. Simplicity itself, canned chickpeas and left-over bits of meat were mixed with beaten eggs and flavored with cumin, coriander and saffron, and cooked in a saucepan just long enough to heat up the peas and thicken the sauce. This went quite well with the main dish for the evening, "Alows de Beef or de Motoun", or veal birds. Thin slices of veal beaten flat with a mallet (a rolling-pin did the job fairly well), and stuffed with minced onion, parsley, marjoram, egg yolks, bone marrow and ginger, tied with string and put on skewers and broiled. Then you have a choice of either a glaze made with a mix of ginger, pepper, and cinnamon in a thin batter of lemon juice, egg and flour, or sprinkling crumbled boiled egg yolks over them. We tried the egg yolks. These veal birds were quite good, although hard to control the doneness; if broiled enough to cook the stuffing, the meat was overdone. By the end of the week, we were stuffed, and so was our refrigerator with leftover goodies.
We'd tried a few of the more exotic recipes, but what of the more plain and simple? "Samon Roste in Sauce" was about as simple as it got. Brush salmon steaks with melted butter and broil. While they cook, toss minced spring onions, lemon juice, ginger, cinnamon and white wine into a saucepan, bring to a boil and turn down to a simmer until the fish is done. Put the fish on a plate, pour over the sauce and eat. Wonderful.

This is just a small sampling of recipes from "Pleyn Delit", and while we may have neglected to try a few more dessert recipes, it's mostly because the food was so rich and filling, we didn't have any room left. Medieval cooking was neither bland nor dull, nor drowned in outlandishly spicy sauces. Nor is "medieval food" country specific; the recipes in this book are French, English, Italian, Arabic and a few in between. We didn't go so far as to strive for "authenticity" by using bread trenchers instead of plates, or fingers instead of forks, but it's the taste we were interested in, not any pseudo-ceremonies. "Pleyn Delit" is more than just a curiosity, it's a practical cookbook destined to become marked with the stains and creases of the best, well-used cookbooks. "Pleyn Delit" is... well... a plain delight. Bon appetit!

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