

The Food of Bretonnia

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Dedicated to the memory of my cat, who Morr took this Friday, May 13th of 2011. A fitting tribute, as he was a great lover of food (particularly if it wasn't his and nobody was watching).

1. General clarifications

Greetings and thank you for your interest in my ramblings!

I have based this article mostly on the book *Essen und Trinken im Mittelalter* (Food and Drink in the Middle Ages) by the legendary (all right, by a historian's standard) Professor Ernst Schubert (if you speak German, READ IT!), as well as the combined background from 5th and 6th edition (including most miniatures). I have no doubt that further publications by GW could well contradict what I'm writing here, but from a scientific viewpoint (and what we have on background so far), this is probably very close to what we can expect Bretonnian cuisine to be like.

A note of caution, though: I have to admit that I'm changing quite fluently between "our" real Earth history and Old World history. I hope that this is not too confusing - should any need for clarification arise, please do not hesitate to tell me so!

2. Foodstuffs common to all classes

Firstly, it should be pointed out which foodstuffs would not have been available to the Old World at all, as this already seriously limits the items on the menu: Potatoes, tomatoes, corn, paprika, chili, pumpkins, chocolate, and certain species of beans (such as kidney beans) all came from America and probably would not have been known yet (though we cannot, of course, say with any certainty what some daring crusader might have brought along from Lustria...). Also, while noodle dough was known, pasta as we all love it today was not - medieval noodles were either roughly cuneate (and then eaten as a dessert rather than as a salty dish) or much like ravioli (though generally somewhat larger - and the filling would make it more of an upper class dish). Furthermore, the large garden strawberry made its first appearance roughly between the 17th-18th century and would probably be missing from Bretonnia's desserts too (only much smaller wild species were common).

In medieval cuisine, almost as much effort was put into preserving food as into preparing the respective dishes themselves (considering that preserved food could, in dire times, mean the difference between life and death - and the Old World has all too many dire times...). As most food preservatives were an invention of the Napoleonic era, it is unlikely that the Brets would have jam or foods that require similar additives. While pickling cabbage was known - Sauerkraut was virtually ubiquitous in Middle Europe - the most common methods of preserving food were salting, smoking, and drying. Every Bretonnian's diet, regardless of social standing, would include items that have been treated in such a manner - though the amount would vary depending on the season. Hence, salt was a sought-after

commodity - also known as "white gold", it was either mined or harvested from the sea. It is for a good reason that we use the term "salary" - it derives from the Latin word *sal* = salt, as people were sometimes paid in salt (since there was no place in the world where salt was unwelcome, it was just as good as money). While the nobility could afford enough salt to season their dishes as they pleased, the peasantry would probably have to use virtually their whole (moderate) supply for preserving food.

Similarly, honey was also used as a food preservative - though I suspect that very few beekeepers in Bretonnia would be private men. While in the Middle Ages beekeeping was mostly an occupation for monks or professionals in the employment of a feudal lord, in Bretonnia, the situation would not be very different: Beekeeping requires specific skills and is time-consuming to the point of not allowing the beekeeper enough time to provide sustenance for himself while at the same time meeting the extremely high tithes. Hence, while some peasants might keep a small beehive, the greater amount of honey would go to the nobility. The peasantry will probably have to make do with a few spoonfuls for the holidays.

As to the foodstuffs themselves, there are quite a few items we will find in all social stratae. Several vegetables would inevitably appear on the tables of both noble and peasant households. Cabbage in virtually all forms was, as I've said, ubiquitous, though it was the peasantry that relied in particular on that item. Peas, lentils, green beans, and turnips were very common (and I believe the Archer sprue includes one of the latter...), as well as onions (see the Men-at-Arms sprue). Onions were popular as they were both comparatively easy to grow and extremely rich in both fiber and vitamins - and that is without counting their medicinal value!

Herbs were equally appreciated as a cooking ingredient and for their medicinal use. Basil was, among other things, used to alleviate bad breath (although the plant fares poorly in colder weather), whereas rosemary was used against headaches. The refrain from "Scarborough Fair" does not list "Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme" for no reason - those actually were the most common kitchen and medicinal herbs.

Fruit is a problematic affair - as most fruit trees require special tending, most of them would (at least in Bretonnia) probably be in seigneurial hands. The most common fruit would be grapes, apples, and pears, though these would almost never have been consumed raw by the higher classes - it was thought that unprepared, "cold" food was actively unhealthy, as medieval scholars were of the opinion that such food would be detrimental to the body's equilibrium of cold and warm aspects (hence our common "cold" - the term comes not from catching said illness by sitting in the cold, but rather from the idea that it is simply a surplus of "coldness" in our system). However, as those were rather the concerns of the educated elite, we can readily assume that some raw consumption must have gone on among the peasants! Grapes, however, were mostly turned into wine. Apples could be dried out and serve as an extra source of vitamins during the winter (the concept of vitamins was of course, yet unknown - people simply knew what one had to eat to stay relatively healthy, though there were some kinks in that system, such as the ignorance of ergot - see below).

The one item all classes would keep finding on their respective menu would be grain and everything made from grain - bread, gruel, and bran in particular. However, the percentage of grain products would vary with regard to the social standing, as well as the types of grain. Nobles would be more likely to eat bread made from wheat flour, whereas the peasantry would have had to make do with barley and rye flour. As with many foodstuffs, grain could not be stored indefinitely; also, many grain crops, the refined sorts in particular, require relatively stable weather conditions, which is probably expecting a bit much from the world of Warhammer (where it occasionally rains blood). But even if the weather were to play along, grain was not at all risk-free - for instance, it has been proven that a majorly frugal diet can wreak havoc with your teeth (archaeologists can, these days, tell apart a meat-eating caveman from a prehistoric farmer by the

respective state of their teeth).

But even so, there were two more major disadvantages to our most common food. Firstly - bread with finely ground flour in particular - it was full of pulverized stone from the millstones, which would only hasten the degeneration of the teeth (it's like chewing fine sandpaper). Secondly, most grains - rye in particular (a fungus known as ergot) - were prone to fungal infections (particularly after long periods of rain or in swampy terrain), which were not recognized as such. The mycotoxins included in those could cause seizures, hallucinations, internal bleeding and organ damage, weeping pustules, fever, gangrene in fingers and toes, diarrhea, vomiting, even death in severe cases or after prolonged exposure. As we are talking Warhammer here, it is likely that the effect of such tainted grain would be even worse! There could be quite a few mutants and beastmen out there who simply had the bad fortune to chow down on the wrong loaf of bread...

Finally, it should be pointed out that the basic ways of preparing food were generally identical for all classes, as the relatively simple medieval hearth put certain constraints on cooking techniques - even the kitchens of the nobility were still comparatively simple by the end of the 15th century. The only things that would hugely differ were the ingredients and their quality, plus the time invested in the preparation of the respective dish (as a noble could afford a professional cook).

This, however, is where the common ground ends. As probably everybody here has expected, the differences were more than staggering...

3. Foodstuffs typical for the peasantry

When it comes to basic food groups, the rarest item on the peasant's menu is unquestionably meat. This is mainly due to the fact that the nutritional value of meat is comparatively poor with regard to some (much cheaper) vegetables, such as beans or turnips - with Bretonnian peasants being notoriously poor, it is more than likely that they would have mostly foregone meat consumption as a luxury. Also, most meat sources from our days would have too great an agrarian value to be simply slaughtered: Chicken were too valuable because of their eggs, whereas cows and goats provided milk, butter, and cheese (which were probably the medieval man's most important source of calcium), and sheep were highly valued because of their wool. The only animal which was mainly kept as a meat source was the pig, and even those had other uses (such as truffle hunters, see Knight Errant).

As Bretonnian tithes are relatively high, it is very likely that most lean pork would have gone to the nobility, while the

peasantry would have to make do with the gristlier and more sinewy parts, and, of course, the offal. In parts of rural France, you can find quite a few offal dishes that are probably very similar to what you can expect to find in Bretonnia. The redoubtable Andouillette is one such dish - an offal sausage not dissimilar to Haggis. It should be pointed out that while Andouillette is considered a delicacy (and is available virtually everywhere in France), anyone who is not used to the taste from childhood will, most likely, find it to be almost incredibly disgusting („It tasted like scrapings from a Russian railway toilet“;, as my grandmother put it. Having accidentally tasted an Andouillette myself - only realizing my mistake when I felt that horrible aroma permeate my mouth - I most vehemently concur). Apart from that, there is an endless variety of offal dishes of all sorts, ranging from sausages filled with brain matter to boiled pig‘s trotters.

As the hunt was strictly a pastime of the nobility in medieval Europe, it is unlikely to be any different in Bretonnia (Knight Errant and Knight of the Realm suggest as much) - apart from the fact that the punishment meted out for poaching would undoubtedly be harsher. Hence, it is probably only outlaws (and perhaps a lucky servant who stumbles upon an only half gnawed-off bone after a feast) who get to taste venison and the like.

The fact that the Men-at-arms sprue includes hares, pheasants and smaller birds which look like quails or pigeons (typical for medieval peasant cuisine) suggests that while Bretonnian peasants were not allowed to hunt directly, they would be allowed to keep any animal that they encountered fortuitously, though deer and the like were reserved for the noble classes. As the background for the Hermit of Malmont suggests, there could be one exception - if there were a Grail Knight living nearby, it would fall to the local peasantry to feed him, which would probably include hunting. But woe betide any peasant caught with a deer and without a good explanation...

As the Bretonnian army book states (which is backed up all the way by science), some of the most common dishes were oatmeal and cabbage. Cabbage, in particular, was almost the ideal dish when it came to a balanced diet: In its varying forms, it remains uniquely high in fiber, minerals, and vitamins (even after prolonged cooking). Oat is relatively high in fiber and minerals - when cooked with milk, Oatmeal or stewed turnips followed by a dish of cabbage would provide the consumer with at least a modicum of basic nutrients.

Eggs were another matter. As the Christian faith regulates the consumption of eggs quite strictly (they were as illegal as meat during Lent, Fridays, and other days which were considered days of fasting. People who consumed them anyway were actually threatened with the idea that Jesus would come down from heaven and personally kill anyone who violated those regulations - no joke, people!), one can expect some killjoy regulation to be in place in Bretonnia. However, even with ridiculously high tithes, some eggs would probably wind up in the pots and pans of the peasantry. The Middle Ages already saw a huge variety of relatively simple egg dishes, though we can still expect eggs to be relatively rare and expensive, so it is a reasonable assumption that such food would be reserved for holidays.

It is unnecessary to underline that the lower classes sought to augment their food supply wherever they could - although the ways to do so legally were limited: Mushrooms and wild nuts and berries were common in wood-rich areas, and their harvest was generally not regulated by seigneurial law. Mushrooms could also be preserved for short to medium spans of time by drying them out, and provided a welcome addition in the sometimes rather monotonous menu of the peasant. Any peasant lucky enough to be living near the sea (although „lucky“ is a relative term here... „Norse raiders“ probably says it all) could probably add to that clams and crabs, though it is more than likely that their consumption is at least loosely regulated in Bretonnia.

There were many semi-wild plants which could provide some extra nutrients, such as cress and nettles - not, however dandelions (those were decorative plants, originally, and were still quite rare in the 17th century - hence, they have probably not yet infested every garden in Bretonnia...).

The rat in the Archer sprue might well be intended for consumption - it was indeed not unheard of in dire times (such as most of the 14th century) - though it could also be that the rat might be used as bait (as sometimes public-minded feudal lords allowed their subjects to fish in the castle moat, considering fish was a highly valued commodity). However, the medieval definition of „edible meat“ basically was „anything from a breathing creature which isn‘t human“. We know for a fact that people would eat cats, otters, hedgehogs, marmots, and storks. Rats

don't seem that exotic a food source, in comparison.

All in all - even a Bretonnian peasant could ideally survive on his regular diet without any major deficiencies, though I seriously doubt that any of us here would fancy having to. And let's not forget that "ideal" is hardly a description I'd attribute to the world of Warhammer...

4. Foodstuffs typical for the nobility

The first choice for this category is obvious - meat galore!

As the meat definition for peasants applied to the nobility as well, some more extravagant items would inevitably appear on the menu - a medieval noble would virtually eat anything that moves. Larks, nightingales, even swans have been known to land on the plates of the upper classes. However, everyday food was a somewhat simpler affair, though it would, of course, have a higher content of meat.

Undoubtedly, the types of meat most common for the tables of Bretonnia's nobility would be venison, wildfowl, pork, and chicken. However, meat was generally not, by then, consumed as we know it - as meat preservation was a somewhat iffy affair, the respective meat would be consumed almost immediately after slaughtering rather than letting it mature a little. Either that, or it would be smoked or salted for long-term storage. The ripe meat we are used to today was simply too risky for most medieval folk - if the meat got a little too ripe and rotted, valuable resources would have been squandered, and with the Warhammer world being so unforgiving, I cannot imagine that anyone would have been willing to take that risk.

Meat, of course, has a lot more "risky" aspects when we are considering Warhammer background. I seriously doubt anyone would fancy a steak from a mutated boar with four tusks and red eyes, so I believe that the selection of meat was even slimmer than for a European noble (which makes it all the more likely that meat wasn't allowed to mature).

Many quarry from the hunt would probably merely end up as trophies, their meat being too obviously tainted - and for some reason, boar are the most likely candidates to fall into that category (see Knight of the Realm or the BRB). This begs the question whether boar is actually eaten in Bretonnia. In Europe, it was a valued (and darn tasty, too) type of meat, for which many different recipes have survived. In the Warhammer world, this seems a little dubious, as Warhammer boar are hugely different from ours - considering the description from the most recent O&G army book, most

of them probably have meat tough as leather. Few wild boar would actually be worth consuming. I assume that this could well be the mark of a seasoned noble hunter in Bretonnia - being able to spot the particular animals which are free from taint and still make good eating. The young are an obvious choice, though it is probably more the challenge of getting past the berserk sow that makes them worthy of consideration for an accomplished huntsman!

Considering the background, fish would rather more be something for the noble classes - and our history suggests as much too: While fish were enormously plentiful until the 19th century, there had been attempts to regulate fishing dating back as early as the Carolingian era (8th-9th century), which probably translates into extremely restrictive legislature in Bretonnia. Some lords might sell fishing permits, but in Bretonnia, this would probably mean that only the wealthiest peasants could afford it. Plus, we have to bear in mind that no matter how noble you were, getting your hands on fish should you be living further inland will inevitably prove problematic.

Hence, salt water fish or crustaceans would be highly sought after luxury items if you were living in Bastonne or Montfort - even salted herrings wouldn't be cheap. As fish and assorted crustaceans which dwelled in freshwater were routinely bred by monks and specialized granges in the Middle Ages (Cistercian monasteries were renowned for their aquacultures - as they lived in a strictly vegetarian manner, fish were even more important in their diet), we can assume that those are common enough in Bretonnia as well. Some public-minded noble might actually feed some to his household (though he is likely to deduct it from their pay afterwards...).

One ingredient we are likely to find in any noble Bretonnian household is jus vert. This would be a liquid herb concentrate with varying ingredients (basically, every accomplished chef had his own recipe). In late medieval Europe, it was the absolute culinary craze - and as the Bretonnians like to show off with fancy stuff of about any category, jus vert is thus a likely must-have for the nobility.

Other ingredients which we can get from any supermarket these days were, back then, so valuable that wars were fought over the control of the trade routes.

One of these items is a less obvious candidate: Rice was an absolute rarity. It had to be imported from China or India by the Silk Road, and, while it transported extremely well, the quantities were comparatively tiny. The same is true for almonds - these had to be imported from warmer climates, as almond trees cannot stand long exposure to sub-zero temperatures (one European winter on the outside, and the average almond tree has had it) - and the decorative trees we have in our gardens these days were bred in the 17th century and later still. Almonds, mixed with white bread crumbs, sage, and butter, could be used for baking small cakes which were used to sop up gravy and sauces - the rich man's bread for certain occasions.

Needless to say that spices were the probably most hotly sought after and expensive ingredients. Pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger root, cloves - all of these were quite literally worth fighting for.

Hence, gingerbread was probably one of the most expensive commodities known in the Middle Ages. Every spice that went into the dough was literally worth its weight in gold, making each gram of gingerbread as valuable as any treasure. A popular 16th century folk tale from Nürnberg (Nuremberg) actually tells us of a wealthy merchant who had a loyal and honest servant thrown into jail, as the merchant had suspected him of stealing his box of gingerbread! (It then transpired that the merchant had, while under the influence, mislaid the box himself. The servant was freed, though the merchant, of course, remained unpunished...) Anyone living in Britain might even be familiar with the custom of gilding gingerbread - while purely decorative, it originally was meant to underline the value of this dessert.

This leads us to the fact that there is one category of dishes which would be reserved almost exclusively for the nobility: the desserts. The best dessert a peasant could hope for would be a bowl of honeyed oatmeal with a few apple chunks or berries, perhaps some fried pears in batter - anything beyond that would be the prerogative of the nobility. This is mainly

due to the fact that sugar cane would simply not grow in colder climates, and that extracting sugar from turnips was a technique not known until the Napoleonic era. Hence, sugar was almost incredibly expensive, and thus a lot more prestigious than honey - it had to be imported from Sicily, Egypt, Canary Islands or any other place with a suitable climate and a high level of agricultural development (mostly where the highly advanced Arab farming system had left its mark). Generally, it can be said that the more expensive the ingredients, the greater the pains a noble would go to to obtain them!

One of the most popular desserts was marzipan in one of its many forms. We've already seen how rare almonds were, and, considering how expensive sugar was (though one could use honey instead, if needs be), this made it the perfect dessert to show off with. There was another reason for the popularity of marzipan - it could easily be sculpted into almost any shape. Heraldic motifs, castles, exotic animals and the like would adorn the banquet tables of the nobility - the sculptures themselves being sometimes a lot more elaborate than the preparation of the dish itself!

All in all, if you were a nobleman, you could hope for a relatively balanced and diversified diet - though I'm glad we can simply pick up a pizza or some Chinese takeout these days.

Long live the Round Table of Bretonnia!

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