

Menu Notes

These dishes all date from a much later period than the life of St. Robert, mostly from the fourteenth century, because the earliest English cookery book to survive in full was written for King Richard II in the 1390s. This text has the earliest salad recipe and one of the earliest lasagne recipes – in English not Italian, surprisingly enough! The sauces are French or Italian in origin from roughly the same period, but were also widely known in medieval England.

St. Robert himself was a vegetarian, eating neither meat nor fish and living off cereals, fruits and vegetables. He worked his own fields and kept animals for ploughing and probably dairy foods. He drank springwater, and maybe some ale too. He would have been familiar with cabbage soup, which poorer people ate, although it is also found in high-status recipes like the one you are eating. Most poor people could not afford meat, which is why pious people like St. Robert saw it as a humble thing not to eat it. As the son of a wealthy man of York, Robert would also have known the heavier meat- or fish-based meals of the rich. By modern standards, the diet of poorer people was much healthier than that of the rich, but it depended too much on a successful harvest. Poor people in Yorkshire did starve if the harvest failed or warfare devastated crops, while the rich could afford to buy in grain from elsewhere.

It is often said that the rich did not eat a lot of fruit and vegetables but they probably did so. It is just that they were so common that they rarely wrote about them. Nor did they leave traces of them in their account books, because they did not need to buy them; we know they owned their own gardens and orchards. Medieval people certainly appreciated the symbolism of all these foods, especially fruit, depicting apples and strawberries in religious art. When the fork first appeared in medieval England in the fourteenth century, it was probably mainly used to eat pickled and jellied fruits. St. Robert would not have known the fork at all. Many of the vegetables that we enjoy most today—tomatoes, sweetcorn, peppers, chillies, pumpkin, runner beans and potatoes—came from the

Americas so were not known in Europe before the sixteenth century, and not widely eaten until much later. For the same reason, medieval Europeans did not have chocolate or vanilla. Tea and coffee were known in parts of Africa and Asia, but not available in Europe until the seventeenth century.

A lot of fruits and vegetables have changed dramatically since the Middle Ages, and we have access to a much greater variety of food now thanks to fridge-freezers and jet planes. The strawberries of the Middle Ages would have been the tiny wild variety. Animals, eggs and vegetables were smaller than now. We cannot exactly recover the tastes and the styles of the Middle Ages because our soils and climate are so different, and humans have modified foods over the centuries to improve yields and alter colours and flavours. Most recipes do not include weights & measurements or much in the way of method.

Medieval people enjoyed spices in their foods or other ingredients that we do not use so much now in main courses: cinnamon, almonds, ginger, sugar, nutmeg, etc. Many of these ingredients were very expensive because they were imported from India or Indonesia. Sugar cane was grown all around the Mediterranean long before it crossed the Atlantic (sugar beet was not processed for sugar until the eighteenth century). St. Robert probably never tasted sugar. Instead, he could have used honey to sweeten his food.

Spices were not used to disguise bad meat as is often stated. If you could afford these spices, then you could afford to buy the best fresh meat. Some of these ingredients added colour and flavour; others were used medicinally to balance the qualities of the food. The spices were thought to warm up and moisten the roasted meats. The poor could probably only have used salt, and if they were lucky, black pepper (the cheapest spice even though it came from India). What you are eating here today is rich in spices, based on recipes from the top table of the king!

Enjoy your meal!

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