

A pound of Pepper



- Food in medieval Inverness -

Even though Inverness was a town with a weekly market you wouldn't have been able to buy all your food from a shop. You would have to grow, rear or catch most of it yourself. In addition there were no freezers so people had to eat what was in season or what they could preserve by drying, pickling or salting. So just what did our medieval ancestors eat?

One of the most common finds from archaeological excavations are food remains. The digs in Castle Street and Friars Lane produced lots of animal bone (mainly cattle, but also sheep and deer) as well as fish bones, seashells and occasionally burnt cereal grains and hazelnuts.

Then there were fragments from cooking pots, jugs for wine and expensive bronze skillets (frying pans). We also have iron arrows for hunting wild birds, lead fishing weights and quernstones for grinding wheat into flour.



Inverness' leather and wool trade meant that beef and mutton were plentiful. The burgesses also had land outside the town on which they could keep animals, grow wheat and vegetables. Then there were wild foods, Salmon from the Ness, sea and shellfish from the Moray Firth (very important for the fast on Fridays), Deer and wild birds on the hills, whilst moors and woodland provided hazelnuts, mushrooms, fruits and berries.



Bread was an essential part of the medieval diet. Most towns had a bakery and bread would have been baked daily using wholemeal flour ground in the burgh mill. However some people, such as the friars, had their own querns. Perhaps to mill white flour for special occasions such as feast days.



Pot quern - the flour poured out of the open mouth - from the Dominican Friary



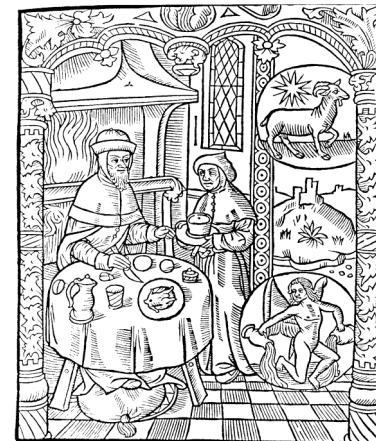
Spices, such as pepper, were rare and very expensive, but we know that Inverness was importing such luxuries. A charter of King Alexander III granted in 1236 records that the yearly rent for the island of Merkinch was a pound of pepper - a lot of money!

Continental merchants probably brought in other spices as well as luxuries such as French wine, currants and perhaps even sugar.

Such luxuries were beyond the average Highlander and were so rare that even wealthy burgesses, or clan chiefs, would not have used them on a daily basis. They were perhaps saved for the many important feast days celebrated by the Catholic church.



Most meals would have been fairly simple, roast or boiled meats or fish, vegetables or perhaps a stew served with bread. Breakfast was particularly important and so yes medieval Highlanders would have eaten porridge, as well as oatcakes and, as they used every part of an animal, probably even haggis.



Recipes for a gode cooke

Below are some medieval dishes that might have been eaten by a wealthy burgess (they all involve the use of expensive spices - particularly pepper).

There weren't many medieval recipe books (most cooks couldn't read or write) and those that do exist don't give quantities. However we have included a modern list of ingredients with the original recipes.

So why not have a go at medieval meal at home?

Muscules in Broth

Take Muscules, And sith hem and pike hem oute of the shell And drawe the broth thorgh a streynour into a faire vessell And sette hit on the fire And then take faire brede and stepe hit with ye same broth and draw hit thorgh a streynour And cast in to a potte with ye sewe and munge onyons wyn and powder peper and lete boyle and cast ther to the Musculus and powder ginger and saffron and salte And the serve ye hit forthe.

Civey of Mallard

To mak mallard in ceyv tak mallard henne or cony and rost them till they be almost enoughe or else chope them and fry them in freche grece and fry onyons mynced and put them in a pot and cast ther to freche brothe and half wyne clowes maces powder of guinger and pepper and draw it with benyggar and when it is boiled cast ther to thy licour and powder of guingere and benyggar and session it and serve it.

Duck stewed with onions



1 duck (chicken or rabbit)
¼ tsp each ginger and pepper
3-4 onions, chopped
Pinch mace and ground clove
2 tbsps lard (or duck fat)
Salt to taste
250 ml chicken stock
2 slices toasted wholemeal bread
250 ml red wine
1 tbsps red wine vinegar

Roast the duck (chicken or rabbit) and then cut it up into pieces. Add to a pan and cook with the onions in the fat until they are soft. Meanwhile soak the toast in the stock and then liquidise. Add this paste to the pan along with the wine, vinegar and spices. Simmer for 10-15 minutes or until the meat is cooked through.

(You took your own knife to a meal and ate with your hands or a spoon (there were no forks). There were bowls for soup, but your food, including stew, might be served on a 'trencher' - a thick piece of bread!)

Gyngere Brede

Take a quart of hony and sethe it and skeme it clene take Saffroun powder Pepir and brow per-on take gratyd Brede and make it so chargeaunt pat it wol be lechyd per-on take powder Canelle and straw per-on per-on make yit square lyke as pou wolt leche yit take when pou lechyst hyt and caste Box leves a-bouen y-styked per-on clowys. And if pou wolt have it Red coloure it with Saunderys y-now.

Mussel Soup

2 pints (1 litre) fresh mussels
450ml white wine
150g breadcrumbs
¼ tsp each white pepper and ginger
2 onions, chopped
Pinch saffron
450ml mussel broth



Scrub the mussels well and steam them in 600ml water for 10 minutes. Remove from the broth and discard shells. Strain the broth and then use a little to moisten the breadcrumbs, leave to absorb for a few minutes and then liquidise. Sauté onions and then add breadcrumb mix, wine, broth and spices. Simmer for 10 minutes and then add the cooked mussels, and heat through. If you wish you can use ale instead of wine or leave it out altogether.

(Broths were often poured over a slice of toasted bread to make a 'sop' - the origin of our word 'soup'.)

Stepkes of Venison or Bef

Take Venyson or Bef and leche and gredyl it up broun per-on take Wynegre and a litel verious and a litel Wyne and putte powder perpir per-on y-nowe and Gyngere and atte pe dressoure straw on poudir Canelle y-nowe pat pe stekys be al y-helid per-wyth and but a litel Sawce and pan serve it forth.



Venison or Beef Steaks

1kg beef or venison steaks
½ tsp salt
1 tbsps red wine vinegar
¼ tsp pepper
2 tbsps red wine
⅛ tsp each ginger and cinnamon

Fry the steaks in a lightly greased pan for as long as necessary. Then mix the vinegar, wine and seasonings and spoon over the steaks. Serve at once. Alternatively use a cheaper cut of meat and chop into chunks, brown in the pan, then add the other ingredients, mix, cover and cook on a low heat for 1.5 hours or until the meat is cooked.

(It's a myth that medieval food was highly spiced, spices were so expensive that they were used in moderation. So you may wish to increase the quantities given in these recipes to reflect modern tastes.)

Gingerbread

120ml clear honey
¼ tsp white pepper
450g stale bread, grated
Pinch saffron (optional)
1 tsp each ginger and cinnamon

Bring honey to the boil and skim off any scum. Keep pan over a very low heat and stir in breadcrumbs and spices. Turn out and press down into a 20cm non-stick baking tray. Cool for several hours and then turn out onto a plate. Serve in small slices.



(Finish your medieval meal with fresh fruit, cheese and oatcakes and perhaps a mulled wine or ale.)



Further Reading

<http://www.godecookery.com> - A website devoted to medieval cookery

Black, M. (2003) *Medieval Cookery: Recipes and History (Cooking Through the Ages)*. English Heritage Publications.

Hiett, C., Hosington, B. and Butler, S. (1996) *Pleyn Delit: Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks*. University of Toronto Press.

Yeoman, P. (1995) *Medieval Scotland*. Historic Scotland.



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