

# Ready, steady, cook

## MISSION OBJECTIVES

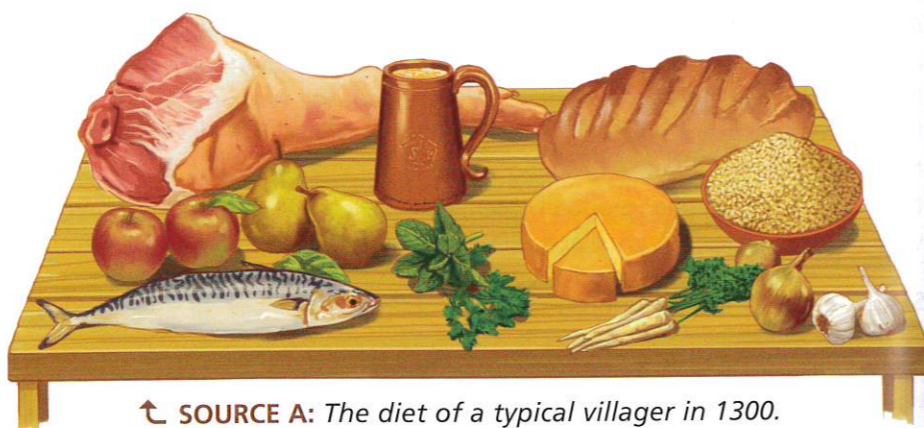
- To understand how food and drink in medieval England is totally different from the food and drink we enjoy today.

Think about what you have eaten over the last week. You may find that you've eaten chocolate bars, a few burgers or pizzas, chicken nuggets or maybe something more healthy such as pasta, rice or fruit and vegetables grown locally or imported from abroad. Today, we have more choice in where we get all our food, what we eat, even how we cook it, than ever before. Things have certainly changed a lot since the Middle Ages. So what was it like to eat in medieval Britain?

### It ain't pleasant for a peasant

A peasant's food was pretty dull and the same year in year out. There was no tea, coffee, orange juice or fizzy pop and the water wasn't usually fit to drink so they drank a watery kind of beer called **ale**.

A peasant's basic food was tough black bread known as **rye bread** made from grain. This bread accompanied all meals. The first meal of the day was breakfast, eaten as soon as the sun rose. For dinner, taken about 10.00am, a peasant would again eat bread, along with cheese, onion, eggs and perhaps a jug of cider or ale. For supper, at about 4.00pm, the bread would probably be dipped in soup or stew (known as pottage) flavoured with vegetables, nettles, flour, dumplings and garlic.



↑ SOURCE A: The diet of a typical villager in 1300.

### Healthy diet

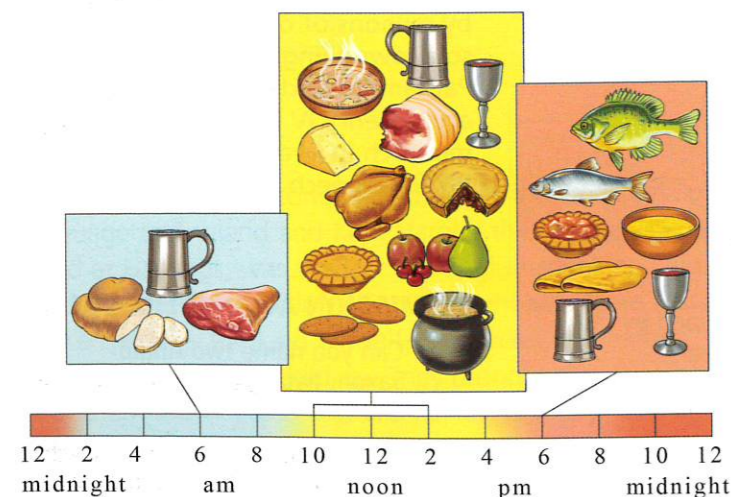
Peasants grew a lot of strong-flavoured vegetables and herbs to make their dull food tastier. Onions, garlic, leeks, cabbage, carrots (which were white not orange), parsley and mint were common. Apples, cherries, pears and wild berries were also eaten, and there might even be a few beehives because honey was one of the few ways to sweeten anything. In fact, a peasant's diet was probably healthier than that of a rich noble living in a manor house or castle, because they ate so many vegetables – the nobles ate lots and lots more meat!

## PAUSE for Thought

Even today we still have a taste for salty or smoked food. For example, some of you will put extra salt on your chips or enjoy 'smokey bacon' crisps or 'smoked' kippers. We like these things because humans have been preserving food like this for thousands of years and our taste buds haven't changed much in that time.

## FACT Spud free zone!

Potatoes didn't reach England until the 1500s so there would be no chips or potato wedges for the peasants to enjoy!



↑ SOURCE B: Lord's meal diagram.

### What about the meat?

If peasants did eat meat, it was usually bacon. This was the most common meat amongst peasants because pigs, who tend to eat anything, were very easy to keep. But there were no refrigerators to keep food fresh so meat was usually salted or smoked. Peasants would spend days rubbing salt into meat to stop it going bad, or hang their strips of meat high up in the roof of their cottage so it would dry out and last longer.

### Life in the manor house

For the richer folk, daily life was a lot easier than for the peasant. They had servants to do most things for them, including the cooking! They still ate a lot of bread, but it was a better quality wheat bread. Like a peasant, a rich noble would eat three times a day, but would eat a lot more meat – and drink a lot more wine! Soups and stews were common but occasionally there might be a pudding, perhaps a fruit tart or a pancake.

### Medieval feast

For a special occasion, the lord and lady of the manor would hold a feast in their largest room – the great hall. A servant would lay out spoons, knives, drinking cups and bread. Forks were rare. The lord and his guests would probably have spent the day hunting for the meat about to be eaten – venison, wild boar, pheasant, crane, wild duck, swans or even peacocks. Slices of stale bread called **trenchers** were used as plates. The juices from the meat and vegetables would soak into them and when the meal was over they might be given to the poor – or thrown to the dogs (see Source C). Servants would then carry around warm bowls of water and bits of cloth so that guests could rinse and clean their fingers after eating.

### A spicy story

Because people grew bored with salted and smoked food, sometimes spices were added to it to make it more interesting. But spices were so expensive (they had to be imported from abroad) that they were only for the rich. In castles and manor houses, spices were even kept in a locked cupboard.



↑ SOURCE C: A medieval feast.

## WISE-UP Words

ale  
rye bread  
trenchers

## Work

- Copy out and complete this paragraph, choosing one answer from the bold words in the brackets.

A peasant's basic food was (**bread/potatoes**) which he ate with all meals. Cheese, eggs and fish were popular too. They drank (**lemonade/ale**) with most meals because the (**water/whiskey**) was not fit to drink. Peasants often had a small (**garden/garage**) next to their cottage where they grew lots of strong-flavoured (**herbs/vegetables**) and herbs to make their duller food a bit (**duller/tastier**). (**Bacon/Lamb**) was one of the most common meats because (**dogs/pigs**) were so easy to keep. To preserve food over the long winter months, meat and fish were (**frozen/salted/ tinned**) and smoked.

- Copy out the diagram of a rich noble's meals (Source B).
  - Now draw a similar diagram to show your meals during one of the days during the last week. Remember to include everything you have eaten, even snacks.
  - Write down at least two ways in which the noble's meals are different from your meals.

## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you explain what a trencher and pottage were?
- Can you explain how and why a rich person's food differed from a poor person's?