Cooking for cultures with no extant recipes
Hrafnir Fiachman / Patrick Cauldwell
October 2002

Recipes

Why do we use recipes
In modern times we use recipes for more than one purpose. For many if not most people, recipes are a set of directions to allow you to make basic dishes that you wouldn’t know how to prepare otherwise.

We use cookbooks to learn basic cooking skills, or to teach or remind us how to prepare basic recipes. Good examples of this kind of cookbooks are Betty Crocker, or the Joy of Cooking. These are books that teach basic skills and recipes, and for many beginning cooks provide an indispensable reference without which they would be lost.

To others, recipes are introductions to new and different “exotic” food that they otherwise wouldn’t come in contact with. For example, people in the US buy cookbooks on Japanese cooking. Most people here don’t grow up with Japanese cooking, so we rely on recipes to teach us about how to cook in a style with which we are unfamiliar.

Some cookbooks or cooking magazines are also designed for very experienced and / or professional. Fine Cooking magazine from Taunton Press is a good example of this type. It is meant not to teach basic cooking skills, but to help professional or highly skilled cooks to learn or perfect new techniques.

Why did they use recipes
It is for the latter two reasons that most people in period used “recipes”. Almost all of what we would think of as recipes that survive from period sources were meant for professional cooks. Upper class or noble households employed professional cooks to prepare their meals. These cooks were often pressured to constantly invent and prepare new dishes to please their employers. That’s not always an easy task, so recipes were exchanged between professional cooks so that they had a ready supply of new ideas with which to thrill diners.

What this means for us is that the recipes we do have from period sources are not representative of what most people were eating at the time. They represent what the chefs of the wealthy were preparing for the upper classes and the nobility.
It is not until the 16th or 17th centuries that the middle classes start sharing recipes in print form. Books like The English Housewife by Gervase Markham were designed, like Betty Crocker today, to provide a primer for the beginning housewife who needed to run both a household and a kitchen. Not surprisingly, the rise of this new kind of cookbook is coincident with the rise of the middle class in Western Europe.
**Why didn’t they use recipes**

The biggest and most obvious reason that many cultures didn’t use recipes was simply because they couldn’t write. The Vikings are a good example of this. Most of the people in the Viking world were probably illiterate, and even if they could read and write, those activities were reserved for formal religious or record keeping functions. It wouldn’t have occurred to anyone in Viking Scandinavia to write down a recipe.

This brings us to the other main reason for a lack of recipes: people doing the cooking (mostly women) already knew how to cook in the style that was expected of them. They were taught how to cook by their mothers, as their mothers before them had been. This was still typical in many places until very recently. How many of us had Grandmothers whose fabulous lemon meringue pie consisted of “a pinch of this and a dash of that”.

**Why should we be interested?**

So why should we care? Why go to the trouble of trying to recreate food for which we don’t have any solid recipes? One reason is to try and capture the food of the common people. While the Romans were big on writing everything down, and we have a fine example of a cookbook (written by Apicius), that cookbook doesn’t represent the kind of food that the average Roman-on-the-street was eating. In fact, it’s completely removed from the kind of simple, easy to prepare food that the common folk in Roman ate on a daily basis.

In the context of the SCA, there are certainly times when it is a lot of fun to prepare something like an Apician feast, or a 15th century French banquet complete with subtleties. However, this things are best prepared when you have a full kitchen behind you, and a nice modern stove to cook over. If you want to prepare period food while camping, using period equipment (and you don’t happen to have a bakehouse at your disposal) it’s much easier to prepare the food of the common people, who ate simply and had only basic cooking implements. Unfortunately these are the same people who didn’t write down what they were cooking in their humble kitchens.

**No recipes**

So how do we go about cooking period food for which we have no recipes? The following section will cover places you can look for information on food and cooking with or without recipes.

**Where to look**

**Primary sources**

**Cookbooks**

While obviously you can’t look in cookbooks for information on cultures with no recipes, it is still a useful exercise to go through the period cookbooks that we do have. If nothing else, this gives us a feel for cooking techniques, and how people dealt with various ingredients. For example, reading a set or recipes from Anglo-Saxon England doesn’t tell
us what the Vikings were eating, but the Anglo-Saxons had access to basically the same ingredients and cooking equipment that the Vikings were using at the time, and so we can assume that the Vikings used similar techniques.

Cooking from period cookbooks can also give you a good introduction to the kind of intuitive cooking that is necessary if you want to attempt recipe-less cooking. For this kind of “training” you need a primary source cookbook, not a modern redaction of a period cookbook. For example, if you can follow a recipe like

**How to make sour milk from almonds**

Next one should take almond kernels and make thick milk from them, and add to it vinegar or wine, and place it over hot embers until it thickens. This is as good as sour sheep’s milk.

You will have all the skills necessary to “work without a net” and try cooking without recipes. See the bibliography for examples of good period cookbooks.

**Works on agriculture**

For cultures that don’t have recipes, or for segments of the population who weren’t writing down recipes, you can sometimes find references to food in unlikely places. In Mark Grant’s excellent *Roman Cookery*, he draws on a number of unusual sources for information on food and cooking. His recipe for Barley Porridge\(^2\) comes from Pliny’s *Natural History*

> “However, whatever sort of barley has been prepared, people mix in a mill twenty pounds of barley, three pounds of linseed, half a pound of coriander seed, and a cup of salt, toasting all these things beforehand.”

Pliny wasn’t writing a cookbook, or intending to take down “recipes” but this description gives us enough information to cook from. Grant also makes great use of Cato’s *On Agriculture*, which is ostensibly a work on agriculture, but contains main references to what the common people did with the products of agriculture. These references give us a much clearer picture of what the Roman people were actually eating than do upper class professional sources like Apicius. Trying to determine what the general Roman public was eating by reading Apicius is like trying to figure out what the average person in America eats from day to day by reading Martha Stewart’s *Living*.

**Food references in contemporary literature**

There are often references to food to be found in literature, since people spend quite a bit of their time eating. The Icelandic Sagas, for example, provide some insights into what the Vikings were eating. There are frequent references to things like butter, cheese, and sour milk, as well as references to raw materials that the Vikings had access to. In Egil’s Saga we learn that Skallagrim

---

1 Grewe & Hieatt, p. 31
2 Grant, p. 41
went out fishing and seal-hunting, and collecting the eggs of wild fowl, for there was plenty of everything. They also fetched in his driftwood. Whales often got stranded, and you could shoot anything you wanted, for none of the wildlife was used to man and just stood about quietly . . . .

Skallagrím also had his men go up the rivers looking for salmon, and settled Odd the Lone-Dweller at the Gljúfur River to look after the salmon-fishing . . . . As Skallagrím's livestock grew in number the animals started making for the mountains in the summer. He found a big difference in the livestock, which was much better and fatter when grazing up on the moorland, and above all in the sheep that wintered in the mountain valleys instead of being driven down.\(^3\)

In Plautus' *The Little Carthaginian* (a comedic play), we see

They are nothing but *laterculi*: sesame seeds, poppy seeds, wheat flour and chopped nuts.

These are both examples of clues we can get about what people were eating, event though they don’t in any way constitute “recipes”.

**Archeological record**

There is a great deal about people’s eating habits that can be gleaned from the archeological record. In the last 20 years or so there has been an increasing interest in gathering “biological evidence” from archeological digs, probably due largely to improvements in micrography and DNA mapping. It’s now possible for archeologists to sift through a bunch of old dirt and find out what plants and animals were present in various locations. For example, if archeologists dig up a Viking age hearth, and find dozens of cherry pits and herring skeletons, we can conclude that the Vikings were eating cherries and herring, and that both were relatively easy to come by. Similarly, excavations of middens or garbage dumps give us some insight into the quantities of various foods that were eaten. Animal bones in particular are easy to identify and give us a good indication of not only what kind of meat the Vikings ate, but in what proportions.

The other thing that is plentiful in the archeological record is cooking implements. The tools used for cooking can give us some major clues into the kinds of things people were eating and how they were prepared. For example, if the Vikings were grinding grain in rotary querns like this one

![Quern](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

we can guess that the flour that had available to them was probably pretty coarse, and therefore that their bread was probably fairly flat and dense.

---

\(^3\) Egil’s Saga, Chap. 29
There are many good examples of Viking tools for working with milk products, such as this tray for cheese making

or this dasher from a butter churn
These tools, in combination with frequent references to milk, butter and cheese in the sagas indicate that the Vikings probably ate a lot of dairy products. Similarly, frequent finds of iron cauldrons and pottery cooking pots suggest that much of Viking food was boiled rather than baked or fried.

Similarly, we have many examples of Roman cookware, such as this porringer and this pestle for grinding spices

Þóra Sharptooth (m.k.a. Carolyn Priest-Dorman) has compiled an excellent list of various foodstuffs found in archeological sites around the Viking world (http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/vikfood.html), which is not only a great resource for would-be Viking cooks, but also provides a great example of where to look for this kind of archeological evidence.

**Secondary sources**

**Redactions of primary source cookbooks**
There are numerous examples today of “modern” interpretations of period recipes, designed to be used by the modern cook who is used to recipes with precise measurements and cooking instructions.
For example, Cato’s

Make wheat porridge thus: One half libra of choice wheat is put in a clean mortar, washed well, dehusked well, and rinsed well. Then it is put in a pan, pure water is added, and it is cooked. When it is done, milk is added bit by bit, until is has become a thick cream.

Has become…

Serves 4
10 oz. (300 g.) bulgur
1 quart (liter) water
1 quart (liter) milk
salt to taste

Bring the mixture to a boil and add the bulgur. When it is cooked (20-25 minutes), mix the milk in slowly and cook for another half hour. Salt to taste.4

What is interesting about these works is that they make a good introduction to adapting period recipes. The important part is not to cook the recipes themselves (although that can certainly be fun) but to compare the period original with the author’s interpretation. This will give you a good sense about how to adapt recipes you are interested in trying yourself.

Food references in later literature
Just as we saw references to food in contemporary literature above, there are also often references to the food of earlier times in later literature. Some Roman authors refer to how the Greeks ate, and the Icelandic sagas refer to a time some 200-300 years before they were written (although at least with respect to food not much had changed in the intervening years).

Modern works on historical cooking
Another category of secondary sources are books about eating habits and customs in history. These books, such as Ann Hagen’s fabulous A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink is not meant to be a cookbook, but rather a scholarly study of how people ate and produced food for themselves and others in Anglo-Saxon England. These scholarly works may not directly help you figure out what to cook, but they provide invaluable insight into what foods where available and how they were prepared in period.

Some studies are still more specific, relating to one particular area of cooking or food, such as Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times. This is a collection of articles centered on how milk and milk products have been used by various cultures over time.

Tertiary sources
These are sources that are typically removed from direct analysis of primary sources, and instead rely on secondary sources for their research, which tends to make them somewhat

4 Giacosa, p. 77
less detailed, and more given to interpretation than some of the secondary sources listed above.

**Some modern “Historical” cookbooks**

Be wary! Just because something says it’s about historical food or cooking doesn’t mean that it is. There are a number of cookbooks out which claim to represent period cooking, but when you read the fine print, they are often cobbled together from a number of disparate sources which aren’t really related, and contain a lot of “interpretation” by the author which borders on “making things up”. If you find something purporting to be about historical cooking, read what the author says about sources, and how closely the authors sticks to them.

As an example, the book *Imperial Mongolian Cooking* by Marc Cramer is really just a collection of modern recipes from places that once upon a time happened to be part of the Mongol empire. If you read the authors notes, he’s quite clear about the nature of the book, but if you just picked it up off the shelf, you might conclude that it was about cooking during the Mongol empire.

**Many web sources**

As I’m sure you know, everything on the web is subject to severe scrutiny in terms of its authenticity. Check sources carefully. That said, there are some pretty decent resources to be found.

**“Culinary literature”**

Culinary literature refers to prose works about the history or nature of food. Some good examples are Tannahill's *Food in History*, or *The Cambridge World History Of Food*. These kind of books provide a good overview of food and cooking through time, and provided valuable insights into how food and cooking habits evolved, but typically don’t contain enough detail to lead to actual cookable food.

**Modern cuisines in those countries**

Lastly, we can look to modern cooking to tell us something about the tastes of people in the past.

While modern Scandinavians certainly have many more ingredients at their disposal, many of the overall tastes haven’t changed there since the Viking age. The Vikings probably ate meat and fruit together, as do the modern Scandinavians. Some signature foodstuffs like pickled herring and lutfisk probably haven’t changed much in the last thousand years. While the fact that modern Scandinavians eat something doesn’t make it period, looking at modern Scandinavian cooking can give you a good sense to what the cuisine as a whole must have tasted like.
Conclusion

Trying to recreate the food of long dead cultures who didn’t write down recipes is a difficult undertaking, but if you are careful about your sources, and go about your recreations systematically, there is nothing any less “period” about recreating food this way than there is in following recipes that have survived (relatively) intact.
Bibliography

Primary sources

Cookbooks


Contemporary literature


Archeological record


Secondary Sources

Redactions of primary source cookbooks


**Modern works on historical cooking**


**Modern “Historical” cookbooks**


**Culinary literature**


Beginning cooks will learn how to boil an egg. Experienced cooks will discover new ingredients and inspired approaches to familiar ones. Encyclopedic in scope, rich with recipes and techniques, and just plain fascinating to read, The New Basics Cookbook is the indispensable kitchen reference for all home cooks. This is a basic cookbook that reflects today's kitchen, today's pantry, today's taste expectations. This volume is the first to present all four extant manuscripts of the Viandier de Taillevent. The texts of the 220 recipes are in their original French and a complete English translation is provided. Variants between the four manuscripts represent more than a century of modifications in gastronomic tastes and culinary practices in French seigneurial life. Cooking without recipes was one of the biggest and loudest things we heard in your Cure requests. We've been talking about stocking your pantry well, which is the first step in cooking without your nose in a book. Improvisation and new creations with familiar elements can only happen when your pantry is well-stocked. Look soon for quick master recipes that can be tweaked and recreated with basic pantry items both savory and sweet. Cooking without recipes was one of the biggest and loudest things we heard in your Cure requests. We've been talking about stocking your pantry well, which is the first step in cooking without your nose in a book. Improvisation and new creations with familiar elements can only happen when your pantry is well-stocked.