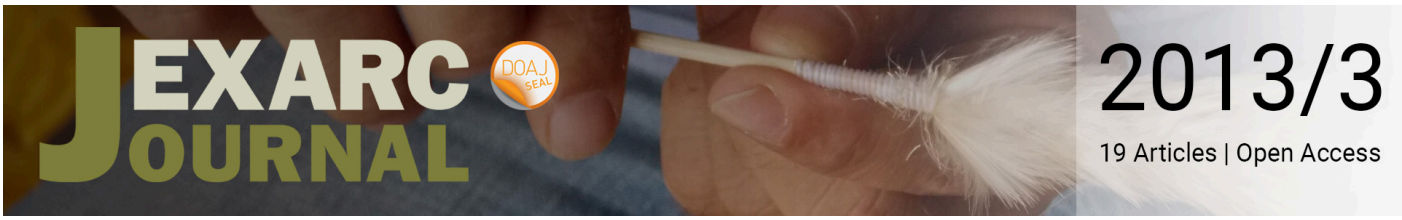

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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Discussion: Food - Reconstruction and the Public

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10119

EXARC Journal Issue 2013/3 | **Publication Date:** 2013-11-15

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For a BBC program in 1954, Sir Mortimer Wheeler tasted a reconstruction of the Tollund Man's last supper, which turned out to be a tasteless mush. This led him to announce: "I believe that the poor chap of Tollund committed suicide because he could stand his wife's cooking no longer!"
While archaeology-inspired cookery is an important and attractive way of involving the public, it also has some drawbacks. How authentic can we be? What about health and safety? Should we only cook what the public will like?

A view of Thit Birk Petersen (DK)

The subject of using food or cooking in our interpretation of the past is growing. Many museums around the world use food as a form of public outreach and education. We all need to eat, so did our ancestors. Food is a direct link with the past that bridges a great temporal gap. Of course there are some downsides to using food and cooking as a tool in historical education, but they are minor and can be handled. For instance, health and safety concerns need to be addressed. In most historical kitchens it is impossible to adhere to modern health and safety codes. For this reason in Denmark it is illegal to sell or give entire meals prepared in a museum kitchen or over a fire. There are ways around this legislation. At the Open Air Museum in Sorgenfri, Denmark we follow recipes from the early 20th century. We hand out small samples of food cooked on the stove. We tell the guests to eat at their own risk, and it has never been an issue. People rarely get sick merely from tasting. And if I may be frank, I don't think anyone ever died from a little dirt. Cooking is one of the best ways to connect to the public and to history. Some of the best conversations I have had are when we were cooking something that is untraditional and maybe something that seems a bit disgusting. For example, if we slaughter a pig or chicken, people, both children and adults, seem to think it is very disgusting. Yet through this practice we are teaching them basic knowledge of how their food is prepared.

The ‘Paleo-diet’ has recently become popular. On the surface, this diet has the reputation for serving up Stone Age cuisine. But a quick visit to one of the restaurants reveals that this diet has little or nothing to do with the Stone Age. Never the less, people seem to believe that they are living like true Stone Age men-macho men who ate lot of meat! We scientists therefore have a responsibility to show what is correct. But it is an up-hill struggle when we have to fight modern media and fashion-trends. Apparently people would rather believe a diet than the actual facts - maybe because it is fun for them and not tied up in a history lesson. Can we learn something from this? I think so!

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A view of Dr Aidan O’Sullivan (IE)

As an undergraduate student in University College Dublin in 1989, I travelled to Leiden to take part in an Irish/UK/Dutch/Danish wetland archaeology Erasmus student program. One of our fieldtrips took us to Oldenburg, in northern Germany, to visit an exhibition on the trackway excavations. During our visit to the museum, we were handed loaves of dark, heavy and gritty bread to taste; bread that had been made using techniques and a recipe that was based on the archaeological discoveries from the Alpine foreland Neolithic lake villages. I have forgotten much about the excellent archaeological exhibition in the years since (I can dimly recall wooden block wheels and dark wood in glass cases), but the taste and texture of that bread in my mouth has stayed with me for over twenty years. It wasn't as nice as Marcel Proust's madeleine cake, but it certainly made me think about times past. Experimental archaeology, should aim to learn about the past - or how it might have been - not only with our intellect, but with all our senses, touch, sight, smell and … taste!

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A view of John Majerle (US)

I find it interesting that folks would be shocked that ancient food would taste different than current food, and that ancient people might have actually enjoyed food that we now might consider either bland or oddly flavoured. As a simple example, my wife still bakes bread like her grandmother taught her, and I still make homemade pie (and crust). Now 40 years is not exactly prehistoric, and yet friends are totally surprised at the difference between these hand-made foodstuff made from whole ingredients and current store bought mass produced items.

The USA has numerous food safety regulations defined at both the state and federal level. These laws even apply when distributing food free to the public. I would recommend consulting the local state health department before considering handing out any sort of samples in the USA they are very strict and are not known to have a sense of humour for violators.

John Majerle
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A view of Gary Ball (UK)

One of the biggest problems we face when demoing mid to late 15th century food is not being able to allow the visitors a chance to taste what we are cooking, due to health and safety issues. (Personally I've been eating food cooked on living history sites for over 30 years and am yet to be poisoned!). Our understanding of current food hygiene regulations seems to rule out being able to allow public tasting here in the UK. Yes, our pallets have changed over time, but that doesn't stop the public from wanting a taste of the past.

Gary Ball
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A view of Edwin Deady (UK)

What can go wrong with basic meats? Bacon boiled in a cauldron or boiled beef must taste as good now as it did long ago. Sure, there will be different proportions of fat to muscle, but in either case, the product qualifies as ‘organic’. In order to have the public get the flavour of authentic period food, it should be served an authentic manner, for example not on a bed of lettuce. Or if garnish is desired, the chef should use watercress or something similarly authentic such as serving samphire with fish and using sea salt instead of conventional salts. On site in the experimental living history display, maintaining authenticity is even more difficult. Spelt flour loaves from ASDA will replace the bannocks usually baked for the presenters. However, this year at the Chysauster Iron Age Village, Cornwall the exhibit may include tasting of the spelt loaves. Other period foods may accompany the fish, perhaps Cheshire or a curd cheese. Hand wipes and hand steriliser will be available, but we are uncertain how this will pan out. It would be nice if our child slaves that usually grind flour on our quern could taste the Iron Age finished product.

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A view of Torsten Neuer (DE)

The question of authenticity can be difficult to address. For instance, some reports only use familial levels of identification (take *Brassicaceae* for instance). Instead, researchers should work toward a more specific taxonomic identification. This may be difficult due to domestication and subsequent breeding programs. Yet there are many closely related species still existing in the wild (although their pureness might also be spoiled by cultivation). In regards to food safety: legislation prevents the audience from tasting what we cook. This is not limited to the UK and not even to Europe. This is a pity, because people do indeed want to participate in the activity. However, if you were using modern kitchen equipment (and have a license for food processing, which might be required in most countries), this problem could be remedied. Though you still cannot have people sample food right out of the iron pot hanging over the fireplace (which is what they would like most). Finally, there is the question of what should be cooked. In my opinion, taste should not be a factor. After all, food is a cultural matter - and culture has changed over the past centuries (let alone millennia). Also, some kinds of food that some people might find disgusting at first (such as snails, haggis) will turn out to be their new favourite once they have tasted it.

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A view of Miika Vanhapiha (FI)

When we practise Stone Age style cooking during our demonstrations we do not give any food to the public, not even small portions. Without certain hygiene and health related control (including official 'hygiene passes' for all cooks, proper storage for certain food materials et cetera) it is illegal. From our point of view this is okay and the audience understands and respects the policy. Also, some of our food actually is somewhat risky.

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A view of Darell Markewitz (CA)

In Canada almost all museums and living history sites are increasingly being overwhelmed by legal liability problems. It has been some years now since any institution will allow 'tastes' to be given to the public. Usually this even extends to restricting consumption by working staff of the institution. Our Dark Ages Re-Creation Company group is increasingly finding resistance to even our normal demonstrations consisting of cooking a mid day meal and then feeding it to our own group members! In my experience (and opinion), the sight, smell and, yes, taste, of accurately presented food items is a natural bridge between the modern world and the past. Foodways programs should remain a significant part of any living history

presentation. Everyone eats (!) so comparisons between food choices, preparation methods, serving styles, even ideas on 'what tastes good', are all huge windows into other cultures. Foodways programs also offer so many entry points to other aspects of a historical period. For instance, how was food acquired? How was it stored? What was local or a rare delicacy? How did food reflect status? It is a massive loss to all of us seeking to inform the public about the past that the recent insistence on legal protections is reducing our ability to use such an important tool.

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A view of Olaf Trollheimsfjord (US)

I cook period feast for members of the Society of Creative Anachronism (SCA) in the United States of America, mostly from modern cookbooks that are based on period texts (usually Renaissance period). We don't have a legal problem because everyone who is at the feast has signed a waiver & the SCA has a good insurance policy. The biggest problems have to do with people who have unusual food allergies. Posting a recipe for each of the dishes seems to quell that problem. Some of the dishes everybody likes (for instance the Almond Tart from *Eating Shakespeare*), while others are only enjoyed by a few (Armoured Turnips, for example.) The food is all prepared with modern equipment, in a modern kitchen, with modern refrigeration. I have plans to build an outdoor kitchen with a mass oven and fireplace at my property in Georgia to cook feasts.

TIP: http://articles.latimes.com/1985-05-23/food/fo-8362_1_ancient-recipes

Olaf Trollheimsfjord
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A view of Vicky Shearman (UK)

Food safety regulations are locally enforced, and vary from council to council. I have been working on a project that relies on providing samples of medieval food to the public. We are lucky - our local Environmental Health officer has said that it is their job to help us accomplish our goals safely, rather than to stop us.

We've been running the project in different areas, and advice has included:

- There are restrictions on how many times you are allowed to do it per year in the same venue before it becomes a 'regular' activity (with different rules).
- Access to hot, clean hand washing water is essential.

- Access to refrigeration is usually considered essential (but depends on foodstuffs being cooked).
- Only serve 'low risk' foods.
- There must be someone in charge that has food handling certificate (but not all stipulate this).
- No pre-prepared foods are allowed, only things that have been freshly prepared on site, and are being served hot.
- Separate (colour coded) chopping boards for meat and vegetables are required (it is acceptable to have a blob of red and green paint on wooden boards).
- Serve food in separate disposable containers (to prevent 'double dipping' with spoons, et cetera). Not the best in a LH situation, but lettuce, or bread can count as a disposable container!

Anyway, all I can really advise is to call the appropriate EH officer beforehand. Different areas have different rules, but without exception I have found them all really helpful. Now whether the event organiser/employer/site manager wants you to do it is another matter. It is usually easier to say 'no', so I'd also check with them before planning anything!

So it would appear we have a national set of EH guidelines that are interpreted and enforced in varying degrees from county to county - just to make things interesting!

Vicky Shearman

A view of Del Elson (AU)

I did an experiment on meat pies in 2003. This project involved baking several pies following a period recipe and then testing them for bacteria over a period of time. Comparisons with pies purchased at local stores showed the bacteria levels in bought varieties were at inconsumable levels within very short periods of time, whereas the period[1] recipe pies were at safe levels for considerable time afterwards.

This method of meat preservation works quite well and, at least from reading between the lines of Markham et al., it's apparent that it was widely known during this period. I'm reasonably sure that medieval bacteriology didn't exist as a science, but rather people believed that ‘bad smells’ or ‘poor humours’ affected the meat. Therefore, the crusts were a way of keeping the cooked meet untainted and away from any bad smells that caused the meat to spoil. The other circumstantial evidence that we have is that recipes for pies of this sort were fairly common in manuscripts and cookbooks of the period, and so a conclusion can be drawn that pies were commonly eaten. We don't have actual direct evidence that pies were cooked in hard crusts of this sort deliberately for the purpose of preserving meat for

long journeys or military campaigns, but the indirect evidence suggests that it is likely or at least possible.

We know it works and we know why it works. In the medieval period I think we can reasonably draw the conclusion that they understood that it did work, used it, but didn't understand or poorly understood why it works.

The smoking gun would be an archaeological dig of a battlefield or campaign midden containing pies, remnants of pies, or similar, but given the time that has elapsed and the likely activity of earthworms, insects and other decay I'm not sure that's likely to be found.

Del Elson
ELSON 2004: “Pyes de Pares”, in: Medieval History magazine (ed. Tim Dawson).

A view of Daniel Serra (SE)

To speak directly to our senses is a powerful way to convey a vivid image of the past. Smells and tastes from the Viking Age give the visitor of an open-air museum a direct sense of how one lived during the period, and makes it possible to carry home an embodied experience of life during the Viking Age, an experience that can not be gained by regular signs and displays alone. When reconstructing food at an open-air museum, I have frequently been given the opportunity to talk about the period in general, but with a starting point in the food, as a response to curious questions from the audience.

However, cooking at an exhibition or at a re-enactment camp for the public, carries with it a major problem. Can we serve samples of what we have made or will that be in conflict with modern rules and regulations from the health department? A meat porridge cooked in a soapstone vessel, some turnips roasted over some embers or thin strips of roasted lamb hearts are perfect small treats but would probably break a handful of important rules from the Food & Health Department. My rather unofficial solution has quite often been to tell the visitors about the limitations given due to health regulations, and then simply turn my back to the tray with the samples.

Sadly enough the solution is often to try to adapt to the current rules, or what we believe the visitors would appreciate, and we have all seen examples of undercooked cabbage soups or tin foil wrapped cooking pit meat at the sites and Viking Burgers in the café. However, since taste and smell are powerful ways to recreate the past, we need to be careful with what we portray or we risk creating all kinds of misconceptions.

In order to keep up with authenticity at a museum I would suggest a threefold strategy:

- Cook authentic food at the exhibition re-enactment camp, using both the right techniques and ingredients in order to display how and what was served.

- Perhaps have some samples prepared in cooperation with the museum café using modern techniques but still getting the tastes right.
- Feasts! Feasts and festive eating can be an excellent opportunity to display the cuisine of a past period, as long as the museum and restaurant is not afraid to cook something that is based on authenticity rather than what is believed to be expected by the visitor.

Daniel Serra

1 The original source for this recipe is Harleian MS. 279, in the section titled *Dyuerese Bake Metis*, as reproduced by Cindy Renfrow in *Take a Thousand Eggs or More*. An almost identical recipe occurs in Harleian MS. 4016, as well as a number of similar recipes with titles such as *Tartes de chare* and *Another manere [of tartes]* and *Doucettes* in MS. 279, and Douce MS. My contention is that this and its derivatives are a relatively common recipe.
xxxvij. Pyes de pares. Take & smyte fayre buttys of Porke, & buttys of Vele, to gederys, & put it on a fayre potte, & do ther-to Freyssche brothe, & quantyte of wyne, & lat boyle alle to-gederys tyl yt be y-now; than take it fro the fyre, & lat kele a lytelle; than caste ther-to yolkys of Eyroun, & pouder of Gyngere, Sugre, & Salt, & mynced Datys, & Roysons of Coruance; then make fayre past, and cofynnys, & do ther-on; kyuer it, & let bake, & serue forth (Cindy Renfrow, *Take a Thousand Eggs or More*, privately published 1991).

Keywords food
tourism
presentation
health

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FIG 1. THE TOURISTS ARE ALLOWED INTO THE KITCHEN AT SORGENFRI, TO TASTE, SEE, FEEL AND SMELL THE HISTORY.

FIG 2. FOOD PRESENTATION IN A MUSEUM DISPLAY

FIG 3. GRINDING CORN ON A STONE QUERN

FIG 4. BILL SCHINDLER COOKING DURING THE OPENARCH "FOOD WORKSHOP" AT ARCHEON 2013.