



INNS AND TAVERNS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Inns And Taverns In Society

Up until the 1400s the vast majority of the population had little or no leisure time. Even so-called 'free' time was spent working on personal projects rather than tasks for your lord or church. By the time of *Le Poulet Gauche* (1596) people are beginning to have more money and more leisure time. This is largely due to the advance of technology, the breakdown of the feudal system, and the increase in travel, which has allowed for a more even distribution of surplus goods.

People have begun to spend a lot of their extra time and earnings in taverns (by which we mean "taverns, inns, and alehouses"), which sat well with everyone but the church. Taverns formed the chief alternate center of social life to the church. They were a public gathering place, where you could see your neighbors and even hold events like weddings and wakes -- presided over by itinerant priests. Laws were enacted in England and on the continent to make such non-church religious events illegal.

Established churchmen viewed these makeshift 'churches' as a threat to their livelihood and function. It could be argued that the rise of the concept of a direct relationship with God (as opposed to one that went through a representative like a priest) paralleled the rise of taverns as public spaces.

Taverns were also frowned upon because they encouraged gaming as well as drinking, providing cards, dice, and table-top games to patrons. It was also common to set up bowling-like games and archery shoots (very short range!) in the alleys between the buildings (hence bowling alley). We will try to do this if we can -- the alley will really be outside!

Additionally, taverns quickly developed a reputation as a place for criminals and criminal activity. Most of the barmaids working in taverns also picked up some extra money engaging in the oldest profession, at least on an amateur basis. Because folks often paid their bills in kind, tavern-keepers often served as fences for dubiously-obtained goods. Innkeepers also often became money-lenders.

In a time when travelers were viewed with suspicion (people from the next town were 'foreigners'; those from other countries, "aliens"), a place which catered to them naturally fell under the same suspicion. While the reputation that tavern-keepers developed for collusion with thieves is not entirely undeserved, we'd like to point out that most taverners (or 'tipplers') were simply honest businessmen and women with some spare room and a talent for brewing beer, ale, and hard cider.

In a few towns, locals were forbidden to go to inns, on the theory that they encouraged debauched behavior and caused them to spend their money wastefully.

There is a distinction between taverns, inns, and alehouses, which we do not often make. A tavern serves only drink, an alehouse (in English usage anyway) served both drink and food, and an inn provided lodgings in addition to food and drink. Le Poulet Gauche is in fact a small inn, with a common room serving both food and drink, a few sleeping rooms upstairs, a yard, and a small stable. It has a small kitchen garden and a few chickens out back.

The Furnishings

Like many houses used for trade in our town, the Poulet Gauche has one main room that opens onto the street. There is a fairly wide door, and a double-wide window next to it. This window has wooden shutters and no glass. Sometimes in good weather we serve patrons out on the street through it. There is some glass in a transom window above the door.

Inside, there are boards (tables) to sit at and forms (benches) to sit on. There are also three-legged stools and the occasional cut-down barrel being used for a gaming table. By the hearth, there is a high-backed settle with broadsides and such tacked to the back. There is a chest near the door that leads to the kitchen, and above it are shelves full of pewter dishes, earthenware mugs, and pitchers.

Since a typical home had only one room that served for kitchen, dining, living, and sometimes sleeping space, it was considered a great luxury to have a table (dining table or work table) that stayed up all the time. The average person used makeshift tables, made of wide planks laid on top of anything sturdy -- barrels, or a pair of saw-horse like 'trestles'. This allowed the table to be knocked down and put out of the way against a wall when it wasn't needed. This was useful, considering the limited space. The furniture in taverns is often particularly crude.

A 'table' was what modern people think of -- the permanent structure. The period English term for these temporary structures was 'board'. Many modern phrases come from the term, such as 'room and board' or 'groaning board', or even the SCA's own 'off-board' and 'on-board'.

The household sat at the table on forms (benches). There was probably one chair, and it belonged to the master of the house (the "chair-man" of the "board"). Even in a poor home, people did not usually eat off a bare wooden table -- they used table cloths and had for hundreds of years. This is typically plural, because the standard cloth being 26" wide, two were laid side-by-side, with a third one laid down the middle over the two butted edges.

We have trestle tables and boards on sawhorses in Le Poulet Gauche. We will do our best to keep them stable, but keep in mind that they are just planks and are not nailed or glued to their legs. It is our opinion that the rule of dining etiquette that says "no elbows on the table" may be a reflection of the fact that if you lean too heavily on such a table, you will flip it over and greatly discommode your dining companions.

Do not attempt to sit in Monsieur Jehan du Lac's chair.

It's rather dark in le Poulet Gauche. Most of the light comes from the fire in the hearth. There are some tallow candles and grease lamps here. Beeswax candles are extremely expensive and mostly are to be seen in churches. Because modern people would find tallow smelly, smoky, and disagreeable to their allergies, we are using better quality candles than Le Poulet Gauche could really afford. The oil lamps will also not be too much in evidence, as they are open flames, with wicks sitting either in flat, padlock-shaped clay or metal bowls or in a lipped goblet-like earthenware bowl, and represent a little too much fire risk for modern comfort (especially as we expect someone will discover the hard way about elbows on the table)

Also, out of deference to the many hay-fevers our patrons report, we will not be strewing the floor with a nice, healthy covering of rushes or straw, but it ought to be there to soak up the mud from your traveling boots.

Some tavern scenes:

Peasants Murdering a Soldier, Marten van Clève, 1566.



A visit to the Poulet Gauche is not usually so violent, but this scene gives a fair idea of the interior of a country inn, which is a much cruder place than one in a city as prosperous as Calais. As you can see, the boards have been knocked over. One malefactor is climbing out the window on a form. A soldier has ridden through the door on his horse, not a common occurrence here in town. The painting illustrates a common antagonism -- peasants suffered a great deal at the hands of marauding bands of soldiers from every side, and stragglers had much to fear if they were caught in a weak moment.



For a more cheerful scene, this wedding is probably taking place in a rural inn. Click on the thumbnail to see the full image in the WebMuseum. Note the settle to the far left of the picture, which has broadsides tacked to it just like ours.



Dining: Service, Utensils, & Manners

Traditional food and drink service may not be quite to modern sensibilities. Usually one ordered beer or wine for the table and got a pitcher and a mug, or perhaps just a great big mug, which was then shared around the table. Pitchers were typically earthenware, while drinking vessels could be pottery, pewter, leather, wooden or even glass. The typical English drinking mug (the 'jack') was made of leather, waterproofed with pitch or beeswax. Leather drinking vessels are considered barbaric on the continent -- it seems to us that Englishmen drink out of their boots.

At the beginning of our century the table was usually quit spare. Serving dishes are set in the middle and diners usually eat what is closest to them, taking food out with their hands or sometimes with a serving fork or spoon. They usually have trenchers -- stale bread cut in a large rectangle to serve as a plate and keep the food off the tablecloth (and there is always a tablecloth -- see Furnishings). The juice- and sauce-soaked bread was usually given away after the meal to the poor. People often provided their own knives, but most utensils, drinking vessels, soup bowls, etc. are usually shared and there isn't much on the table at any given time. Even in a great house, a noble dinner guest would call for a servant to bring a drink, which would be served from a common goblet kept on the sideboard and wiped with a napkin between uses, and would share the soup bowl with their neighbor.

In our day, at the end of the century, individual plates are more common. In France, these are typically pewter in an inn, and are round with a wide rim. In Italy they are of fine painted earthenware, "like porcelain" according to Montaigne, and in some parts of Germany and Switzerland "fine white wood" is preferred. Wood (typically sycamore), seems to have been the most common in England, although a modest country gentlemen would usually have a "fair garnish of pewter." These wooden trenchers are flat squares with two round depressions: a large, dish-shaped one where the meal goes, and a small (fingertip size) one in the upper right corner for salt.

Whether you get personal plates or not in the Poulet Gauche probably depends on the social status of you and your party. Generally speaking, we will bring one big platter for the table, a lot of bread, and expect people to go at it with spoons, knives, and fingers in the traditional way. We will bring spoons if you want them, but we expect that you probably have your own knife. While personal forks have been in common usage in Italy for 100 years, they haven't quite caught on in France yet -- although they're starting to in some upper class circles. England doesn't use them at all, except as novelties amongst the nobility. Here in the Poulet Gauche, M. du Lac thinks they are a ridiculous affectation -- he eats with his hands. Consequently, napkins are a must. You throw it over your left shoulder (or drape it over your left arm if your ruff gets in the way) and wipe your hands on it as needed.



We have salt if you ask for it (for a small fee - salt is still quite valuable), and do not leave the salt cellar (or "nef") on the table!

In this detail from Caravaggio's *Christ at Emmaus* (1590), it is clear the table has been set for a person of importance. The fruit basket and roast fowl indicate this. The painted maiolica pottery is very Italian. This is a good quality inn -- the table is covered with a Turkey rug. These were popular, but too valuable to put on the floor. Naturally, the rug is covered with a tablecloth for eating. There is one glass for all at the table, and a loaf of bread for each. Click on the detail to see the whole image in the WebMuseum.

For rudeness it is thy potage to sup
Or speak to any, his head in the cup.
Thy knife se be sharp to cut fair thy meat;
Thy mouth not too full when thou dost eat;
Not smacking thy lips, As commonly do hogs,
Nor gnawing the bones, As if were dogs;
Such rudeness abhor, Such beastliness fly,
At the table behave thy self mannerly ...
Pick not thy teeth at the table sitting,
Nor use at thy meat over much spitting;
this rudness of youth is to be abhorred;
thyself mannerly behave at the board.



Francis Seager in *School of Virtue and Book of Good Nurture*, 1557

Food



Like everything else, food is a matter of social class as well as region and season. With the price rise that has been a general phenomenon in this century, a peasant or urban laborer rarely sees meat except on feast days. Bread is much more than figuratively the staff of life -- it is the fundamental food of Europe. The bread of the lower classes is made with cheaper grains than wheat: barley and rye, for example. More rye is being used in bread now than formerly in this century, again a sign of the high cost of living now. Lower class bread had grit in it. The bread of the upper classes was made with a higher proportion of wheat, which was more finely ground and sifted. Stale bread was cut into squares and used for trenchers -- a surface on which to serve the other food and sauces. When the rich were done with their meals, the sauce-soaked bread was usually given to the poor.

Most meat is usually served either extremely fresh (birds kept in cages until killed for dinner), or salted and preserved. The spicing of many medieval recipes is intended to mask the fact that the meat is extremely salty and has to be soaked and boiled forever. Meat is commonly served in ragouts and pottages, which is a good way to deal with preserved meat. It can also be baked into pies. The purpose of a piecrust is to serve as a storage container and serving vessel, and these are often made too hard to really eat. Roasted meats naturally have to be fresh and of good quality, and are more likely to be found on a noble table. It is the cauldron, not the spit, that is the mainstay of the common household.

Only the noble classes had the right to hunt game, and only a seigneur could keep a rabbit warren or dovecote (the latter being especially resented by peasants, as the birds would eat their seed when they sowed the fields). In the north of France, we have pretty good pasturage for cattle, sheep, goats. Pigs aren't difficult to keep, and everyone has chickens. As city dwellers, the animals are usually kept outside the walls (except for the chickens). Fowl are viewed as especially desirable foods for noble tables. Peacocks, swans, herons, and other birds that we no longer eat in the twentieth century (they don't taste that good to us) were much sought after for banquets, but were inaccessible to the average person.

There are over a hundred fast days a year in which meat cannot be eaten and fish is an important staple. This fish is rarely fresh unless one lives in a port -- fresh fish was quite a luxury food. Most people ate salted fish, which has rather the consistency of plywood. Here in Calais, the herring fishing industry is very big and herrings are salted, smoked, and exported in good quantity. The herring business has been key to the prosperity of many northern port towns. Herring "à la Calaisienne" means fresh herring -- we are lucky to live on the sea. Oysters, crayfish, mussels, and similar shellfish are generally considered "poor people's food". Oysters will gain cachet in the 17th century as a food fit for the upper middle classes, but right now they are the food of dockworkers.

Fruit is another luxury food. The natural season of most fruits is quite short. Fruit is usually preserved, either "wet" (e.g. marmalade) or "dry" (e.g. orange peels). Preserved fruits are probably the closest thing to "sweets" that there are. Vegetables also are frequently preserved in brine or vinegar. Common ones in this region are leeks, cauliflower, artichokes, chicory. Salad is often a food of the poor and the religious. "Potherbs" -- many kinds of savory greens -- usually go into the soup. Onions are an important vegetable for the pot. In the south, garlic is of course very popular -- the king loves it and his garlic breath is a byword.

What people eat is very much a function of region. Although some luxury foods are imported from far away (oranges from Seville, for example) and there is an wide-ranging import-export business in certain staples like grain (the recent string of disastrous harvests have stimulated a strong trade with Eastern Europe through the Baltic) and salted fish (the source of wealth for many Atlantic coastal towns), most food rarely goes more than a few miles from where it was grown. Without the extensive network of market gardens that surround the average town, city dwellers would starve. Even today, food in France is still quite regional and seasonal, with the ancient network that brings the produce of the countryside to the market towns being very much alive.

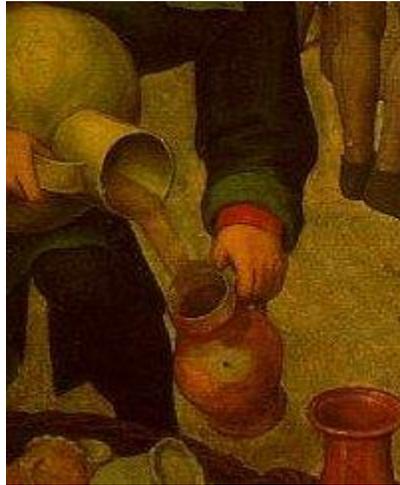
Season also plays a big part in what shows up on the table. One does not get lamb in August or fresh artichokes in March. Strawberries are an intense, but very brief, pleasure in June. We are used to the idea that fruits and vegetables are seasonal, but meat is, too. The pigs are slaughtered in December, and their remains are preserved as sausage, bacon, etc. and eaten until spring. Early spring is often the most difficult season for food. Food which was harvested and preserved in late summer and fall is often gone, and it is too early yet for new crops. The lambing season comes just in the nick of time! There is a reason why the two big "food festivals" we still preserve in Western culture (Christmas and Easter) come at the beginning of winter (slaughtering time) and the middle of spring (lambing time). And there's a reason why Lent is conveniently located at a time of year when there is little food anyway.

Spices are critical and of great value. Not so much to counteract all the salt and the bland taste of shoe-leather quality meat boiled in the pot all day. Medieval people did not value "taste" in quite the same way that we do -- food was appreciated more for its appearance, its symbolic value, or its rarity. When the great noble feasts are described, a great deal of narrative is spent on the clever inventions of "sotleties" constructed to look like castles or unicorns, boars covered in gold leaf, and peacocks dressed in their own feathers, but nothing at all on how the food tasted. The sign of a great cook was the ability to make something look like something else: fish that looks like venison or vice versa. Those silly little fruit-shaped marzipans that we consume at Christmas are a vestige of this tradition.

However, this is an age of transition, as it is for so many arts. We are beginning to see the development of what we consider a modern sensibility about cuisine -- food valued for itself and its taste, where spices and cooking methods are used to bring out its intrinsic qualities. These new tendencies have already appeared in Italy, where so many of the fine arts of the Renaissance were born. Catherine de' Medici is credited with bringing Italian cooks to France, who helped to shape what would become their classic cuisine. How much impact this had on

the everyday cook is hard to say -- cookbooks more than a century old are still being published and used. Here in the Poulet Gauche, we benefit from a mixture of traditional and modern cooking because Jeanne-Marie can read cook-books and came from a wealthy household where some of the new approaches were used. Although we don't have any luxuries or as well-stocked a larder as she was used to before, her background shows in the food

Drink



The most common tavern beverage in France is wine, followed by cider.

France is famous for its wine. The clarets of Bordeaux have been part of a brisk trade with England since the Black Prince's day at least. The vineyards of the Midi in the south began with Roman colonists, and the vigneron of Burgundy are the most powerful guild in that region. Wine was even produced in the Ile de France around Paris, and was known for its quality. Those vineyards have long since succumbed to the pressures of urban density and no longer exist in the twentieth century.

Wine has a tendency to spoil, and old wine isn't usually as good as newer wine. It is shipped in barrels and dispensed when it is sold. One goes to the vintner with a bottle and gets it filled. The cork is not yet the common way of sealing bottles -- one usually stuffs a rolled up rag in the neck. The cork, a refinement to come in the next century, will make the bottling and keeping of wine a rather different matter than it is now.

Wine is commonly drunk with water, the proportions between the two being a matter of personal taste. It is rare to drink either one unmixed, although the poor have always had to make do with only water.

The apple-producing region of France runs from the Bay of Biscay to Normandy. Cider is produced in great quantity in Normandy and is even preferred to wine there.

Beer is not common in France except in the northwest around Flandres and in the northeast around Lorraine, near the German states. As a beverage, beer is as old as Sumer and was drunk throughout Charlemagne's empire, although these early beers were not made with hops as we do now. Hops adds a bitter taste and functions as preservative. First mentioned in 822, hops appear in Germany in the 12th century, Netherlands in the early 14th century, and England in the early 15th century, although its use was forbidden there until 1556. The European "beer zone" is north of the vine-growing region (roughly the 49th parallel), from England to

Netherlands, Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Muscovy. There are already different types in the sixteenth century -- homemade small beer, luxury imported beer, popular cheap brew. A book by Heinrich Knaust in 1575 (Vom Bierbrauen, Erffurth) lists names of famous beers and their medicinal qualities.

The Flemish method of brewing with hops (a "high" fermentation) was supposedly developed by one of the Counts of Flanders, Jean Sans Peur (John the Fearless), and the Flemish fondness for beer is legendary. Here in Calais, we drink beer with almost every meal, including breakfast. This region does not produce wine, much to M. du Lac's dismay.

During poor harvests ordinances were sometimes passed against making beer as it took grain away from the food supply. Under the pressures of modern living, drinking is becoming more of a social problem in this day and age. The making of brandy and spirits distilled from grain is becoming more widespread, the high alcohol content often being a cheap calorie substitute for bread, not to mention an escape from life's problems.

Chocolate from the new world was introduced as a drink to Spain in the 1520s, but it has not yet spread to the rest of Europe. It is a bitter beverage, seasoned with cinnamon and hot pepper and rumored to cause lasciviousness.

We don't yet have coffee either. Although its becoming all the rage in Islam, there will be no cafes in Europe until the next century. The first boatload of tea won't arrive in Amsterdam until 1610.