

## The Medieval Cook

*Bridget Ann Henisch*

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**Bridget Ann Henisch : The Medieval Cook** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Medieval Cook:

20 of 20 people found the following review helpful. The Medieval Cook looks at the kitchen of the ordinary person, with satisfying results  
By Rebecca Huston  
Being a history nerd, especially interested in the ancient and medieval periods, I tend to take a special point in looking out for books that explore daily living, and just how our ancestors were living in a far less industrial time. And one topic I love to read about is culinary history. About thirty years ago, Bridget Ann Henisch wrote *Fast and Feast*, a very scholarly work on the roles and symbolism that food and meals had for the everyday person. But then, she seemed to vanish, so it was with a great deal of pleasure that I saw her new

book, *The Medieval Cook*, in a notice from the publisher. I ordered it at once, and it quickly got a spot near the top of the never-dwindling Mountain To-Be-Read in my living room. Ms. Henisch starts with how the cook was viewed by medieval society -- he was despised for being a labourer, of being of the middle or lower classes, and for handling blood and dead animals, but also very necessary for the enjoyment of life and providing status for his master. It's a fascinating paradox, and one very interesting point is brought to bear in both the creation of a knight -- the master cook would claim the new knight's spurs after the ceremony -- and in the ceremony of degrading a dishonourable knight -- that same master cook would come and hack off those spurs with his kitchen knife. But the craft and cunning of a cook was necessary for human survival, without them, there would rarely be hot meals in the wintertime and no one to coax flavour and sustenance from raw ingredients. And if a patron or noble lord could convince a talented cook to work for him, his own prestige would be raised by the elaborate meals that he could provide. A few cooks rose to the ranks of the elite, and a few would write down their secrets and skills, giving a rare insight into the world of medieval cookery. But the chapters I found the most interesting were those of the 'cottage cook' -- which is who most cooks were, and more often than not, the woman or wife of the household, juggling the roles of being a mother, spouse and provider and keeper of the family larder. Here cooking was simple, but skillful, being passed down from one generation to the next and almost never written down. And the other one was about how cook shops, bakers, and butchers provided 'fast food' as it were, especially in towns and cities to inhabitants who didn't have the equipment or skills to bake items, provide bread, or handle the dispatch of large animals. People could buy a finished product outright, such as bread or roasted meat, or that particularly medieval delight, the pastry pie or simply bring the ingredients to the baker, and for a nominal fee, have them craft the desired item. And then there were the times that extravagance was called for, when there was a marriage or funeral, and not just outside labour was brought into a household, but the equipment and supplies could be arranged as well. These times are most readily revealed in household account books, where a list would be made of who provided what and how much was paid. It was the master or mistress of the household would look over these -- often writing them up themselves -- and there must have been constant worry over how much was being pilfered by the servants, or who was overcharging, or if there would be enough brought in to satisfy the guests without waste. The best example of this, and a source that Ms. Henisch draws on heavily, is that marvel of medieval life written by a much older merchant for his young wife, known as "The Goodman of Paris," filled with suggestions of how to run and manage a household full of servants and guests, and how they were to be sustained and entertained. Be warned however, that there are not any recipes or redactions in this book, beyond a selection of those to be found in the Eileen Power translation of "The Goodman of Paris." Unfortunately, they are not much more than descriptions of what a dish might contain, and perhaps how they might be prepared. However, for those wishing to recreate a medieval feast, I would suggest looking at the selection of books that Ms. Henisch provides for further reading. But if you want to find out who was doing the cooking, what society thought of them, or what sort of conditions they were working in, this is a great place to start. There are black and white reproductions of manuscript pages that show artistic representations of cooks and cooking in medieval life -- my favourite is a wood carving that show a husband and wife brawling over a cooking pot, as the man peeks into a pot, and his wife tugs on his beard to make him yelp in pain and a bowl goes sailing past his ear. The notes are very extensive as well as the bibliography and index, all of which provide ideas for further study. I give this one five stars, and happily recommend it, especially for those in re-enactment groups as it takes a look beyond the aristocratic life and history. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Let's hear it for cooks! By Michael Waghorne Whilst there is a certain amount of repetition throughout this book, which more careful editing could have prevented, it was a fascinating read. Cooks certainly have an easier time today. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. It would be great for a resource for research. By Teresa Ball This was a fascinating read. It would be great for a resource for research.

'Stylish and racy... An excellent book and a delight to read, written with panache and entirely convincing.' Professor PETER COSS, Cardiff University. This book takes us into the world of the medieval cook, from the chefs in the great medieval courts and aristocratic households catering for huge feasts, to the peasant wife attempting to feed her family from scarce resources, from cooking at street stalls to working as hired caterers for private functions. It shows how they were presented in the art, literature and moral commentary of the period (valued on some grounds, despised on others), how they functioned, and how they coped with the limitations and the expectations which faced them in different social settings. Particular use is made of their frequent appearance in the margins of illuminated manuscript, whether as decoration, or as a teaching tool.

Bridget Henisch has tackled an enormous subject, the cook in western Europe, and expertly marshalled evidence throughout the medieval period. --Medium Aevum It is an attractive piece of work, beautifully illustrated, making the subject highly approachable for the general reader. [...] A useful and highly entertaining introduction to the study of the necessity and artistry of cookery in the Middle Ages. --Ricardian This admirable book is based on a much wider field than the art of the period. It shows a remarkable range of literary and historical sources. SPECULUM An

accessible overview of medieval culinary practice that will entertain and inform the general public. [...] The general audience will be seduced by the lively medley of cooks and kitchens the book presents. --The Medieval About the Author  
Bridget Ann Henisch is the author of *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (1976) and the co-author, with Heinz K. Henisch, of *Positive Pleasures: Early Photography and Humor* (1998), *The Painted Photograph, 1839 - 1914: Origins, Techniques, Aspirations* (1996), *The Photographic Experience, 1839 - 1914: Images and Attitudes* (1994), all from Penn State.