

Tart de brymlent ^a. [^][^]
viii. vii.

Take Fyg⁹ & Rayfons. & waifshe hē in Wyne. and
gnde hem finale w apples & per clene ypiked. take
hē up and cast hē in a pot wip wyne and sug. take
falwar Salmōn^b yfode. oþ codlyng, oþ haddok, &
bray hē smal. & do þto white powdos & hool spices. &
falt. and seep it. and whanne it is fode ynowz. take
it up and do it in a vessel and lat it kele. make a
Coffyn an ynche depe & do þ fars þin. Plaūt it bouc^c
w prunes and damysfyns. take þ ston⁹ out, and wip
dates q̄rte rede^d and piked clene. and coūe the coffyn,
and bake it wel, and sūe it forth.

Pegge, Samuel. *The Forme of Cury: A Roll of Ancient English Cookery Compiled, about A.D. 1390* © CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

The Forme of Cury is the earliest recognizable British cookbook that still exists today, written by the professional cooks of Richard II's medieval court. Richard II dedicated more of his wealth to indulgences such as feasting rather than foreign affairs such as wars. The multitude of recipes from his court reflect the importance placed on food as well as shed light on the nutritional theories at the time, the prevalence of class-based cooking, and the influence of Middle Eastern ingredients.

The Forme of Cury is a cookbook from a royal court, and the ingredients that are used make this status clear. Ingredients such as meat and eggs were in shorter supply, but they are abundant in these recipes. The recipe "Tart de Brymlent" suggests using expensive salmon, which indicates affluence. It also uses sugar, which Kate Colquhoun in *Taste* refers to as the "ultimate culinary luxury" during this time (1). She mentions that a normal household might use only a pound of sugar throughout the

year, while royal household cooks used thousands of pounds. The abundance of other spices also suggest that these recipes were for privileged households. Spices were extremely expensive (“a pound of pepper in the twelfth century was equivalent to two or three weeks’ land labour,” says Colquhoun) and carried associations of grandeur. “The grander the occasion and the more one wished to impress, the more spice,” notes Sarah Peterson in *Acquired Taste* (3).

The recipes are phrased as more of a note to jog a seasoned chef’s memory, rather than a detailed recipe that anyone could pick up and cook. Quantities or times are rarely mentioned. The lack of quantitative or step-by-step detail in the writing suggests that the book and its recipes are intended for other royal cooks who have already been trained and who have experience, rather than instructions to teach the uninitiated how to cook. This audience is further supported by the types of recipes, with dishes and ingredients meant for royal households. For example, “Tart de Brymlent,” contains no quantities for its ingredients, and does not mention times for its boiling or baking steps other than “whanne it is sode ynowgh” (when it is cooked enough), and “bake it wel” (bake it well). The language of “enough” and “well” suggest that the cook should already be familiar with these techniques, with how to tell when a fish is done, and how long a fish/meat pie should be cooked. It also says to “make a Coffyn an ynche depe” (make a pie shell an inch deep) but gives no further instructions doing so, suggesting that the making of a pie shell is something the cook should already have in his repertoire. The recipe also refers to using spices, but does not list which ones specifically. One of the ingredients called for is “white powdos” (white

powders) which would be a type of spice mixture, as Samuel Pegge explains in his introduction to the book. The recipe calls for this spice mixture but does not bother to specify exactly what is contained within it. The vagueness implies that the cook would have access to a kitchen containing a variety of spices at their disposal, in addition to knowing which ones to use in this kind of recipe. The recipe is also flexible with the type of fish, stating that salmon, cod or haddock can be used. The type of fish to use becomes a decision for the chef in much the same way as the types of spices to use. He may decide based on the preferences of the royal family or the availability of the various types of fish, but giving the chef this choice assumes that he has the knowledge to make the right decision. It could probably be assumed that the royal cooks to whom these recipes would be relevant were already well-trained. It could also be that the purpose of the book was to document the skillfulness of the cooks or the consumption of the royal household.

The recipes are also based on the nutritional theories at the time, which were primarily humoral theories. Humoral theory associated various foods with “warm,” “moist,” “cold” or “dry” states of being, in various degrees. Maintaining balance between these humors led to good health. Cold foods could be neutralized by warm foods and vice versa. Throughout *The Forme of Cury*, the common tendencies to boil dry meat, or cook it with warming spices, honey, verjuice, or wine elucidate the prevalence of the humoral theory. The introduction to the book even states that “it was compiled by assent and avyssement of maistres of phisik and of philosophie” in Richard II’s court. These medieval physicians likely dedicated much of their time to

ensuring that the food that was served was well-balanced humorally. The rise of sugar and its abundant use in many of the recipes can also be partially explained by its agreeable humoral properties. It was warm in the first degree and moist in the second, making it not only popular in cooking but for medicinal uses as well. In the recipe for “Tart de Brymlent,” salmon or other fish is boiled in wine, spices, and sugar neutralizing the cold fish with warm wine and spices. The cold fruits (apples, pears) are also cooked in this warming sauce. The addition of salt in the filling mixture balances the natural moistness of the fish, while pie’s pastry shell protects this moistness of the fish from excessive drying out in the heat of the oven, as would normally happen with baking or roasting (4).

Much of the medieval diet was also dictated by Lent and fasting days. Fasting days meant fish instead of meat, but in royal households fasting recipes were often still extravagant, including seafood such as whale, lobster or porpoise, with the fish poached in wine, fried in oil, cooked with fine spices, or encased in spiced jellies (1). “Tart de Brymlent” suggests that it was intended to be cooked during Lent simply from its name. This was another fasting recipe on the luxurious side, with salmon and whole spices which would have been expensive. Unlike many of the other recipes, this one does not contain eggs or dairy because it was probably intended for fast days.

Middle Eastern cooking is another strong influences on the ingredients and tastes of all the recipes. Sarah Peterson describes how Arabic influences moved through Italy, Switzerland, Sicily and eventually England and Normandy, spreading influence through Frederick II’s Holy Roman Empire. She cites the prevalence of

“Mudejars” (Muslim subjects) in all aspects of life at the time, including commerce, arts, trades, municipal organization and agricultural pursuits. Europeans also descended upon the Middle East, and while hostility was sometimes present, both European and Arab courts were encouraged to greet the others graciously. Naturally, much cultural exchange was facilitated during this time. “European cookery texts of the High Middle Ages and of the Renaissance resembled those of the medieval Arabic world,” says Peterson. This can be seen in the abundant use of sugar, spice and saffron in *The Forme of Cury*. Sugar came from Palestine and Lebanon along new trade routes, and began to replace honey which was primarily used beforehand. Spices were essential in Middle Eastern cooking, and their availability depended on “uninterrupted trade between the Arabic world and Europe” (3). The “Tart de Brymlent” calls for “hool spices” (whole spices). While it doesn’t name the exact spices, judging from the other recipes, these would be along the lines of mace, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, or pepper. Dried fruits were also brought as a result of these new trade routes. “Exotic raisins of Corinth (currants), prunes, figs and dates were all traded by spice merchants,” says Colquhoun. The “Tart de Brymlent” calls for figs, raisins, dates and prunes. The mix of these sweet flavors with the savoriness of fish also has Middle Eastern influence.

Whether its main intent was to testify the skillfulness of Richard II’s royal cooks, to document the plentifulness of his meals, or to accompany other royal cooks in the kitchen, *The Forme of Cury* is an illuminating look into the culture of Britain in the Middle Ages through its cuisine.

Sources:

1. Colquhoun, Kate. *Taste: The Story of Britain through its Cooking*. New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008.
2. Pegge, Samuel. *The Forme of Cury: A Roll of Ancient English Cookery*. London: Printed by J. Nichols, 1780.
3. Peterson, Sarah. *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking*. Ithaca, NY, USA: Cornell University Press, 1994.
4. Scully, Terence. *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 1995.

Second Essay Due (5 pages): Drawing upon the assigned secondary sources, consider *The Forme of Cury* as a historical artifact. What does the collection tell us about the world that produced it? Select a recipe. Who would have prepared it? For whom? Where would the ingredients have come from? What techniques and kitchen equipment would have been needed? What knowledge does the recipe presuppose? What part of a meal would it have been included in? What is notable about the language of the recipe? What religious and/or nutritional theories does the recipe reflect? [Tip: You'll probably want to check out unfamiliar words in on-line glossaries of medieval cooking terms. Here are links to a few good ones:

<http://www.foodtimeline.org/>

<http://www.angelfire.com/md3/openhearthcooking/aaCookbookindex.html>

<http://www.godecookery.com/glossary/glossary.htm>

<http://www.thousandeggs.com/glossary.html#l>

- class-based cooking
 - ingredients: meat
 - no explanations: for seasoned cooks
- humoral theory
- grand presentation
- lent
- middle eastern influences

Tart de Brymlent. Take figs & raisins, & wash them in wine, and grind them small with apples & pears clean picked. Take them up and put them in a pot with wine and sugar. Take very fresh salmon boiled, or cod or haddock, and mince them small, & do there-to white powders & whole spices & salt, & boil it. And when it is cooked enough, take it up and do it in a vessel, and let it cool. Make a pie shell an inch deep & do the filling there-in. Place on top of this damson prunes: take the stones out; and with dates quartered and picked clean. And cover the pie, and bake it well, and serve it forth.

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21L.707 Reading Cookbooks: from The Forme of Cury to The Smitten Kitchen
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