

## CHAPTER THREE

### MEDIAEVAL CUISINE: THE URBAN NEXUS

Mediaeval cuisine, as here interpreted, is a 'higher' cuisine associated with a privileged milieu, that of the wealthy, educated and, possibly, leisured classes. It is also, inevitably, associated with an urban society, as were the near-contemporary cuisines of China during the Sung dynasty and of Persia under Abbassid rule. Similarly, the urban civilisations of Greece and Rome developed sophisticated culinary systems and fostered a culinary and gastronomic literature in which these were recorded.

For Xenophon, the town offered the ideal environment for the development of crafts and trades: "In large cities ... inasmuch as many people have demands to make upon each branch of industry ... it follows, therefore, as a matter of course, that he who devotes himself to a very highly specialized line of work is bound to do it in the best possible manner."<sup>1</sup> The environment was no less favourable for cuisine. The town market could guarantee regular and adequate supplies of both exotic and local ingredients; its society supplied the other necessary prerequisite for cuisine, a population of critical, adventuresome eaters. In both the ancient and mediaeval world, the town was the catalyst of cuisine, and the

revival of the art of cuisine in the later mediaeval period was synchronous with, and to a certain extent dependent on, the recrudescence of towns and town life.

In the period after the disintegration of the Roman Empire, most of western Europe stagnated. Trade was disrupted and disorganised, towns shrank as citizens retreated to the land. Roman culinary traditions were inherited by Byzantium (a "giant freezer of Roman customs"), a thriving city and possibly the most important trading centre in the Mediterranean at that time.<sup>2</sup> Well provisioned with spices and other exotic ingredients, Byzantium maintained the Greco-Roman style of cuisine, based on the same staple ingredients and on the same characteristic seasonings, such as garum, oenogarum and oxymel.<sup>3</sup>

The seventh century saw Byzantine supremacy usurped by the Islamic conquerors who, having assimilated both classical and Persian inheritances, subsequently transmitted new culinary traditions to Sicily and southern Italy, and to Spain, by way of north Africa. Their new cities, such as Palermo and Cordoba, were well-organised and prosperous, and could command products from all parts of the empire. Court society encouraged the culinary arts, and an understanding of the principles of cuisine and gastronomy was considered indispensable to the well-bred gentleman. The Arab conquests established "a social and cultural community, from Andalusia and Sicily as far as Iran, (which) expressed itself through the diffusion of the 'fast-food' dishes of street vendors, some of which

remain, with their Arab names, in twentieth-century Palermo."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, throughout the rest of Christian Europe, cuisine (and other arts) waned until, with the eleventh century, came the light at the end of the tunnel: "After the chaos came order. After the year 1000 the world experienced a new spring."<sup>5</sup> The first mediaeval literature appeared - the Chanson de Roland, the earliest troubadour songs and poems. The teaching of medicine began at Salerno and Montpellier, of law at Bologna. Agricultural production, encouraged and facilitated by technological improvements, expanded and new lands were cleared and sown to crops. Population started to move, towns returned to life - or life returned to the towns - and, in the shadow of ecclesiastical centres or feudal fortresses, new settlements sprang up. Finally, in 1099, Jerusalem was captured by the first crusaders who, inspired not only by a desire to gain paradise through fighting in God's cause but also by the prospect of fame, excitement and riches, illustrated the spirit of the century, no longer introspective but expansive.

The remnants of any Roman or indigenous cuisine which may have persisted in western Europe between the fifth and thirteenth centuries - for it is inconceivable that the art of cuisine disappeared completely - are insignificant alongside the culinary renaissance of the later mediaeval centuries. The absence of cookery books does not necessarily signify a society lacking in the culinary graces; it is known that monasteries preserved many

traditions of agriculture, horticulture and herbal medicine, as well as learning, and at least two copies of Apicius were transcribed in monasteries in the ninth century. Many of the dishes which appear as recipes in texts of the fourteenth century are mentioned in earlier literature.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the flourish of culinary manuscripts which appeared almost simultaneously in France, Italy, Catalonia and England around the year 1300 is evidence that cuisine had emerged from a period of seclusion and was now integrated into a new system of values.

#### THE MEDIAEVAL TOWN AND ITS SOCIETY

The development of cuisine in mediaeval western Europe is linked with the re-emergence of towns and of a new class in society, the urban bourgeois.<sup>7</sup> While the town itself may not have been new, especially in Mediterranean regions, it differed from its antecedent in both nature and function. The mediaeval town was primarily a centre of production and exchange, its function primarily economic (although it also fulfilled administrative, political and religious roles), its society more purely merchant and artisan.<sup>8</sup> Merchant and town evolved in parallel.

The fairytale simplicity of a sudden urban reawakening after the year-of-doom 1000 is unrealistic although appealing to the imagination. It is more accurate to place the town at the confluence of several interrelated and interdependent currents - a period of

relative peace and stability, improvements in agriculture resulting in increased production, greater opportunities for trade and contact with other civilisations.

Whether the source of the urban renaissance is ascribed to the impetus of international commerce, particularly in luxury items of mainly Mediterranean origin, or to the gradual enlargement of the circle of local economic activity as a result of prospering agriculture, the trade resurgence was undoubtedly vital to the growth of towns. The twin revival of trade and towns has two corollaries particularly relevant to the development of cuisine: a gradual shift from a 'natural' to a money-based economy and, at the same time, increasing specialisation of industry and, to a lesser extent, agriculture. Money transactions were neither common nor necessary on rural monasteries and large estates which had customarily operated along the lines of self-sufficient communities, with dues often paid in kind. In the towns, however, where trade encouraged familiarity with the use of currency, citizens favoured interdependence rather than self-reliance. Money translated individual effort into freedom of choice.

Town dwellers were constrained more by the size of their purse than by the whims of Nature, and the urban environment thus favoured the evolution of cuisine in a way that the rural habitat had not, and could not. In the mediaeval town the vagaries of nature were replaced by order and stability, and a tempo of life regulated both by the Church and by municipal authorities, whose sanitary

and market regulations were generally designed to ensure fair competition and adequate supplies of wholesome ingredients at all times. Further, the town was the setting for the ritualised dinners and feasts in honour of a patron saint or a special occasion, organised by small local communities such as religious brotherhoods and the professional guilds which grew out of the specialisation of trades.

Insofar as their life was no longer determined by their relations with the land, the doctors and lawyers, merchants and artisans of the new towns were differentiated from the agricultural communities which continued outside the towns. They differed, too, from the workers and craftsmen of a feudal society in that they were, in principle, free, which meant that they could rise to important positions and ranks within the town society and rub shoulders with the hereditary nobility. In all dimensions, the structure of the town and its society was less rigid than that of the feudal estate and more conducive to the development and flowering of a characteristic cuisine.

#### THE HIERARCHIES OF MEDIAEVAL SOCIETY

Mediaeval life is traditionally described in terms of dualities: noble-peasant (or 'courtoisie-vilainie'); feast-fast; plenty-scarcity; town-country (or, in Jacques Le Goff's terms, 'l'espace civilisé - l'espace sauvage').<sup>9</sup> This simplistic schema suits the broad

brush, but an emphasis on extremes ignores the vast space between.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the noble/peasant dichotomy became totally inadequate to describe the complexities of society, especially town society. The old lines of demarcation were blurred; 'noble' could refer to a quality of birth or to individual worthiness. In Toulouse at the start of the fourteenth century, families of the 'haute bourgeoisie', whose revenues were derived mainly from land although although some members were still active in commerce, were traditionally considered noble. Nobility could either be conferred by the king, or his representative, or could be acquired by the purchase of property belonging to nobles.<sup>10</sup> On town councils, the old aristocracy sat side by side with the 'new elite' - merchants, lawyers, apothecaries - whose individual fortunes may well have exceeded those of many of the nobility. In fifteenth-century Milan, Ludovico il Moro, an upstart whose family had been merely prosperous farmers a century earlier, had a personal income which was greater than half the budget of France and exceeded the total budget of England.<sup>11</sup>

Fifteenth-century Arles offers an example of the social structure of a mediaeval town.<sup>12</sup> Nobles were by far the wealthiest social group, with average assets exceeding 1000 florins, but among property owners there was an elite, including apothecaries, livestock breeders, lawyers, merchants and 'bourgeois', whose average net wealth was greater than 250 florins. On the next rung, in

terms of fortune, were fishermen, barbers and butchers with average assets of about 130 florins, while near the bottom of the ladder were the shoemakers, worth less than 50 florins. These averages, however, concealed wide disparities; three out of eleven butchers could be included in the merchant-lawyer class on the basis of their wealth. Assuming a fortune of 300 florins or more to represent substantial wealth, then ten per cent of property owners, 115 in total, formed the wealthy elite of Arles.

As far as cuisine is concerned, hereditary or intellectual distinctions - noble birth, noble profession - are probably less significant than those based on wealth, and the example of Arles indicates that the wealthy elite was of heterogeneous composition. More important again is disposable wealth, since the existence of a cuisine implies that it satisfies more than just nutritional requirements, and that the expression of preferences is not subject to financial restrictions. The ability to spend must go hand-in-hand with conspicuous spending: "wealth and power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence."<sup>13</sup>

Status, in mediaeval - as in contemporary - society, was signalled by the trappings of everyday lifestyle, of housing, furnishing, dress and, perhaps less conspicuously, cuisine. The illustrations in the various fourteenth-century northern Italian manuscripts of the Tacuinum Sanitatis show clearly the organisation of society and the division of labour between peasant,



bourgeois and noble strata.<sup>14</sup> The peasant, working in the fields or delivering olive oil to the townspeople, is either barefoot or has holes in his shoes or stockings; the bourgeois housewife wears a serviceable simple, but long, dress, often protected by an apron; while the nobleman is dressed in a long, flowing robe with voluminous sleeves and his shoes have long and exaggerated points. Such differences in costume indicate that the social gulf between the country peasant ('vilain'), and the citizens of the town, both bourgeois and noble, was far greater than that between the two latter groups. Likewise, a parallel gulf existed between the peasant's 'alimentation' and the the cuisine enjoyed by the bourgeois and nobility. Indeed, the emulation by the bourgeois of the nobles' way of life was sometimes of such concern to the latter that they tried to control extravagances of spending - notably on food and clothing - by enacting sumptuary laws which favoured the maintenance of class distinctions.

Dress and diet were two areas where a symbolic function could, and did, assume pre-eminence, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The more luxurious and more individual the costume, the more it symbolised one's role in society. The design, material, colour and accessories were all symbolically-charged: "La richesse ou le rang social doivent sauter aux yeux."<sup>15</sup> At the court of roi René, the highest-ranked courtiers were accorded more, and more expensive, cloth for any item of clothing; they were allowed more clothes, more furs,

more jewellery.<sup>16</sup> Thus fashion was stratified in the same way as cuisine; even the differences between everyday and feast-day cuisine could be paralleled by differences in dress - serviceable colours for ordinary clothes, bright colours, especially red, for ceremonial occasions. By their clothes and by their meals, the wealthy elite of the mediaeval era proclaimed their superior status.

### CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Wealth, as much as birth, may have decided one's social status in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but to demonstrate it one had to adopt the lifestyle appropriate to this status. For members of the aristocracy, obliged to affirm the superiority acquired by virtue of birth, a time-honoured code of morals and manners had long governed their life and conduct. It was outlined in such works as Li Livres dou Trésor by Brunetto Latini, a compendium of moral wisdom and code of social manners written for intelligent, wealthy, well-bred nobles (and perhaps aspiring nobles, too), which had a widespread success in Europe in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Book II of this work, largely based on Aristotle, deals with "pratique et de logique, qui enseigne à home quel chose il doit faire et quel non, et la raison por quoi l'en doit faire les unes et les autres non."<sup>17</sup> Among the requisite 'virtues' are Generosity, Magnificence and Magnanimity, and of the three, Magnanimity, which incorporated Generosity and

Magnificence, was the most esteemed.

Each of these virtues was associated with wealth and noble birth: "Et nobletz de naissance et seignorie et richesses aident mult a l'home a estre magnanimes"; "magnificence est une vertu qui oeuvre par richesses, grans despenses at grans maisons."<sup>18</sup> One way of demonstrating Magnificence was to erect churches; another was to "faire grans noces et doner as gens grans herbergeries et grans viandes et grans presens".<sup>19</sup> Seen in this light, the great feasts offered by mediaeval nobles were less an expression of greed or uncontrolled appetite than a means of fulfilling social obligations and displaying social status. The description of Flamenca's arrival at Bourbon and the celebrations in her honour demonstrate how Archambaut perceived, and fulfilled, the duties of his rank in accord with the accepted social ritual of the time.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of affirming one's station extended to almost all aspects of daily life, even to christian names - one set of names was considered appropriate to the nobility, another set for others. At table, a sophisticated code of manners distinguished the well-bred gentleman or lady. In the kitchen, a more extensive 'batterie de cuisine' permitted the elaboration of the complex and sophisticated dishes which were the mark of the wealthy table. In mediaeval Provence, the frying pan and cauldron were common to many town households but the additional implements of grill and roasting-spit were found only in the homes of the wealthy.<sup>21</sup> Merely the

existence of a 'kitchen', a space set aside for the preparation and cooking of foods, differentiated the upper from the lower levels of society.<sup>22</sup>

All studies of mediaeval diet have demonstrated the disparities, in both quantity and quality, associated with the divisions of society. In general, the lower in the social hierarchy, the less money allocated to rations and the less food provided. Further, the composition of the rations varied according to rank; for the lowest orders greater proportions were spent on bread and wine and less on 'companage', typically meat and other protein foods. In one example, the cost of rations for an agricultural labourer was at least 30% less than the cost for a monk, and of this only 12% was spent on 'companage', compared with 30% for the monk.<sup>23</sup>

Such examples illustrate vividly the widely-held belief that nobles and peasants were not to eat the same foods, although this belief was modified somewhat in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (significantly, one of Goody's determinants of a 'higher' cuisine is a different set of ingredients). "Peasants must not eat fowls, but onions and cheese, nor rolls or white bread, but coarse bread; for base and coarse foods are to be given to base persons, and delicate foods to noble folk."<sup>24</sup> The Latin Tractatus also prescribes certain foods for nobles and different foods for labourers.<sup>25</sup> This same text implicitly associates 'cuisine' with wealth and nobility, as does Guillaume de Lorris in Le Roman de la Rose; his image of the walled garden of the Rose, filled with exotic

fruits and the spices which typified mediaeval cuisine, implies that these delights could only be enjoyed by those inside the garden, itself an allegorical representation of the courtly life.<sup>26</sup>

If food is a system of communication, cuisine can become an exclusive language. In the mediaeval centuries, symbolic values became invested in ingredients, in methods of preparation and in the final results. The intimate relationship between wealth and social status also came into play; cost alone could identify the foods of the rich and powerful, and the more costly, the stronger the affirmation. As Thorstein Veblen has remarked, taste can be guided by pecuniary repute, and the most esteemed ingredients and preparation methods in mediaeval cuisine were typically the most costly ones.<sup>27</sup> Like the heliotropic sunflower, mediaeval taste preferences took their direction from a source of gold.

The increasing fluidity of mediaeval society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries produced a shift in the symbolic values associated with diet and dress. It was not so much a matter of the aristocrat affirming his natural superiority of birth by means of what he ate or how he dressed, but of new wealth using these same means to claim similar status. The 'higher' cuisine of these later centuries belonged to the socially mixed group who could afford it. Conspicuous consumption did not, however, imply indiscriminate and extravagant spending; the author of Le Menagier was a paragon of economic virtue, careful to spend enough but not too much.<sup>28</sup>

As remarked earlier, the difference in dress between the peasant in the country and the 'town citizen' denoted a greater class separation than that between the 'bourgeois' and the noble and in all probability, the same was true with food. The bourgeois and the noble probably shared many dishes from the same repertoire; for the bourgeois the more expensive, more complicated, more decorative ones were enjoyed less frequently, while for the peasant they existed only in the mythical realm of Cockaigne.

#### INDIVIDUALITY OF 'HIGHER' CUISINES

Were the hierarchical differences in what people ate more striking than geographic ones? Throughout western Europe, did the rich share the same "cosmopolitan cuisine of the aristocracy", a phenomenon which Flandrin has labelled "l'internationalisme de la cuisine"<sup>29</sup>

The recipe manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries offer many examples of ostensibly equivalent dishes in Italy, Catalonia, France and England. Often they are very similar, despite the individual interpretations of each text; blanc manger (menjar blanc) is one example. There are others, however, where the similarity of names conceals significant differences which are probably geographic in origin. The sauce known as 'cameline' in northern France was distinctly different from the Catalan 'camellina' and the Italian 'camelino'. Indeed, a long list of culinary 'faux amis' can be

compiled from mediaeval texts: boussac and busac; hericot and nerricoc; brouet sarrasinois, brodium sarracenicum and salsa sarrasinesca.

The assumption that regional differences in cuisine did exist, and are demonstrable, is a fundamental premise of this work. Again, dress seems to offer a parallel development. "The transformation of costume in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries thus appears less as the expression of a general and common civilisation than that of a group of nations equal but different in culture. From being universal, uniform and impersonal, costume became particular, personal and national."<sup>30</sup>

In both the lowest and highest reaches of cuisine, geographical differences may have been minimised - cereal grains such as rice and wheat were cooked in practically the same way throughout western Europe, and the roast and be-feathered peacock took universal pride of place on festive tables. Between these extremes, however, cuisine could, and did, take on a distinctive regional character. "La diversité des goûts et des pratiques ... existait déjà aux XI<sup>Ve</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles," affirms Jean-Louis Flandrin.<sup>31</sup>