

**“*Mens et mensa: Thinking of Food in Medieval Cultures (1000-1600 CE)*”<sup>1</sup>  
Introduction**

Montserrat Piera  
Temple University

In the last few decades new theoretical perspectives have emphasized the significance of material culture for an understanding of historical and sociocultural developments. As a consequence of this renewed interest in more pragmatic aspects of daily life through the ages scholars have turned to the study of food as a window to the cultural dynamics that are embedded within. The acquisition, preparation and consumption of food is a basic human need that provides a lens through which scholars can explore relationships among economic, religious, literary, legal, political, cultural and social activity. Scholarly study of food, as well as its surrounding ideas and practices, illuminate the boundaries and nexus of material and mental exchanges which are so fundamental to human experience that they often escape a culture’s nominal categories to occasion the crossing of social and political borders.

Scholarly interest in food and eating in the Middle Ages increased after the publication of Caroline Bynum Walker’s groundbreaking study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* but it has received an even more noticeable impetus in the last two decades with the publications of several seminal books devoted to the cultural history of food by eminent medieval and early modern historians: Paul Freedman’s *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination*; Massimo Montanari’s *The Culture of Food (Fame e l’abbondanza)*; and Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s, *Food: A History*, among others. In spite of these and other noteworthy contributions food history still remains relatively absent from scholarly debates. A thorough study of food and how it both nourishes and affects societies and bodies will shed light on medieval culture in general. Food determines identities, defines groups and brings about change and revolution. Food and the exchange of foodstuffs are omnipresent in the historical, artistic and literary record and its impact is felt cognitively and epistemologically as well as sociologically.

Medieval Christians inhabited a world in which eating was infused with sacramental, ritual, and symbolic significance. The apotheosis of this culture turned, of course, upon the symbolic eating of sacramental food, the body of the Eucharist, in a ritual that can be labeled as “sacred cannibalism”. Medieval Jews and Muslims abhorred such ceremonial custom but they were equally bound by other ritualistic and symbolic rules of food consumption and preparation. Furthermore, the relationships and interaction among these three antagonistic groups relied heavily on the exchange of foodstuffs and spices. Trade, commerce and navigation owe their existence to food and eating. But in medieval culture eating also had political value in addition to religious and commercial value. As Felipe Fernández-Armesto states, “eating is a culturally transforming – sometimes a magically transforming– act. It has its own alchemy. It changes personalities, it can sacralize apparently secular acts. It can release power” (34).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank and acknowledge here the two people whose vision and untiring determination made this project possible: John Bollweg and Donna Rogers, who came up with the idea and the name of the association which has provided the impetus for this venture: *Mens et mensa: Society for the Study of Food in the Middle Ages*. In the past few years the association has organized several sessions devoted to the topic of food in the Middle Ages at the Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University as well as their first international symposium in Barcelona in October of 2013.

The aim of this critical cluster is to probe into this hitherto neglected subject of the power and symbolism of food within medieval culture. Our scope is geographically, methodologically and linguistically interdisciplinary. The studies included therein focus on the period between 1000 and 1600 CE and approach their subject matter from variegated methodologies and disciplines but they are all examples of original and engaging cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural scholarship on ideas, practices and artifacts concerning food in the Middle Ages.

The critical cluster begins with two articles that, in different albeit illuminating ways, establish the foundation for our collaborative inquiry. In the first one, “Spoiled or Splendid: Speculations on a Culinary Misgiving”, Aaron Hostetter, an Anglo-Saxon scholar, provocatively challenges some long-held stereotypes about medieval food and eating habits, in particular that which maintains that the extensive use of spices in medieval cuisine was due to the need of masking the taste of spoiled food and persuasively concludes that such misinterpretations reveal our own modern ignorance rather than the lack of sophistication of medieval society. Hostetter cogently demonstrates as well that the pervasiveness of these ideas is also a result of an epistemological construct that still views the “Middle Ages” as a period which only has negative and marginal attributes and, consequently, is constantly critiqued. Hostetter’s discussion will provide a frame for all subsequent contributions, which set out to describe, scrutinize and interpret precisely how medieval people viewed and thought about food and the activities around food procuring and consumption.

In the second of these two articles, “What Not to Eat: Excess and Moderation at the Medieval Catalan Table”, Donna Rogers outlines a series of general attitudes and habits surrounding the custom of eating and drinking in the Middle Ages and also illustrates, through the scrutiny of various Catalan treatises and cookbooks (such as the *Llibre de les dones* and the *Llibre de Sent Soví*), a theme which is reiterated by every contributor in this collection, namely, that the act of eating and drinking in medieval culture is never a neutral act, devoid of meaning but, rather, it is always endowed with symbolic undertones. In the particular texts which Rogers analyzes the consumption of food is constantly intertwined with notions of religious ritual and propriety which underscore the advantages of abstention and moderation and the unhealthy consequences not only of sinful behavior but also of bad table manners.

But food can also be symbolically linked to more secular concerns as evidenced in knightly and aristocratic *milieux*, where the display and offering of food serve as a reenactment of class struggles and displacement of power among aristocrats. From disciplines as diverse as Art History and Iberian Studies Rebekah Pratt and Jonathan Burgoyne analyze this phenomenon, the former studying the beautiful illuminations included in Gaston Fébus’s *Libre de la chasse*, the latter analyzing the epic *Poema de Mio Cid*. Apart from its interest as a material visual artifact that vividly illustrates the activities surrounding the hunting of an animal and its transformation into food, the *Libre de la chasse* is also a crucial example of the importance of hunting as a social marker of power for aristocrats. Thus, hunting and the violence perpetrated on the prey was not only aimed at obtaining food but was socially performed to assert the aristocrat’s perceived superiority. Drawing on the anthropological studies by Mauss and Douglas, Jonathan Burgoyne arrives at similar conclusions and finds that several of the banquet scenes in the *Poema de Mio Cid* should not be interpreted as simple occasions for the exchange of food and display of hospitality but instead as a performance of power and a hierarchical reversal between the Count of Barcelona and the lesser nobleman Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. The banquet scenes in the *Poema de Mio Cid* parodically and humorously humiliate and feminize the Count and thus reaffirm the Cid’s status as a better prince and epic hero.

Especially relevant to our collection is Marie Kelleher's article "Eating from a Corrupted Table: Food, Fraud, and Public Order in Medieval Barcelona", which brings a historian's perspective to bear on the topic of thinking about food in the Middle Ages. This article neatly fulfills as well the purpose of contextualizing and grounding our discussion by bringing to the fore actual municipal ordinances that were drafted expressly to deal with issues related to food in the medieval city. Kelleher's analysis provides us with valuable information about the daily activities surrounding food as well as the importance of foodstuffs and food supplies for the survival of a city. Using the famine of 1333 in Catalonia as her departing point she engages in a thorough and perceptive scrutiny of historical documents and argues that they clearly demonstrate that procuring an uncorrupted supply of food not only guaranteed the physical nourishment of a city's dwellers but also the preservation of the social fabric of the city itself. The councilors of Barcelona were aware that their own civic authority and the trust of their neighbors depended on how well they managed to regulate food sales and to persecute business corruption as well as food corruption or pollution. What Kelleher proposes is a departure from previous studies because "while food and famine may be subjects of study in and of themselves, they can also be used as an analytical framework, a lens through which to understand the workings of a particular society".

The next two articles delve with great acumen into the linkages between food and violence. Martha Daas in "Violence and the Soul: The Penitential Diet in the Spanish Middle Ages" focuses on the depiction of consumption and fasting in the centuries before the Inquisition in several Iberian texts from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. She first examines the violent impact of fasting and other religious dietary impositions on the bodies of medieval female saints, in particular Saint Mary the Egyptian and Saint Martha and contrasts it to the transgressive and uproarious description of food in the *Libro de Buen Amor*, where a battle between Doña Cuaresma y Don Carnal openly enacts a parody of the concepts of abstinence and fasting and proclaims the hypocrisy of the religious lifestyle. Conversely, Sonja Mayrhofer turns to a different type of culinary violence when she scrutinizes the symbolic implications of the cannibalistic eating of Saracen flesh in the Middle English romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*. In this romance Richard's forbidden and violent act of cannibalism heals the King's ailment while obliterating the Muslim enemy physically as well as symbolically. But this act of cannibalism does not only metamorphose the Saracen into edible meat: it also transforms the consumer who, from this moment on, will take on the humoral constitution of the enemy he is attempting to destroy.

Although perhaps not as centrally as in the previous two articles, violence (physical as well as psychological) is also alluded to in Madera Allan and Mark Johnston's articles, which investigate the tragic consequences of adhering to religious and cultural dietary customs among the two groups that were more severely persecuted in the Iberian Peninsula after the establishment of the Inquisition in 1483: the *conversos* and the *moriscos*. In "An Elusive Minimal Pair: Taste and Caste in Inquisitorial La Mancha" Allan carefully investigates the Inquisitorial proceedings which describe the trial in Ciudad Real of the *converso* and courtier Juan González Pintado. What the documents evince is that dietary customs that were no longer religious but only cultural among new *conversos* served to identify them as "marranos" and put them in danger, while any attempt by *conversos* to prove that they ate the same as their Christian neighbors only exacerbated their plight by contributing to the creation of a "community of taste" which supposedly marked them as Jews or Judaizers. Similarly, Hernando de Talavera identifies *moriscos* by means of their external cultural customs and behavior. According to Mark Johnston, the archbishop Talavera in his treatise *Contra la demasía de vestir y de calçar y de comer y de beuer* (reprinted in Granada in 1496), discusses food and the sin of gluttony when trying to persuade the *moriscos* of Granada to amend

their ways and become and behave as Christians. Talavera applies Christian moral theology and the concept of ‘natural law’ to the consumption of food and drink and exhorts *moriscos* to abide by it and abandon their alleged culinary excessive and sinful behavior. Both Allan and Johnston’s contributions unequivocally demonstrate that in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain cultural or social differences from the Christian norm were equated to sins such as gluttony and lust, deemed excessive (*demasia*) and punished accordingly. A refusal to conform to Christian dietary prescriptions would leave *moriscos*, as Johnston states paraphrasing Talavera, “prey to the omnivorous forces of providential history” that would eventually consume them.

Last, but certainly not least, we engage the topic of food and the senses in the last two articles of the cluster. In “Este manjar es dulce”: Sweet Synaesthesia in the *Libro de Buen Amor*”, Emily Francomano engages in an in-depth analysis of the corporeal sensation of taste in Juan Ruiz’s book. Francomano argues that sweetness is synesthetic in the *Libro de Buen Amor* because it is evocative of multiple yet simultaneous sensations: while the protagonist reflects upon sweetness, he and his other characters also encourage their readers and listeners to interpret the text. Sweet tastes upon the tongue are ubiquitously equated with understanding and knowledge, with the use of the immaterial faculties of the soul. But the *Libro* also offers many examples of the ambiguous nature of sweetness, which, like interpretation, can lead to good and evil. Heather Downey embarks upon the discussion of another of the senses, smell, in her article “He never ‘Sausage’ a Sight: The Blind Man’s Search for Olfactory Truth in *Lazarillo de Tormes*”. In her study of the episode of the sausage (“longaniza”) in the first “Tratado” of the novel, Downey proposes that the anonymous author of this picaresque novel seeks to reveal the unreliable nature of the senses. Applying Michel Jeanneret’s concept of banquets as textual objects, Downey undertakes a detailed close-reading of the scene in the text where Lazarillo steals the sausage from the blind man and replaces it with a turnip. The smell which emanates from the enticing sausage will prompt the ever-hungry rogue, Lazarillo, to act and steal the food but will also be his downfall since smell will be what alerts the blind man to the truth. Downey contends that the function of smell in this episode puts into question the preeminence of sight as the superior sense and exposes the uncertainty that pervaded the period in which the work was composed. The anonymous author alerts the reader to sharpen his/her senses in order to better understand the world and survive in it. Thus, both Francomano and Downey study culinary metaphors and their correlation to the senses and coincide in the realization that the senses can be unreliable.

From this brief review of the various critical contributions contained in this collection it can be easily surmised that the study of food may yield fascinating insights into the culture of the Middle Ages. It is also evident that, despite the disparity of disciplines, methodologies and critical approaches utilized by the authors, there are many points of convergence and shared conclusions between the different contributions. As suggested by Aaron Hostetter’s discussion at the outset of this cluster, scholars and readers are still, too often, constrained by our own cultural paradigms, preventing us from engaging in novel appraisals of the realities or phenomena we seek to define and comprehend. Nevertheless, the eleven scholars here included are ambitiously debunking several old paradigms in their re-readings of historical documents, manuscript illuminations and literary texts, thus reversing the neglect of food as a scholarly subject. Their collective perceptions have produced a first charting of what we envision will be a very productive venue of research among other scholars in years to come. In the same way as the *Libro de Buen Amor* “offers smooth and sweet words to be savored” (Francomano), let this cluster of articles about food in the Middle Ages be as savory and sweet to our readers.