

“What Not to Eat: Excess and Moderation at the Medieval Catalan Table”

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The consumption of food and drink in our past and in our present is often bound up with notions of need and desire, obsession and control, subsistence and decadent indulgence. Prescriptions and proscriptions about food have long been associated with medicine, hygiene and health, as well as with opposing notions of satiety, pleasure and extravagance. In medieval Europe, the three great religions each imposed constraints on the consumption—and sometimes production—of certain foodstuffs.

The medieval Church followed an established calendar of fasting and feasting days, which had to be observed by the pious. Indeed, beyond the normative strictures of the Church regarding the observance of fasting, we know that some medieval religious women took fasting and self-denial to anorectic extreme, as Caroline Walker Bynum and others have documented. The consumption of flesh is, of course, the basis of the Eucharist, and thus the ingestion of food is bound inextricably to notions of consecration/piety/holiness.

Both Muslims and Jews also observed (and observe) religious constraints on the consumption of certain foods, either alone or in specific combinations. There is ritual significance in the prohibition against pork, for instance, and in the requirement for halal or kosher butchery. The religious significance of fasting is institutionalized in Islam with Ramadan, an exercise whose purpose is, in part, to practise discipline, humility and sacrifice, and to create empathy with the deprivation of the poor. In Judaism the primary occasion of fasting is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Jews fast to atone for their sins against God. In all three religions, depending on the region and the era, certain foods were believed to have medicinal properties, or indeed to be dangerous or poisonous.

For medieval Christians, however, the restriction of food consumption and the expectation of abstinence and self-denial were regular and extended throughout the calendar year—at a minimum, throughout Lent, prior to certain feast days, and one day each week, typically on Fridays (Woolgar 166-67). From the early church onward, we find the coupling of food abstinence and almsgiving: that is, if we each eat less, we can share what we have with the poor (Bynum 31-32). According to Woolgar, “One of the earliest and continuing determinants of eating patterns was the link between diet and virtue. From at least the fourth century, Christianity promoted abstinence for its spiritual benefits. Refraining from meat and dairy fats, and hence from carnality and its associated vices of gluttony and lechery, helped to ensure the salvation of the soul.” (165-66).

Complicating this picture, too, was the prevalence of Galen’s medical theory of humours and its application to food choices. Physicians attended to their wealthy patrons and prescribed particular foodstuffs according to their humoral properties and their patients’ characteristics. Illness and disease could be staved off in this way, and health maintained by attending to any imbalance of the humors through dietetics (Delbrugge 10-11). As an example, the great Catalan physician and spiritual reformer Arnau de Vilanova served as doctor and dietary advisor to Kings Pere II and Jaume II, and to the Avignon popes. Medical writing and, later, popular almanacs contained treatises on the humors and their qualities, sometimes conflated with the assignment of humoral properties to signs of the zodiac or months of the year; in such manuals, advice was offered as to what kinds of foods were most appropriate to the season, and what kinds of foods should be avoided (see, for instance, Delbrugge; Rivera and Rogers).

We could argue, of course, that for most people fasting and minimal food consumption were not merely ritual, given the bare subsistence of the vast majority of the populace. Wright observes that “at a time when hunger and starvation were common, gluttony was only possible among the rich” (79), and calls the medieval Mediterranean world “a poor and famine-stricken Mediterranean populated with perpetually hungry people” (86). Most of them had little choice about what to eat, and barely thought at all about what *not* to eat.

Grains and cereals of various kinds provided much of the caloric intake for European people of all classes from the ninth to the early fourteenth centuries (Woolgar 173). Bread made daily from more refined flours was a staple at the wealthiest tables, while the poorest subsisted on millet, rye, barley, spelt, oats and less commonly wheat (see, for example, Rogers, “‘Ve ab paor...’”; Woolgar 173). Cereals were consumed as bread but also in pottages and porridges (Woolgar 173). Moreover, it was not only the presence of cereals in the diet that draws our attention, but rather the proportion of it in the diets of all classes. In his study of provisioning and food in Provence in the later Middle Ages (*Ravitaillement et alimentation en Provence aux XIVe et XVe siècles*), Louis Stoff examined the institutional accounts of several hospitals and other religious institutions (the papal Studium, an archbishopric) and determined that on average, bread and cereal products constituted almost 30% of the food budget (226; see also Wright 153-54). By way of comparison, meat averaged 24% of these institutions’ food budgets, and wine 29%. The average for fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables, spices, fats and cheeses combined was a little under 18%.

Disease and pestilence could also exacerbate hunger and famine, and indeed in extreme cases could change the way people produced food and ate it: “So many died during the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century that there was no one left to care for farms. The farms were abandoned and the land reverted to meadow or forest. The number of husbanded animals, as well as game, increased and therefore more meat was eaten. From the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries,” much of “the European diet consisted [...] of meat” (Wright 87). In Iberia, particularly in Castile, the changes caused by the Plague led to an enormous increase in shepherding: sheep adapted well to the terrain, and transhumance—the great seasonal migrations of vast flocks of sheep between summer and winter pastures—grew tremendously. The Christian-Muslim borderlands were ideally suited to shepherding, as it was not personnel- or resource-intensive and did not require elaborate defenses (Phillips and Phillips 89-94).

There are many regional differences in food varieties and consumption—very generally between northern and southern Europe, between coastal and inland areas, between fertile valleys and craggy mountainsides. Due in part to region and climate but also to topography, there were preferences for certain spices, butter or oil, mutton or beef or goat, poultry or game, fresh or preserved fish, fresh or dried fruits, and so on. Weather and climate determined harvests, and failed harvests meant real suffering that season, and more deprivation the next. Nevertheless, regions where there was significant Arabic presence often benefitted greatly from the products and technologies brought from North Africa and the Middle East, which afforded much greater variety of foodstuffs and often higher productivity from the land.

Much of the Iberian Peninsula acquired such benefits, with the presence of Muslims in large swaths of territory over many centuries. New irrigation technologies, new products and crops, new spices, and new methods of preparing foods spread across southern Iberia, along the Mediterranean coast and into the interior. From the peninsula many of these products and technologies became known in other parts of Western Europe as well. The rest of this essay will, however, focus on Catalonia, more precisely on several of the few medieval Catalan texts that

describe and discuss food (including recipes), customs and practices at table, and the dangers of overindulgence.

Recipe collections from medieval Catalonia, such as the *Llibre de Sent Soví* (c. 1324) and the *Llibre del coch* (latter half of the fifteenth century; Santanach 16), contain recipes for many kinds of fish, seafood, poultry and meat, and are careful to note which ones are to be served to the sick to make them healthy and strong; in the *Sent Soví* certain recipes contain very specific instructions that connect food to the treatment of the sick and convalescent (Santanach 23). The same book contains a group of recipes for Lenten dishes—all dishes eaten with a spoon, sweetened, creamy, puddingy or porridgy concoctions made from barley or oats with almond milk (Santanach 24). But the connection between spiritual health—abstaining from meat during Lent—and physical health is not always a positive one. As Joan Santanach remarks in his edition of the *Sent Soví*, “It is worth noting the connection that Arnau de Vilanova makes in the *Regimen sanitatis*, a work he wrote for James II of Aragon, between ‘spoon’ dishes and the fare characteristic of Lent. In his [Arnau’s] chapter on legumes we read: ‘As during Lent one must often eat food that causes obstructions, such as fish and dishes eaten with a spoon, it will be a profitable thing for conserving one’s health if one takes a bit of purée made with chickpeas or peas at the beginning of the meal’” (qtd. in Santanach, 25).

Both the *Sent Soví* and the *Llibre del coch* clearly document the Arabic influence on Catalan food preferences in the late Middle Ages; one notable tendency is the abundant use of sugar, even in savoury dishes. Other frequent ingredients include pomegranates and citron, oil (in preference to butter), chickpeas, and spices such as mint and saffron (Woolgar 180-81). Both the *Sent Soví* and the *Llibre del coch* reveal these preferences to some extent; and we must remember that these books are reflections of the tastes and consumer capacity of the well-to-do.

In order to consider more specifically the themes noted in the title of this essay—excess and moderation at the Catalan table—I turn now to two works by the fourteenth-century Catalan friar Francesc Eiximenis (1327?-1409?), specifically the *Terç del Crestià* (1384), and the *Llibre de les dones* (c. 1388). In a section of the *Terç* of some 47 chapters (chapters 350-96 were edited by Jorge Gracia and comprise his edited treatise *Com usar bé de beure e menjar*), Eiximenis considers the sin of gluttony—understood to apply to food and drink—and he also provides a short guide to courtesy and table manners. About forty per cent of this little treatise is devoted to drinking and drunkenness, about 30 per cent treats food gluttony specifically, and the remainder deals with good and bad behaviour at table (though this section also contains admonitions about food and drink).

In the chapters on alcohol and drunkenness, Eiximenis argues that inebriation is usually a mortal sin, but under limited circumstances could be characterized as a venial sin: “Alcun pot beure lo vy en gran quantitat per set que haurà e no per amor del vy, no attenent a la sua fortalea, e axí’s poria l’om leugerament embriagar sens peccat mortal” (Eiximenis, *Com usar bé* 21). Eiximenis cites a variety of sources to bolster his argument, both Biblical and patristic, and goes to some length to specify that these strictures apply to women and the clergy, too (23-42). As he does so often in the *Crestià*, Eiximenis offers his readers some anecdotes to illustrate his arguments. In one of the more amusing ones related in this section, Eiximenis tells of a monk who wrote a letter to a doctor to seek advice about his health:

Sapiats, sènyer, que no visch ben sà ne puch quaix res menjar, car jamés no he fam. Tramet-vos a dir tot mon regiment de viure, per tal que vejats si és bo ne sà a mi.

Sènyer, yo cant me leu, meng d’una fogaça calda un poch ab una taça de vin cuyt o de grech. El dinar: meng tostemp pa de floret e varieg les carns segons lo temps; car en estiu meng

poys tenres en diverses maneres, ço és, en ast ab aygua-ros e en olla ab salsa de agraç, e en pa, cabrits e vedella de llet, moltons primals e perdiganes. En yvern: gallines grosses, polles prenys, capons gorts, moltons de past, perdius, colomins e guatles. En l'autupne: torts grassos, todons, fotges e carn de caça, ço és, çervos, cabirols, cabro munter, lebres e conills. En la primavera: pagos, faysans, grues e oques enadedes en lo pasqual. No ús de totes salses sinó les espesses bollides, o salsa de pago e luxell e mig raust mesclat ab girofle e ab gíngebre vert. A la fi de taula: flaons e formajades, o formatge frit ab mantega o fus al foch damunt cubert de çucre e posat en pa torrat. Si meng peix, tostemp l'é ab dents e de tall, frit e en caçola, o en graylles e en pa. Si meng res de cullera, he ginestada, avellanat o pinyonada, celiandrat o arroç ab çucre e ab let d'amenles. Aprés, ab fruyta secca e a la fi, deman dragea per repeembre los fums e per confortar l'estómech e per gitar de mi matex ventositats qui's solen levar dins l'om. Aprés taula, encara ús la dita dragea per fer-me bon alè. (Eiximenis, *Com usar bé* 43-44)

The letter goes on to describe the great variety of wines he takes: local and imported, red and white, sweet wines, cordials and other beverages. He then takes to his bed for a few hours and starts all over again. The letter describes the plushness and fine furnishings of his bed and chamber, the perfumes he uses, his bathing habits and personal hygiene, his frequent enemas (to maintain his figure), and his frequent trysts with women, the younger the better. The monk concludes the letter by asking the doctor whether this seems to him to be a good regimen to follow, and states that if it is insufficient, he will try harder.

As one might imagine, in his reply the doctor is highly critical of the monk. Essentially, he tells the cleric to return to his parents' home in the countryside, where he must live as they do, on barley bread and onions and garlic, with an occasional bit of salt pork, drinking water or diluted vinegar. That is, the doctor's advice on what not to eat is: *everything*. He must also, warns the doctor, eschew the excessive comforts of his chamber; if the monk does not renounce his gluttony and lasciviousness, he is going to hell (Eiximenis, *Com usar bé* 44-47).

Eiximenis entertains us with this over-the-top description of lavish meals, plentiful food and drink, and luxurious living, before he makes the point that his monk must give it all up or risk eternal damnation. His lesson is that even when surrounded by plenty, the virtuous choice for the good of one's soul is self-denial: abstinence and moderation instead of excess. With Eiximenis there is always a moral lesson, even when he offers it as entertainment with a sly wink.

The rest of the treatise adduces more evidence of the mortal quality of the sin of gluttony, and explicitly connects overindulgence with an imbalance of the humours: "can la vianda és major que la virtut de l'hom, lavors la virtut natural no la pot digerir, e per consegüent, de la matèria indigesta qui roman se engenrra corrupta sanch e corruptes humors de les quals nexen grans e espesses e leges malalties qui són missatgeres de la mort e la fan venir cuytadament" (Eiximenis, *Com usar bé* 79). Eiximenis also notes that such excesses are followed by "en lo cors generalment excés de fleuma, e la fleuma sia quaix principi de totes les malalties del cors; segueix-se que la major part de les malalties e casos perillosos de l'hom han principi e començament de excés de menjar e de beure" (*Com usar bé* 83).

From this point on, the short treatise examines courtesy and table manners. Eiximenis offers guidance on such matters as: keeping the beard clean while one eats; eating carefully so that food does not fall on the clothing; not spitting out food or bones or olive pits from the mouth into the hands (readers are advised to lower the head and spit them directly onto the floor); not licking one's fingers at the table; not loosening one's belt or tight clothing at the table (readers are advised

to do so in private, before sitting down for a meal); not scratching one's head or body while eating; not blowing one's nose with a bare hand (handkerchiefs or hems are advised); and not spitting onto the table (spit directly onto the floor between your spread knees then cover it up with your foot).

The guide continues with specific recommendations for handling certain foods (such as figs), and for appropriate and courteous behaviour toward other diners. These range from personal comportment and arrangement of the body to advice regarding embarrassing incidents: for example, if someone releases a loud fart, the polite guest will shout at the cats and dogs to stop making such a racket, or if there are no cats and dogs, will blame the noise on the creaking of a bench. Under no circumstances will a polite guest laugh or look directly at the person who farted (Eiximenis, *Com usar bé* 99-115). As he often does elsewhere, Eiximenis here includes a little aside to remind everyone of the gracious superiority of the Catalans and their customs, in comparison with the rude and undesirable habits of the French, the Italians and the Germans (*Com usar bé* 89-91). The treatise continues with advice to those who serve at table (115-21), and concludes with a return to the admonition to take wine in moderation (133-35).

In the other text I will discuss very briefly in this essay, the *Llibre de les dones*, chapters 216-19 also focus on the sin of gluttony, within a more general section of advice to religious women about the deadly sins. There is very little here about food itself; rather, the focus is on abstinence and fasting. Eiximenis again considers whether gluttony is a venial or mortal sin, and refers the reader explicitly back to the *Terç* for a full treatment of gluttony (*Dones* 317). Here he links gluttony to the nature of original sin, observing that Adam and Eve were cast out of Paradise precisely because Eve could not refrain from eating (*Dones* 319).

Some specific points made in the *Terç* are repeated here in the *Llibre de les dones*: the devout should rise from the table after a meal still hungry (Eiximenis, *Com usar bé* 80; *Dones* 322); the devout and abstinent will eat primarily barley bread, onions and garlic, and drink water or heavily diluted wine (*Com usar bé* 46, 69; *Dones* 321); dread diseases are the consequences of eating too much (*Com usar bé* 83; *Dones* 322). Finally, the admonitions to fast are primary here, along with a reminder to give a share of one's food to the poor. Fasting and penitence are expressly linked (*Dones* 323; see also *Com usar bé* 88). These chapters in *Dones* read as almost a point-form summary of the treatment of gluttony in the *Terç*, and the material is not at all adapted to its supposed audience of religious women. The only explicit reference to this audience comes in the final sentence of chapter 219: “Jamés hom amant la gola no fo net ne cast ne hom de bé, ne per consegüent bon secglar, e jamés no fo bon religiós. E si és lega cosa en hom, ja és pus lega en dona, e majorment en religiosa” (Eiximenis, *Dones* 323).

This should not surprise us given the broader context of Eiximenis' writings—his stated purpose in both *Lo Crestià* and the *Llibre de les dones* was to set out the ways in which everyone could be a better Christian and live a more virtuous life. Even the lengthy descriptions of meals that Eiximenis provides in the *Terç del Crestià* are seemingly offered in the hope that his good Christian readers (especially the nobility and the royal family) will see them as a counter-example for virtuous behaviour. From the Lenten recipes found side by side with those for more refined and sumptuous foods in the *Llibre de Sent Soví* and the *Llibre del coch*, to Eiximenis' arguments in favour of abstinence and self-denial even in the midst of plenty, the physical and the spiritual are inextricably linked. From *what* not to eat, we are given the lesson of *why* not to eat: to become closer to God by leading a life focused on spiritual needs, by controlling physical appetites.

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