

THE “STANDING ON THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF” NOTES GUIDE  
TO:

THE SCIENCE OF COOKING, a 16<sup>TH</sup> century Transylvanian  
Cookbook

BY

Gwyn Chwith ap Llyr, not a Transylvanian.



Fragment of a tile from a Transylvanian tiled stove...yes, it's a Pelican in its piety!



Fair warning, this cookbook represents the very epitome of the SCA “rabbit hole” or “another endless project you sort of fall into by mistake or happenstance”. I’m not Transylvanian/Hungarian, mundanely or in the SCA. This is a far later period of time than my general scope of interest in the SCA’s period. And yet...here it is. By now, most cooks know the story...Duke Cariadoc came across the transcript of the original manuscript while in Hungary on a Hungarian website. He shared with the SCA-Cooks email list, and we all were sad that none of us read Hungarian. Then it hit me that you could find people online who you could pay to translate stuff (and let’s face it, Google Translate does a poor job of recipes, as we learned). The rest was just a matter of crowdfunding the translation, editing the result, and making sure it’s up online where interested parties, such as yourselves, can get it.

Speaking of which, the easiest (but not only) place to download it for free would be:

[www.medievalcooking.com](http://www.medievalcooking.com) [?] then click on Cookbooks, then on Hungary.

So, I’m a big fan of knowing how period cookbooks teach you about the place and time you’re in, and that’s certainly true here. But, it never hurts to have some background about the place and time your cookbook is from. So...



Geographically, Transylvania is a fairly isolated area, being a large, flattish bowl-shaped giant valley surrounded more or less by fairly steep mountains. It has no direct ocean access, although it's relatively close to the Black Sea (about 250 miles at the closest point). It has many rivers, and was renowned in medieval times for having lots and lots of trees (the name Transylvania literally means "through the trees"). Agriculturally, the region was known for its wines, wheat production, and cattle. It is at roughly the same latitude as Seattle is in the States, with an average summer temperature of 82F and the January temperatures in the 40's.

Historically, the region was never really on its own. The Romans held sway here for some years, and eventually, it became part of Hungary (as a Principality) just prior to 1000CE. In 1526, Hungary lost control of the region to both the Hapsburgs, and then the expansionistic Ottoman Empire, who were both more or less content to leave it as a semi-autonomous region. All this had peculiar effects on the religion of the region---going from Eastern Orthodox, and forcing nobles to officially convert to Catholicism when Hungary did (if they wanted to be recognized as nobility), but then losing this impetus when the Ottomans took over and butted heads with the Hapsburgs. This resulted in an area where Calvinism and Lutheranism were popular with the people, and the nobles were more or less Roman Catholic, but only as a matter of habit. You can see this in the menus and recipes—only Friday was being observed as a fast day, and aside from the various recipes that cooked fish specifically, there are very few recipes that were versions of popular dishes specifically adapted for Lent unlike most period cookbooks.

What about the author? Sadly, our manuscript does not have a title page, which means we don't know who the author was. There IS a page towards the back that mentions Johann Wecker, who was a known doctor and cookbook author from Germany, and whose wife, Anna Wecker, was one of the first female cookbook authors, also of Germany, but this is just to promote that our author borrowed some of the writings of J. Wecker from one of his several books, specifically for medicinal cooking (in this day and age, it would be called "copyright infringement"). We can still tell some things about him from how he wrote.

First, he was and considered himself a professional with standards—cooks had at least some degree of status. Master chefs apparently gathered and had group discussions of recipes they'd seen. He felt his job gave him a certain status, as he notes that even a noble should not just order a cook around, but go through the proper channels during a feast. He was very much a proud nationalist. He never mentioned being part of the Ottoman Empire, only rarely Hungary, or even Romania...he frequently proclaims "We Transylvanians do it this way." He was definitely well-travelled. There are recipes he claims to have made for ingredients which are not at all native to Transylvania, and certainly could not have been transported there easily (such as those for whale, oysters and octopus, none of which are found in the Black Sea). In addition, he gives recipes for other countries, implying that he'd been there to learn these and prepare them for the nobles there. He brings in recipes from as far away as Spain (Olla Podrida), and there are indications of Arabic influence too, as well as common references to Italian and German dishes. His style of cookbook writing shows influence of both German cookbooks (where they are sorted by main ingredient), and those elsewhere in Europe (where they are sorted by what kind of dish they were, such as sauces, pies, and pottages). He also takes a decidedly conversational tone with his readers, very much as if he were the old, experienced master lecturing to a room full of students frantically taking notes. This is especially apparent in the advice that an old master should be encouraged to work and direct from a chair brought in for his comfort! I admit, after rereading this cookbook several times, my imagination has assigned the author a voice with mannerisms and an attitude.



### Non-scientific reconstruction of the cookbook author based on his writing

As to the manuscript itself, that's a little more difficult. What we have translated is actually an 1893 transliteration of a 1620 copy of the original...with no known date. This could be problematic for purposes of keeping it within the SCA's period. However, there are several things in our favor. First of all, there are at least two other recipe manuscripts dating to 1601 and 1603, each with around 50 recipes. While they are not identical with those in The Science of Cooking, they are very similar in content and style of food, leading us to note that if The Science of Cooking IS twenty years post-period, there were no major changes in cuisine. This also applies to the feast menus provided with this document dating to 1603. Secondly, scholars reading it have dated the language and word choices to be consistent with those in the second half of the 1500's. Thirdly, two of the recipes specifically in the manuscript call for Gum Tragacanth, an ingredient not imported from the Arabic countries until 1558. Lastly, Johann Wecker, mentioned above, with material incorporated into this cookbook, died in 1586. The wording of the page mentioning Wecker seems to be memorializing a recent death ("the once celebrated physician..."). All these elements point to an origin around 1590. Ish.

On to the contents. One of the first things noted in the cookbook is a need to adhere to a high standard of cleanliness that would not be out of place in modern times, exhorting the cook to keep himself and his equipment clean, and almost incidentally that the cook should also be quite moral. Food was also to be kept from contamination. Several recipes use ice to keep food from going bad, especially in heat. (It is worth noting that the mountains surrounding Transylvania would have snow and ice year round, and thus would not be out of the reach of a noble kitchen).

Many other medieval references to cooks and cooking across Europe assume the chef would definitely be skimming off the top for himself, either in money or ingredients, to the point at which it was something of a stereotype. Despite some of the more opulent dishes found in The Science of Cooking, there are actually exhortations that the chef should not spend his master's money frivolously. Unless, of course, our unknown chef was poking fun at his master's frugality...but that's a tone we would have to assign out of our own imagination.

In this same vein, based on what we read, we see the master chef of a kitchen was of considerable importance, heading a team of other chefs, assigning them duties, as well as having other workers such as carpenters (for building supports and displays) and artists (for their knowledge of gilding foods and painting) as part of their teams, especially for such ornate affairs as weddings.

With weddings as the exception, there are relatively few spectacle dishes found here, unlike in some French, Italian and English sources, with their elaborate subtleties and lavish use of non-local ingredients. Looking over the recipes as a whole, most of them seem designed for a relatively small

crowd, such as the English High Table or the dinner parties thrown by Talliavent. The dishes as described would be best cooked in smaller batches, and the frequent mention of baking in the “pinnata” (a covered baking dish capable of having coals placed above and below, like the modern camping Dutch Oven), or the furnace (a tiled and vented heating unit usually with a small space for baking) would not be efficient if trying to bake large amounts. Likewise there is mention of a “large” earthenware pot whose measurement in modern terms is about three liters—a far cry from huge cauldrons pictured further south. Lastly, the feast menus provided show relatively small amounts of food being purchased, such as would be required to feed smaller numbers. The implication for the few larger feasts is that each chef would take one dish and make it for the larger crowd, which is a quite efficient use of labor.

The ingredients used are also interesting, and quite distinct from other period cookbooks. As in many other European cookbooks, a given series of recipes will focus strongly on one major ingredient, treating it in a variety of similar ways before moving on to another ingredient. I refer to this as a German-style cookbook, since the Germans used this extensively. Later in the manuscript, presumably as the author continued to add material over time, he became less organized and added recipes as he thought of them (or in the case of the Wecker section, copied them).

Looking over the herbs and spices called for in the cookbook can give us a glimpse of the Transylvanian history. Parsley is used almost more as an ingredient than as a seasoning, especially the call for parsley roots. Pepper is nearly universally used, and must have been imported by the ton. The references to clean pepper indicate pepper stripped of its outer, black skin. Mace, called “Saracen’s Nut flower”, as well as saffron, ginger, nutmeg, cumin, and cinnamon would have been imports brought in by the Ottomans. Garlic was very popular, which is interesting because in other medieval recipes from other countries, its use was more medicinal. A number of herbs/spices grown locally are much more common in this corpus than elsewhere—juniper, sorrel, tarragon. Interestingly, unlike the rest of Europe, there is no evidence of some of the pepper substitutes found elsewhere, such as Long Pepper or cubeb, despite the obvious fascination with pepper.

Post-period, and out of the range of this cookbook, this dependence on black pepper helps explain the modern Hungarian/Transylvanian fascination with paprika—the peppers used in paprika could be grown there, unlike black pepper, and have a similar flavor profile...so as soon as they came over from the new World, they were used. But that is outside the SCA period, later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Excepting the German inclusion from Wecker, there is little mention of almond milk. Transylvania had sufficient cattle as well as the availability of ice needed to keep milk on hand for most all recipes. This also implies they had little need to preserve milk as cheese, so the only references in the cookbook to cheese and cheese-like ingredients are sour crème (easily made with fresh milk), and turo, a fresh farmer’s cheese, which is soft and not unlike an unsalted ricotta (thankfully, it is easily made by the home cook should you wish to experiment with those recipes that call for it). They also used an immense amount of butter as a cooking fat

Paula Deen must have a Transylvanian background. I assert this because the number one cooking fat throughout the cookbook is butter. The doughnuts or fritters are largely fried in pure melted butter and the strudels are layered with it. Other fats called for inclusion was salo, which is a bacon like cured or smoked pork fat product, like bacon with very little meat. A few recipes, often those noted as coming from Italy, call for “tree oil”, which was olive oil. A fewer still call for flax oil or walnut oil specifically.

Finally, one of the last, and largest distinguishing characteristics of Transylvanian cooking in this cookbook is the extremely common use of acids to flavor the dish, saving only the baked goods. Many of the meats call for the addition of vinegar, which they would have had in plenty as a major wine producer. Red wines were only largely available after the mid-1500’s, so in choosing which sort of vinegar to use, absent other cues, white would be more likely. A few recipes call for the addition of a fruit which would

be either a lemon or a lime. There are also calls for gooseberries (a notably tart fruit), the use of sorrel leaves (which has a pleasant sourness), and once, a call for the juice of an orange, which would have been a very expensive import indeed, as it would have almost certainly come from Spain.

Most all the meats used would have been locally provided, and indeed show a preponderance for the cattle industry. The rivers flowing down from the mountains would have provided abundant fish, with, of course, some of the imports listed by our unknown chef. As with most period cookbooks, recipes for vegetables are in the minority.

Unlike most period sources, there are relatively few recipes titled specifically for Lent, although, of course, many of the ones made from fish would qualify. There are fewer than 15 recipes which are adaptations of non-Lenten recipes for use during Lent's restrictions. And in reviewing the feast menus we see only Friday had the fasting menus...and even then they occasionally slipped up and added bacon here or there.

Common cooking techniques were used, again, of course, with the focus being on relatively small servings (no evidence of "take a thousand eggs or more...!"). Boiling was the most common, which makes sense as it the most efficient. Even in a land of trees, there is still effort needed to gather fuel. Spit roasting and frying were common also.

One unusual technique involves cooking in parchment, the technique modernly known as "en Papillote". Given the expense of paper, this is quite a surprise to see. Another surprise is that the sauce listed as German sauce would be an actual roux, which is rarely found in period.

The last surprise is a pair of recipes for octopus...recipes that call for treating it in the same manner as the Norse treated fish...with alkali! So yes, octo-lutefish is a thing you can't not imagine now. If you make it, however, you really must tell me how it came out.

The kitchen equipment, based on the recipes in the cookbook and the feast menus are not terribly surprising, save only perhaps for the smaller scale on which things were cooked. Elsewhere in Europe, feast menus called for dozens of cattle to be used, whereas we have a single recipe to cook one whole cow on a spit. Aside from the ever-popular pot, the most commonly used kitchen artifact called for was the strainer. I have not yet been able to find a picture of a period example, to know if it was the holed skimmer type, or the colander. Likely both were used, as a large percentage of recipes call for food to be separated from its cooking liquid and sometimes returned to it.

From other studies I have read, the state of the material arts was extremely high as the Celts of the La Tene and Hallstatt cultures inhabited the area, were maintained during the Roman occupation, and then gradually declined until about the mid-1300's, when matters started to improve again. Between the exit of the Romans and about 1400, pottery was fairly primitive, with pots made with coil construction and no use of pottery thrown on the wheel until then. Pottery was only infrequently glazed, and only on the inside. Starting in the 1400's, ceramic work became increasingly complex. Not just pots were being made, but also the ceramic bricks in use for the hypocaust oven/furnaces were being cast in ever-increasing numbers. These furnaces were very efficient space heaters and also could be used for cooking far more efficiently than the huge stone ovens used elsewhere in Europe. They were also remarkably decorated. Just prior to the inhabitation by the Ottoman Empire, the material culture took another jump upwards with more sophisticated metalwork in the kitchens.

Now it's up to you. Download the cookbook, try making some of these dishes, and tell us all about it! I can't spend ALL my time in the kitchen, after all!

A few recipes to get you going:

*Second plate of dishes with beef.*

(1) BEEF WITH HARVEST SAUCE.

If you want to cook with a harvest sauce, prepare the meat like I told you. Put parsley roots, (parsley) leaves and onions into it. After it's cooked, add six or seven eggs, according to your needs. After you're done, put the eggs into vinegar and start whipping it. Then pour the meat's juices into it. Pour it onto the meat again, but don't boil it; if you boil it, its size will suffer<sup>1</sup>.

*The third still with beef.*

(2) BEEF WITH GARLIC HARVESTER SAUCE

Do the same. What we call garlic harvest sauce, as I said, is that you beat eggs in vinegar, peel the garlic clove by clove, break<sup>2</sup> it well, add it to the eggs and vinegar; then dilute it as I said before. Break it well with the blanching stick<sup>3</sup> after adding liquid, be careful to keep it from shrinking.

Turo Cheese

This is a modernized recipe for a cheese you probably can't find in your grocery store. Take a gallon of whole milk and a pint of buttermilk, mix them in an oven-safe container, and leave on the counter for a day to a day and a half. The mixture will get visibly thicker as it cultures. Place in a 175F oven for 8 hours or so (overnight is fine), and using a skimmer, remove the cheese and let it drain 2-3 hours. It is now ready to use to make things. Do not throw away the whey. Use it for the next recipes!

(606) Fellorium<sup>4</sup> from eggs.

When you cook a dish with túró, take some of its liquid into a small pan or pot, when you want to serve the curd cheese dish, bring the bit of liquid to a boil, crack the egg onto it, but take care that the yolk doesn't cook, but only the white, and even that only gently. Deal with this quite quickly, because if it hardens, it will not be good for anything. Put this afterwards one by one on the túró dish nicely, serve the túró dish thus nice and warm. When you put the fellorium on it, salt it lightly.

(573) Túró cake.

Crush the túró, whip some eggs, then add some dill, sour cream and butter.

(612) Dish with túró and sour cream.

---

<sup>1</sup> Meaning; It will curdle. Tempering the egg/vinegar and broth mixtures will result in a creamy sauce. Note that this sauce is used several times in the cookbook.

<sup>2</sup> chop

<sup>3</sup> Beat it

<sup>4</sup> No match for this word in Hungarian, however pellorium is part of the Latin name of a local marine critter and may thus have some connection to "Skin" or "pelt". In any case, this resembles poached eggs on cheese, with the eggs poached in whey from the cheese, possibly.



If cooking for a prince or a lord, do it like this. Crush some túró into a pot, add some dill and whip some eggs; if you're making this for a smaller plate, five eggs will do, then add some sour cream. Don't add water, put it on coal and stir it while cooking.

Cook it, but serve it immediately once cooked, for it's no good otherwise.

If you don't have enough sour cream, add a bit of water if your lord wants. Cook the túró, whip some eggs and pass the sour cream through a strainer onto it.

(124) Hog legs with black pepper.

Do the same with the preparation, using broth like I told you, once it's half boiled, slice an onion onto it, garlic, add some black pepper; when time comes, you may serve it.

(176) Hen with bird sauce.

Remove the feathers and wash it like I told you to. Put it on a skewer like the capon. While being roasted, make the sauce; take some wine, if you barely have any wine, then use water from boiling beef or regular water; add some bread; cook it, pass it through a strainer, add apples and grapes; once the hen is roasted, take it down from the skewer, cut it in the sauce, add some saffron, black pepper and ginger. This should be a more sour than a sweet food. They call it bird sauce for its wildness. Chefs nowadays put almonds into it, but it is not a necessity.

(1) Fried chicken.

Do what I told you before. Cook it in salt, and once cooked, take it out and let it cool. Make salty pancake from eggs and flour, and when serving it, fry the chicken in this, put it into the pancake and serve it when hot<sup>5</sup>.

(495) Cabbage salad.

We Hungarians do it like so. We slice the raw cabbage into little pieces, add salt, then wash it from the salt twice or thrice, then wash it in wine. Then we add vinegar, tree oil and slice some onions – we do it like this.

(509) Milky rice.

Wash the rice, put it in milk, boil it, add some salt, ginger and sugar. Add butter, too

(702) Funnel-cake.

Beat eggs whites into a little sweet milk, mix flour into it as well, and sugar, make it only as thick as you judge will go through the funnel, have good hot butter in a frying-pan at the fire, also give it its salt as is fitting.

---

<sup>5</sup> Batter fried chicken...note the chicken is pre-cooked

When you want to let it into the butter, fill the funnel with batter; if the funnel is large, you can let as much into the butter as will fill a small dish. If you can do this, it will be an attractive doughnut, like the pretzel of Pápa.

From this same batter, you can also make what they call headdress-doughnuts, except poke holes in the bottom of a pipkin, as I have said above also. This also will be like you've pearled it, put it on a tree/stand so it bends.

When you fry these sorts of things, make an effort to fry half of it white, half of it yellow<sup>6</sup>. Carve sugar onto it and serve it up.

---

<sup>6</sup> The yellow half could be made so with saffron



Reconstruction of Ceramic tiled stove/furnace. Note the knights. Reconstructed pots below.





15th century copper ewers