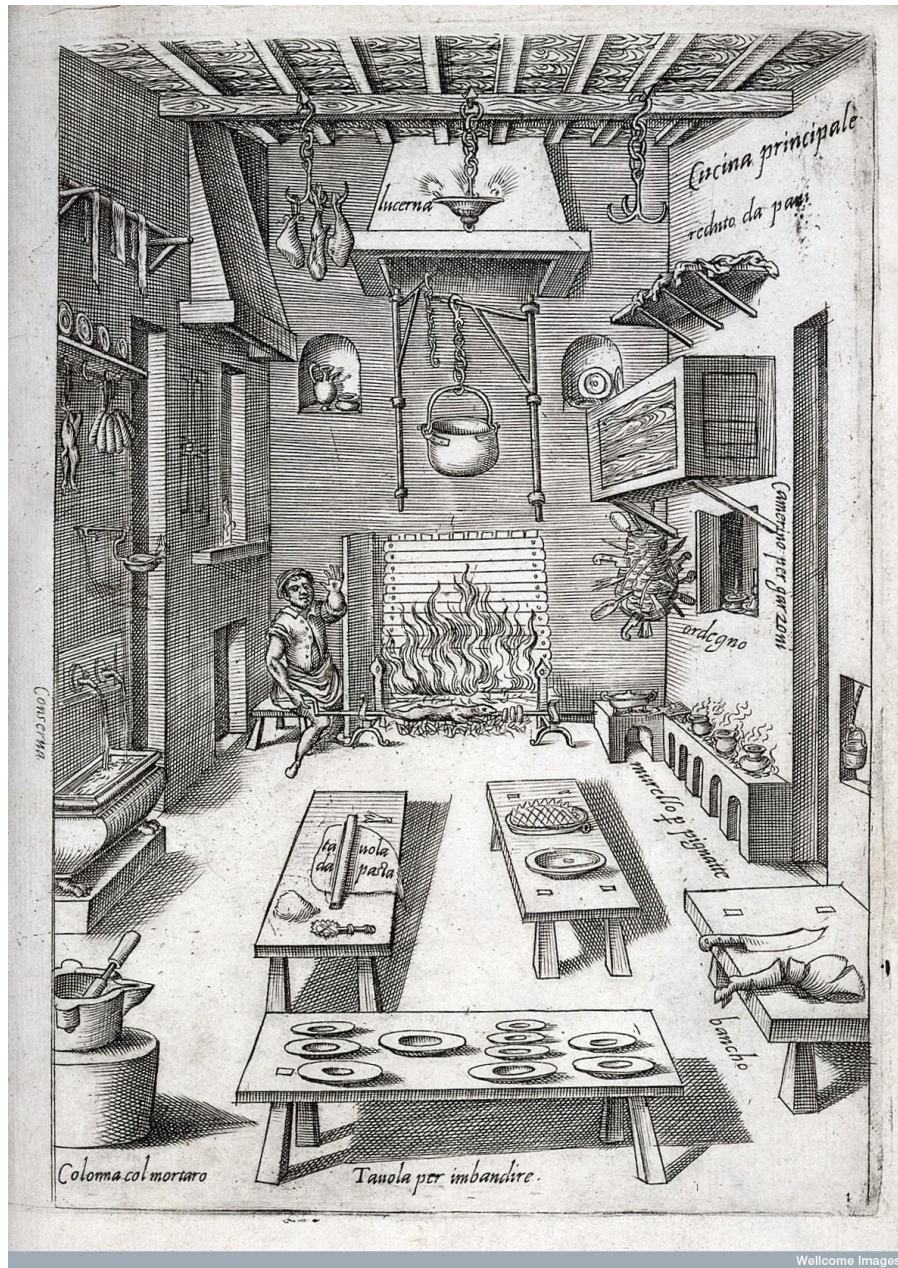




The Evolution of the Kitchen

The Origin Story

My interest in period cooking equipment and techniques stems from a long-held belief of mine that you cannot truly cook medieval food without taking these things into account. We have, relatively speaking, a fairly large assortment of recipes for dishes for at least the upper classes of this time period. That said, there are holes in our knowledge. Knowing how they cooked, and how they thought about food (that would be another class) can help fill in those holes.

As an example, consider a modern recipe. I tell you to take a piece of ribeye, brush it with some olive oil, and sprinkle it with salt and pepper, and cook it until it reaches 135F on the inside. Someone reading that from the far future without knowing about our kitchens might conclude you boil the meat (if they thought the recipe was from the early part of last century, based on popular cooking methods), or (horrors), microwave it (say from the 70's on) until the right temperature is reached. But you and I know, with our expertise in 21st century kitchens where we are now, that these kitchens had easy access to radiant heating methods, so we would instead choose to grill, pan-fry, or broil that steak instead.

Really Early Kitchens

Mid-1800's, huh? How about Pompeii? Before the eruption, that is. Here we see a raised hearth, with built in flues to direct heat upwards to pots and pans. Very much more ergonomic than a fire on the ground, and very like the effect of what the folks at the West-AnTir war do at the Cooks' Playdate, by raising the cooking hearth to a more comfortable level, and basically having a small fire, in the form of well-burning coals, to direct heat for each item being cooked.



Next to the hearth you can see an oven—which makes a great deal of sense as you can move lit coals easily from one to the other—a very sensible design.



The primary materials we see, besides stone tile and brick, of course, is cast bronze for the pots. Sadly, we don't see any utensils. But form usually follows function in these cases. Off to the left you can see a ceramic jug still part of the wall of ash. Anything wooden would likely not have survived (sadly), but from other writing we know they used wood and ceramics extensively. Rome in this time was also a major source of glass, producing amazingly delicate cruets, and drinking vessels.



So, what can we learn from this site and culture? They had enough manpower for a metals industry. Refining and shaping metal takes a great deal of effort for a society, from the mining it took, to the time and fuel for smelting, and the fact that they didn't need to restrict metals just to the absolutely necessary bits of indicated considerable wealth. Being in a city environment, they had to be fairly efficient in fuel use, and the hearths shown actually conserve fuel quite a bit—you only built a fire as large as you needed. The large setups shown here could cook several dishes simultaneously, of moderately large size, but we do not see evidence of spit roasting—which takes large amounts of raw fuel and the labor to ready it. We do have frying, simmering/boiling, grilling and baking as options at the very least. And indeed, these cooking methods make excellent sense with the recipes we have for this time period.

What isn't shown here, but still should be noted, is that a kitchen like this was not terribly common—it was in a home for a wealthy family. Less well-to-do folks would buy meals mostly prepared at various establishments. Or they would make do with units like those below, allowing a smaller household to still heat a few smaller dishes simultaneously. Note that the metal use is considerably less. The hearth itself is ceramic, which is certainly less expensive, but cannot withstand truly high heats (no deep frying), and would need to be replaced fairly often. There were also metal hearths, generally made of bronze, known as a *foculus*, that were more portable and could be used as room heaters as much as a means to heat food. Think of a metal tray on legs....and this is EXACTLY what the Play Date uses—albeit with steel or iron instead of bronze.



In terms of cooking, no recipe we have from Apicius or Cato would be particularly difficult to recreate with these types of equipment. Just add in a few bowls, a knife or two, and some simple carved wooden implements for stirring and scraping. And of course, the ubiquitous mortar and pestle.

The Middle Ages

After Rome was no longer a going concern, the arts of hearth and home took a giant step backwards. People were gathered more into clans than the smaller family-size units, and the cultures there no longer had the resources for large scale metal-working—it had to be reserved for the essentials. Cooking techniques similarly regressed. Boiling/simmering is the most fuel and labor-effective method of cooking, so that was done in large bronze cauldrons (you only needed the one for a clan, after all). Smaller dishes might be done with ceramic pots, placed around the edges of an open fire. Likewise, since fuel was generally close-by (just step outside with your axe and clear the forest), you could afford the less efficient method of cooking—spit roasting. Most people had little or no access to ovens, so breads were simple flat breads that you could again, cook around a fire. Where you had enough people to make it worthwhile, a close community could build communal stone ovens allowing raised breads. Kitchens weren't generally separate spaces but made use of the hearths available in the large halls that were central to the lives of the clansmen.



Materials? As the population started to increase, more and more people could be spared from the necessity of farming and hunting food, as well as improvements in farming technology meant that more people could be spared for tasks like mining, making charcoal, and of course, smithing. This meant that while cast bronze, and then pewter alloys and brass were in use, small pieces of wrought iron began to be used...not just for knives, but other small tools you wanted to last and that didn't have to face too much heat. The limiting factor on this was not the raw material—iron ore is quite plentiful, but smelting it requires a great deal more skill and fuel for less return than with bronze. Wrought iron, especially in the smaller pieces discussed here, using so-called beehive smelting, is not the most heat-resistant metal to use. And for pots and pans, a cast pot of bronze has great advantages over one made of several pieces of iron hammered to shape and riveted in place—for one, it's less likely to leak. For another, it's easier to clean. Therefore, throughout the early medieval period, cooks made use of the same bronze, ceramics, leather and wood that had

served them before, with iron knives and a few other items that could be beaten into shape, such as ladles, graters, and skimmers.



Over time, the clan lifestyle gave way to what most people think of as medieval. Clan chiefs became kings, clan halls became castles, and the number of people who nobles had to feed increased. Social status became increasingly important, and what you ate, and how you ate it became one of the signs of what social class you fell into. It was no longer a matter that the clan chief simply got the first bowl of stew out of the communal pot, but this or that noble had access to more rare and exotic foodstuffs, and dishes that might be prepared just for them, to their specific tastes. Food had gone from a matter of survival to almost a matter of fashion and status. This element is of importance to the SCA, because these high class foods eventually were written down, and became cuisines and foods that we could try to recreate.

An anonymous 12th century writer lists his thoughts on the kitchen: *There should be a small table [for preparing vegetables], There should also be pots, tripods, a mortar, a hatchet, a pestle, a stirring stick, a hook, a cauldron, a bronze vessel, a small pan, a baking pan, a meat-hook, a griddle, small pitchers, a trencher, a bowl, a platter, a pickling vat, and knives for cleaning fish...The chief cook should also have a cupboard in the kitchen for storing many aromatic spices...likewise there should be a large spoon for removing foam and skimming...there should also be a garde-robe pit...In the pantry let there be shaggy towels, tablecloth, and an ordinary hand towel which shall hang from a pole to avoid mice.*

And then we had the plague starting in 1336. It is counterintuitive, but the death of so many servants and crafters eventually helped lead to the increase in food complexity, and thus to the more sophisticated kitchens. Cooks had to become skilled professionals to do more with fewer bodies, as were other formerly menial jobs—people who could DO the various tasks were far less easy to find and hire. Now, because they were scarce, they were worth wages and a better of standard of living (at least if you wanted to keep these people working for you). The raised hearths replaced the large open fires once again as fuel was no longer as cheap in terms of manpower to obtain. While spit roasting was still popular, instead of just propping the spits around a fire (as

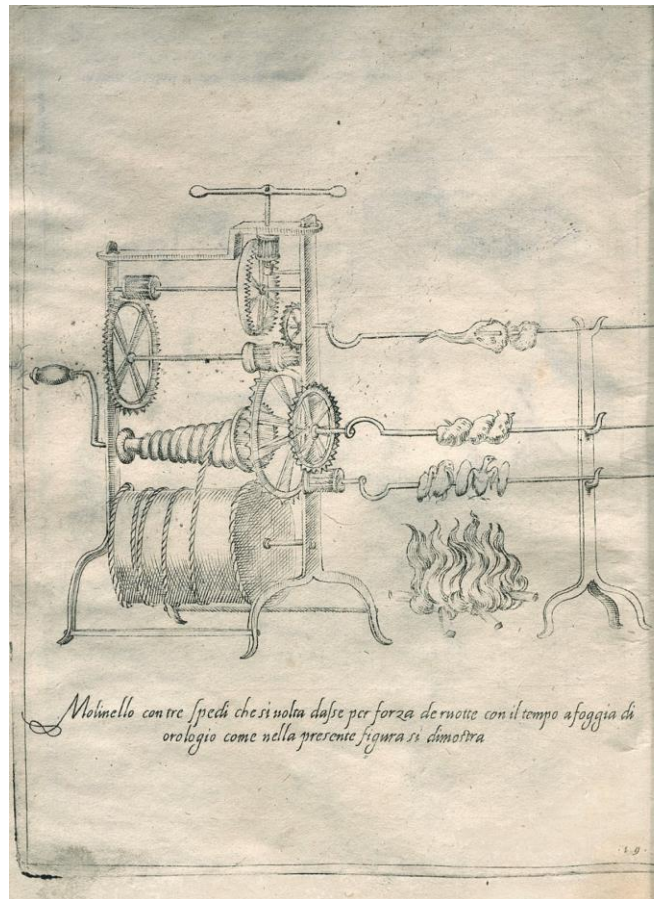
above), fireplaces were used, so heat was reflected back to where it could be used. Purpose-built stone ovens allowed the baking of more bread by fewer bakers, and conserved heat and fuel. All this required specialized rooms to once again be set aside for the tasks of cooking. Since money (as opposed to barter) was now common an issue, there even had to be people carefully tracking supplies and expenses—hence the Exchequer, known for his checkered table cloth for counting.

Because this newly formed class of skilled tradesmen was much closer in living standards to the nobility than they were to the peasants, the nobility had to find more ways to distinguish themselves. They did this with ever more exotic foodstuffs—spices and foods brought back from both the Near and Far East, and recipes that called for more finicky preparation. Entremets (small decorative foodstuffs) became the elaborate subtleties. Cooks planned feasts based on more baroque interpretations of humoral theory (attempting to justify their masters' tastes while adhering to popular theories of the time), while incorporating color and texture into the foods served.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century and into the 16th, this lead us into what I call the super-chefs. These folks cooked for princes, cardinals, kings, and Popes. Chiquart, Martino, Messisbugo, Scappi and others. These folks were so talented at creating special food for their special masters they had to have the most special spaces possible to do their work. Of course, they also gave us elaborate cookbooks which were written to jog their memories. Their kitchens were elaborate complexes of rooms dedicated to particular cooking tasks—in some cases the rooms were purpose-built for their tasks, as in Raglan Castle and at Caernarvon Castle, where the kitchen was so placed as the castles were built for ease of deliveries and access to the dining halls, as well as access to fresh water, light, and air flow.

Chiquart tells us what he thinks you need in a kitchen, a few centuries after our prior listing: *And for this there should be provided large, fair, and proper cauldrons for cooking large meats, and other medium ones in great abundance for making potages and doing other things necessary for cookery, and great hanging pans for cooking fish and other necessary things, and large common pots in great abundance for making soups and other things, and a dozen fair large mortars; and check the space for making sauces; and there should be twenty large frying pans, a dozen large casks, fifty small casks, sixty cornues [bowls with handles], one hundred wooden bowls, a dozen grills, six large graters, one hundred wooden spoons, twenty-five slotted spoons both large and small, six hooks, twenty iron shovels, twenty rotisseries, with turning mechanisms and irons for holding the spits. And one should definitely not trust wooden spits, because they will rot and you could lose all your meat, but you should have one hundred and twenty iron spits which are strong and are thirteen feet in length; and there should be other spits, three dozen which are of the aforesaid length but not so thick, to roast poultry, little piglets, and river fowl... And also, four dozen little spits to do endoring and act as skewers.*

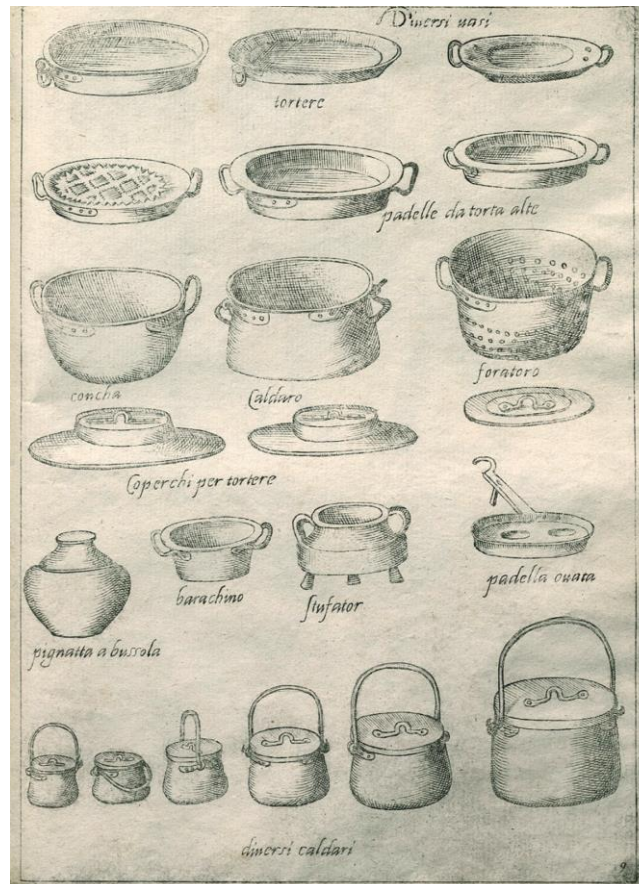
Note the increase in both the amounts of cooking equipment and the complexity of what is there, in the matter of just a few hundred years.



Contraptions were also built into the chimneys above the roaring fires, so the rising hot air could turn spits via cranks and gears. Many specialty foods were outsourced where necessary to people outside the castle proper, as towns and later cities grew up around them. There were profusions of specialty utensils and molds built—things that would have been wasteful a few centuries prior but were now necessities for the noble who wanted to parade his status. There was an increased likelihood that the highest nobles would now have their meals prepared in a “privy kitchen”, a smaller, at least as elaborate, but in all ways more exclusive kitchen used for their foodstuffs only (this despite admonitions against pride by the Church). These were set up to cook a great many dishes, with smaller portions, as a sign of their masters’ status. In fact, in late period England, these were even separate kitchen spaces for the King and the Queen, so each could have what they wanted. Incidentally, it would be that much harder to introduce poison to the royalty...and much less likely that the less royal folk would get the King’s saffron, sugar, and pepper. And we are fortunate that for the most part, these smaller, high status kitchens were used to prepare meals for the nobility—the very meals we have recipes for, as recreating a noble kitchen is much easier on a smaller scale.

At this point, wrought iron items were now, if not common in all kitchens, at least well-used in the kitchens of nobility, and while not unused, ceramics were far less common than previously. That said, the 15th century did see a resurgence of the brightly enameled and ornate majolica ceramic-ware (mostly for service and storage). Other metals in use—pewter, brass, bronze and copper still had not edged out wood and leather for some tasks...though green wood spits were now

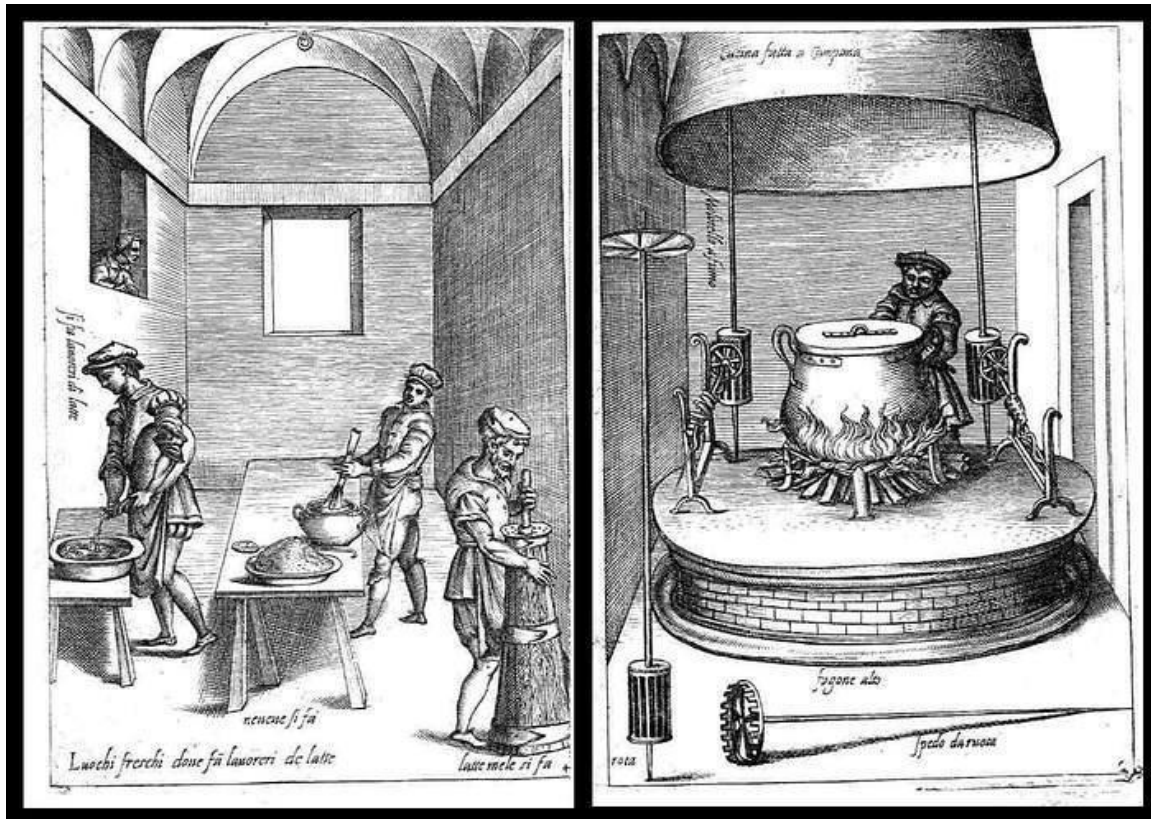
replaced with iron in most cases (remember the warning about the dangers of using wooden spits from Chiquart). Since foods higher in acids were now quite common, most metallic pots and pans were coated with tin on the inside—and we have warnings advising us not to scrub out the tin too often or forcefully lest the tinsmith have to be brought in, at considerable cost to the master.



A few words on iron. It is quite common for those of us into reenactment to use cast iron cookware for cauldrons and frying pans and the like. They are inexpensive and easy to get as such things go, look reasonably historical, come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and are very durable (especially in comparison with ceramic cookware) and easy to cook with. It needs to be said, however, that strictly speaking they are not medieval, and we should not recognize them as such. Wrought iron, with its profusion of rivets and seams, lower heat capacity, and likelihood of rust and leaking was what was used. Yes, at the very end of the SCA period, there were foundries that were capable, for the first time in Europe, of creating cast iron. And they did. But what they did create was, simply, cannonballs. Not until the mid-eighteenth century did cast iron make its way into kitchens.

We will end the class with some views of the ideal medieval kitchen, from the eyes of Bartolomeo Scappi, as well as pictures of the real thing after moderate restoration. Scappi was so kind as to add woodcuts to his cookbook showing us what we needed to have to have a properly functional

kitchen—both in terms of the spaces involved and the tools in use. They look almost...modern, if you excuse the lack of electricity.





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