

CHAPTER FIVE

SPICES - THE SCENT OF MEDIAEVAL CUISINE

What would Charles V say if he returned to twentieth-century France and sat down to a dinner of roast beef with bearnaise sauce, or blanquette de veau, or daurade Bercy? No doubt he would comment, as he reached for the pepper grinder, that the dish was bland, unstimulating, tasteless. He might even go so far as to qualify the cuisine as barbaric, unsophisticated and crude, or even atrocious. His reaction would be incomprehensible to a contemporary gourmet, to whom things should taste 'of what they are'. Yet these very same adjectives are applied, from five centuries remove, to the unfamiliarity of mediaeval cuisine.

Tastes have undoubtedly changed over this period, as has European cuisine. Mediaeval western European cuisine was certainly different to that of the twentieth century, and was characterised by, to present-day palates, a prodigality and profusion of spices which might have surpassed even the excesses of the Romans, but to dismiss it as crude and barbaric is singularly myopic.

THE MYTH

For centuries, the Middle Ages was commonly seen as a dark abyss between the brilliance of the classical era and the enlightenment of the Renaissance: "Le Moyen Age est né du mépris."¹ Even when the spirit of nineteenth-century Romanticism rehabilitated at least some aspects, cuisine was a poor relation of architecture and literature. Only in the present century did historians begin to interest themselves in its social and economic history, period, and to look dispassionately at mediaeval civilisation.

When 'discovered' in the late eighteenth century, mediaeval cuisine was regarded as a curiosity, like a two-headed calf in a dusty museum jar. In one of the first 'modern' editions of a mediaeval culinary text, Antiquitates Culinariae (1791), the Reverend Richard Warner was as intolerant of the foods of mediaeval times as he was of French cooks, then the fashion in England. "Even in his (Richard II) time we find French cooks were in fashion,... disguising nature, and metamorphosing their simple food into complex and nonedescript gallimaufries ... The combination of such a variety of different articles in the one dish, would produce an effect very unpleasant to a palate of this day, and the quantity of hot spices, that were mixed in almost all of them, would now be relished only by those accustomed to the high-seasoned dishes of the East and West-Indies."²

Brillat-Savarin, writing in 1825, preferred to ignore this chapter in the culinary history of France.³

Similarly, Alfred Franklin was obviously glad to confine to the past mediaeval cuisine, with its "abominables ragôts dont se délectaient nos pères ...(qui)... n'entendaient rien aux raffinements de l'art culinaire."⁴ Having tasted a dish prepared in accordance with a mediaeval recipe, Franklin lamented that it was difficult to imagine how a king as accomplished as Charles V could be condemned to such fare; nor would the duck, had been allowed any say as to its fate, have chosen that chosen that particular sauce. In the same spirit of objectivity, I prepared the same dish (Canard a la Dodine Rouge) and found the flavour of the sauce unusual, but not disagreeable, nor incompatible with the duck.⁵

Contempt for mediaeval cuisine persisted throughout the early part of this century. William Mead described mediaeval cuisine in terms of "atrocious combinations of incongruous elements.... The ideal, apparently, was that nothing should be left in its natural state ... Even the best recipes, as a rule, contain one or more ingredients which, though palatable when taken separately, are combined in a fashion that would now make them nauseating in the extreme."⁶ A current gastronomic guide denigrates "les recettes lourdes et incroyablement compliquées, inventées par Taillevent et ses successeurs ... On déchiffre Taillevent comme une curiosité archéologique."⁷

Thus developed what might be called the popular view of mediaeval cuisine which, in the subsequent pages, will be shown to be quite inaccurate. As Philippa Pullar has

remarked, "Mediaeval food, like Roman, is supposed to have been unpalatable, the recipes uncookable and uneatable. ... We have come to believe it because it has been stated firmly as truth for the last two hundred years. Much of it is exaggerated."⁸ Historians today have more sympathetic and better informed attitudes, and describe mediaeval dishes with such adjectives as 'tangy', 'sharp', and 'piquant'. "In the profusion of types but also the combinations of fragrances and tastes mediaeval spicery now seems wildly aromatic."⁹ Some have gone so far as to discover in mediaeval cuisine a "cuisine-mère" from which modern French cuisine is directly derived.¹⁰

All these criticisms and observations focus on one particular feature, the feature which most effectively separates mediaeval from modern cuisine: its fascination for spices. Insofar as spices can be said to epitomise mediaeval cuisine, an understanding of how, why, when and where they were used can throw some light on the material culture of this much-maligned period.

SPICES: HISTORY

Mediaeval western European cuisine combined the indigenous with the exotic, for spices (with the possible exception of saffron) were nothing if not exotic. Yet although the use of spices can be seen as a continuation of an age-old custom, it was an adopted custom, derived from a distant source. What was exotic in mediaeval northern European cuisine, and to a lesser extent in Mediterranean cuisine,

may have been indigenous to their predecessors. The cumin and coriander favoured by the cooks of ancient Greece and Rome, of Mesopotamia and of Persia, were either native to that part of the Mediterranean or had been cultivated there for so long that they were regarded as indigenous. Athenaeus describes coriander as "one of the wild plants fit to cook".¹¹ Yet once introduced into non-Mediterranean areas, where they did not grow naturally, these 'herbs' were more likely to be classed as 'spices'.

The mediaeval distinction between herbs and spices relates not only to the opposition between indigenous and exotic but also to the part of the plant used - of herbs, usually the fresh leaf; of spices, the seed, bark or root, almost always dried. In differentiating spices from 'strong seasonings', Platina follows this convention. Amongst spices he includes pepper, clove, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and saffron (although implying that saffron may be an anomaly): "There are many kinds of spices which we use in our food and all of them were first imported into our region from foreign lands. Almost all of them grow on trees."¹² The 'strong seasonings' were the common plants of local occurrence - garlic, leek, fennel, cumin, aniseed, poppyseed, coriander, mint, celery, thyme - which, wrote Platina, were more often used by country folk.¹³ Thus the indigenous/exotic duality runs parallel to the others of mediaeval society: country/city; peasant/noble; subsistence/indulgence.

The use of spices constitutes a direct link between

mediaeval and Roman cuisines. But the continuity is deceptive; they were not the same spices, nor were they used in the same way. Mediaeval recipes bear little relation to those of Apicius, although some dishes - typically spice-less - are very close to the popular Roman foods; the 'moretum' of Silenus is not too far distant from the 'anys esquesos' and 'jurvert' described in the *Sent Sovi*.¹⁴ Like the Christian churches built over Roman temples, mediaeval cuisine was a new structure erected on the same base and with many of the same materials. To the extent that it was dependent on exotic ingredients, it was also unstable, an imported cuisine which evolved by means of further borrowings.

The changing patterns of spice useage in western Europe testify to the gradual evolution of culinary practices (and tastes?). Pepper was the dominant spice in the recipes of Apicius, followed by coriander and cumin.¹⁵ Other exotic spices, mainly of Indian origin, included ginger, costus, spikenard, cardamom and cinnamon, although the latter two were more often used in perfumes than in cuisine. Pepper persisted in mediaeval cuisine, but the coriander and cumin of antiquity gave way to cinnamon, ginger, galanga and cloves, the main spices of commerce in France at the end of the tenth century.¹⁶ In the thirteenth-century Provençal poem of *Flamenca*, Archambaut ordered "spice, incense, cinnamon and pepper, / With store of saffron, clove and mace" for the feast to welcome *Flamenca*.¹⁷ By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the most popular spices, to judge by their

frequency in cookery books, were saffron, ginger, pepper, cinnamon and cloves.¹⁸

Peterson's claim that "the style of late mediaeval cooking was adopted from the Arabs" cannot be disputed, but rather than the sudden and complete transformation implicit in this statement it is more reasonable to assume a progressive and continuous evolution in culinary practices and spice preferences.¹⁹ This accords with a changing pattern of imports, which in turn reflects shifts in power in the Mediterranean - from Roman rule to Byzantine supremacy in the early Middle Ages, later changing to Arab and then Italian/Catalan/southern French domination.

In the days of the Roman Empire the spice trade was largely in the hands of the Arabs, who sailed to India via the Red Sea and returned to Alexandria with their precious wares. Subsequently another trade route, via the Persian Gulf, linked the spice sources with Bagdad, Damascus and towns on the Syrian coast. By about the eighth century, Arab and Persian merchants were venturing as far as south-east Asia and returning with the 'new' spices - nutmeg, mace, cloves - although cloves may have arrived in Europe before this time.²⁰

Spices continued to be traded in Europe throughout the early mediaeval period, although the quantities were insignificant compared with later centuries. Because the Catholic Church believed commerce to border on usury, and to be unseemly and inconsistent with the Christian ethic, trade was, at first, largely in the hands of

non-Catholics: Greeks and Syrians, based in such towns as Marseilles, Narbonne, Bordeaux, Bourges; then the Jews, trading with Africa and the Orient via Spain and Italy, some of whom settled in France and entered into commercial relations with French merchants. By the tenth century there were also Arabs, specialising in spices and products from the East. In northern Italy, where a merchant class had persisted, native traders became established around the eighth century. Venice, a trading centre which had remained within the Byzantine fold, was selling incense, silk and spices in central Lombardy in the ninth century, and in the second half of the eleventh century was granted concessions to trade directly with the entrepots of Alexandria, Antioch and Tripoli. Other Italian cities which had retained ties with Byzantium, such as Bari and Amalfi, were also trading directly with the Orient prior to the Crusades.²¹

The persistence of spices since Roman times quashes the theory that western Europe discovered spices with the Crusades, that all of a sudden the pots were peppered, the roasts gingered and gilded at every turn of the spit. But the spice 'boom' of the late mediaeval period should be understood in the context of the resurgence of international trade, and trade, certainly, benefited from the Crusades and also from the spirit of adventure and the economic shrewdness and cunning of the merchants of the post-1000 era.

CRUSADES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

More than one writer has asserted that the Crusaders of the eleventh century, semi-barbarians, so marvelled at the civilisations of the cities they overran and so enjoyed the novel tastes of spicy food that they themselves were converted. "To the rapacious pilgrims the cleaner, better built towns of the East gave an appearance of opulence. They ... could buy silk garments, indulge in scents and spices in a way that only the very rich had done in western Europe. When they returned home they introduced many of the improvements they had seen into their houses."²²

The popular myth assumes that these adventurers were unaccustomed to the flavours of spices and that, contrary to the generally accepted theory of neophobia, they were won over by these unfamiliar dishes. Certainly, there were opportunities to taste spicy Byzantine fare, as when the Crusaders were 'received' at Constantinople by the Emperor who "made moche grete feste to the barons that were with hym, & everyday he gaf to them grete yeftes and new thynges ... There was brought to them grete plente of vytalles and of other things"²³ More often, though, especially on the First Crusade, they ran short of food and were reduced to scavengings.

The romantic legend has been scathingly demolished by Jacques le Goff. "The Holy Land was not this haven of borrowings - good or bad - that abused and often abusive historians have complacently described."²⁴ Le Goff

refutes the theories that the Crusades provided the impetus to commerce, that they brought to Christianity the products, techniques and intellectual contributions of the Arab world, as well as its 'goût du luxe'. On the other hand, the Crusades were certainly a catalyst of vital importance to trade and facilitated the cross-cultural fertilisation which contributed to the development of cuisine.

Not all the Crusaders were fired with religious fervour, anxious to gain the remission of sins promised by Urban II; those who went to accompany a friend, or for reasons of pride, or to escape creditors, were undoubtedly more pragmatic than quixotic.²⁵ Some, and the merchants who either accompanied them or followed close on their heels, were quick to take advantage of the conquests. Trading concessions were granted in recompense for assistance; a group of Genoese noble families thus gained commercial privileges at Antioch after the First Crusade.²⁶ Significantly, the greatest benefits went to the Mediterranean towns which supplied the crusaders with ships and stores.²⁷ Profits to be made in trade were immense; dividends of 1000 per cent were reported on a cargo of silk, spices and pepper delivered to Venice, and from Venice to the consumer countries of western Europe a further profit of 100 per cent on spices was not uncommon.²⁸ "The one lasting and essential result of the Crusades was to give the Italian towns, and in a less degree, those of Provence and Catalonia, the mastery of the Mediterranean."²⁹

In France, the importers/wholesalers/distributors of spices were generally based in the Mediterranean towns, and often belonged to the class of 'lesser nobles' long since resident in the towns. Montpellier, largest city of southern France and already renowned for its medical school and its multicultural population, early gained a reputation for its spice industry and associated commercial activity; many of the spices, confections and therapeutic remedies for the papal court at Avignon came from Montpellier.³⁰ The 'pebriers sobreyans' of Montpellier, recognised as a professional group from early in the thirteenth century, had shops and offices in Montpellier and branches in north Africa; they travelled regularly to the large fairs of Champagne and elsewhere in northern France, where they competed with Italian and Catalan merchants.³¹ In the towns, the 'apothicaires' ground the spices and prepared spice mixtures, electuaries, syrups and sugared 'comfits' for their customers. Spices were sold both in the regular town markets and in the shops; travelling salesmen ('pebriers del mercat') supplied villages in the local region with spices, but neither their range of goods nor the frequency of their visits could offer the same advantages enjoyed by the town-dweller.³²

The significance of the Crusades was their catalytic effect on a trade which had never been completely quashed but which, from the twelfth century on, brought the 'luxury' products of the East to a larger - and more appreciative? - audience. (Another consequence, I suggest,

was that the merchants themselves also returned with new ideas, new techniques, to be tested in the kitchen.) The Crusades did not convert tastes so much as seduce them. The spices of the Orient were as much a part of its image as the gold and silver, jewels and precious stones, silks and tapestries that the crusading armies were able to loot from conquered towns and abandoned tents. This persuasive image, as irresistible as the Coca-Cola promise of carefree hedonism, may have persisted in mediaeval minds when spices began to appear, in quantity and regularly, in the towns. What the wealthy bourgeois bought was not simply a new taste sensation but a new lifestyle.

THE FASCINATION OF SPICES

Spices have always been imbued with a strong symbolic significance, enhanced in classical times by their mythological associations and their exotic origins. For Herodotus, the land of spices was Arabia, the only country to produce the aromatic frankincense, myrrh, cassia, cinnamon and ladanum for religious ritual and erotic perfumery. "The whole country of Arabia is scented with them and exhales an odour marvellously sweet."³³

Spices had a threefold function in the ancient Greek world: culinary, religious, erotic. In Plato's Republic, Socrates contrasts his vision of the 'simple life' with life in a busy city where people will want the refinements of tables and couches, rich dishes and cakes, together with perfumes, incense and courtesans.³⁴ "For an

entire moralistic tradition, for which Plato of the Republic is the most powerful spokesman, ... the very evocation of spices is, by itself, enough to conjure up a succession of images of luxury and sensuality ... all the refinements of life lived in the Persian manner, at least as the Greeks imagined it."³⁵

By the Middle Ages, the mythological and ritualistic associations of spices seem to have all but disappeared, no doubt firmly ejected by the Christian Church; what remained was a symbol of luxury and an aura of magic linked to their faraway, and sometimes still fabulous, sources. The twelfth-century Roman d'Alexandre describes an enchanted forest perfumed with incense, liquorice, cinnamon, galangal and other spices.³⁶ In terms of cost and exclusivity, they were genuine luxuries and, as in ancient Rome, both the privilege of the rich and a means of demonstrating this privilege.

Through contact with Arab civilisations - partly, perhaps, via the troubadours - the association of spices with luxury and refined living was reinforced. It should be emphasised that the main legacy of this contact was the symbolic value of spices rather than specific combinations and patterns of use; culinary borrowings are more likely to take the form of a gradual incorporation of specific new ingredients or methods into an existing pattern, than adoption of a completely new style or set of recipes. Gibb's theory states that aspects of one culture are rarely accepted into another as entirely new constituents, but rather when the receiving culture already possesses an

"existing activity in the related fields", when the borrowing offers a better, or even just a different, way of doing something.³⁷ Applying this theory to spices, Rodinson suggests that mediaeval western Europe had inherited from Antiquity a taste for spicy food, which 'need' could be satisfied by borrowing a model from the Muslim world.³⁸ The model, however, need not be adopted in its entirety, and I suggest that from spices the symbolic value was predominant.

The promise of spices, then, was one of luxury and exoticism. Little wonder they were accepted by the aristocracy and the upwardly-mobile merchants, "wishing to surround themselves with luxury, or at least with comfort befitting their social rank", who spent lavishly on food, dress and household furniture, the new refinements of living - to such an extent that the fortunes of some noble families were dissipated within a few centuries, fortuitously for the self-made bourgeois who thereby acquired the prestige of a country estate.³⁹ For the 'leisure class' of property owners, both the aristocracy and the new 'haute bourgeoisie', spices represented a means of demonstrating social superiority.

SPICES: SYMBOLS OF STATUS

The importance of spices as status symbols, which must constantly be recreated, is confirmed by the changes in prestige of individual spices, prestige (and price) being associated with relative rarity and novelty. Pepper, which

had been so prized by Roman gourmets, was the most plentiful (and cheapest) of the mediaeval spices, but lost its status to the newer, more exotic spices. In the fifteenth century, when European imports of spices trebled, the proportion of pepper fell from about one-half to near one-third. Venetian imports of pepper increased only slightly in the fifteenth century, but imports of ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon increased three- or fourfold.⁴⁰

Despite the dominance of pepper in imports, it was ranked low on the scale of preference (frequency of usage) in cookery books of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Thus, in the fourteenth-century Viandier, saffron and ginger are approximately equal in popularity, featuring in almost one-fifth of recipes, and not too far ahead of cinnamon and cloves, but pepper appears in only one-tenth of recipes. In the recipes of Anonimo Toscano, saffron is called for almost twice as often as pepper.⁴¹

One explanation offered for the disproportionate representation of pepper in cookery books is that pepper, as the oldest and cheapest of all spices, became the spice of the lower classes, the artisans and rustics, and as such was disdained by the elite for whom cookery books were intended.⁴² Yet in France in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the price of pepper was comparable to that of ginger; why was ginger not similarly disdained? An equally plausible explanation is that the disaffection for pepper was the corollary of a fad for

ginger. Indeed, the papal court at Avignon almost always ordered larger quantities of ginger than of pepper.⁴³ These spices are the only two, of the basic range, to contribute both heat and pungency, as well as flavour and aroma, to a dish; thus, to a certain extent, one can substitute for the other. As the newer ginger gradually took over the role of providing the hot-spicy character, pepper disappeared from the tables of the elite and simultaneously reappeared among the lower classes.

The elite is always the first to adopt a new product or ingredient and must be continually creating new symbols of exclusivity as existing ones are borrowed, filtering through the rest of the society. The preference for ginger over pepper seems to be an example of this process, as was the acceptance of other new spices. By the fifteenth century, spices of later introduction into western Europe - cubeb, nutmeg and mace, grain of paradise - had begun to feature more often in recipes. Cubeb and mace are mentioned in papal accounts of the early fourteenth century.⁴⁴ Grain of paradise arrived in France about the thirteenth century, and was one of the spices Guillaume de Lorris placed in the Garden of the Rose; it soon infiltrated the cuisine of northern France, its representation in cookery books increasing from 9% in the fourteenth-century Viandier to 19% in the fifteenth-century edition.⁴⁵

It may not be valid to associate the prestige of a spice with its frequency in recipe collections. The apparent predilection for ginger and cinnamon in the three

manuscripts of Le Viandier may simply be a reflection of their abundance and relatively low price - although the same cannot be said for saffron, at least four times as expensive as these two but probably used in much smaller quantities since its main purpose seems to have been colouring. What is clear from the relative frequencies of usage in mediaeval cookery books is that there was a subtle shift in spice preferences in the direction of the newer arrivals, which emphasises the importance of spices as social boundary markers.

A status symbol will be dropped when it no longer fulfils its function of marking social distinctions. Here might be found the answer to the intriguing question of why spices all but disappeared from the cuisine of the elite, the 'higher' cuisine, in seventeenth-century France. One suggestion is that the maritime discoveries of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which brought spices within the reach of even the poorer classes, effectively reversed their symbolic value so that they were no longer prized by the aristocracy.⁴⁶

Coincidentally, they also brought many of the new modish luxuries of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, such as chocolate. Another theory is that the French, more convinced than in the past of their own cultural and culinary superiority, abandoned the Oriental model in favour of a more patriotic one, and turned towards indigenous seasonings - herbs such as parsley, chervil, tarragon and thyme, mushrooms of all kinds, salted capers and anchovies.⁴⁷ Whatever the reason, the

prestige-confirming potential of spices faded with the Middle Ages, although to mediaeval culture they were as truffles in the twentieth century.

SPICES: DEMYTHIFICATION

For mediaeval society, the fascination of spices resided primarily in their symbolic value, but the motives for their culinary use were not solely ceremonial and exhibitory. Before considering other explanations for the role of spices in cuisine, one particular fallacy must be corrected.

The most pervasive myth about spices in mediaeval cuisine is that they were used to camouflage the undesirable flavours of stale - not to say rotten - meat in refrigerator-less days. (A variant of this theme, equally unfounded, is that spices served to enliven a monotonous diet of salted meats and fish.) "Alors, faut-il imaginer qu'une viande pas toujours tendre, qui se conserve mal, appelle les condiments, les fortes poivrades, les sauces épicées? C'est façon de pallier la mauvaise qualité de la chair."⁴⁸ Those who diffuse this story seem to forget that the degree of putrefaction achieved by hanging is considered desirable for many species of game, and that refrigerators were just as absent in the post-mediaeval period when spices had fallen from grace.

"There seems to be no evidence in the cookbooks to

support some historians' explanation that spices were relied upon to mask the disagreeable tastes of spoiled and salted meats. It is not clear that tainted meats were much used, especially among those wealthy enough to afford the spices to use with them."⁴⁹ Further, there is ample evidence from municipal documents relating to markets to prove that the authorities were well aware of freshness and quality in the goods offered for sale. Provençal butchers were strictly forbidden to sell tainted meat, or the flesh of ill, wounded or dead beasts; in summer, meat was permitted to be sold only on the day of slaughter and the following day, with exceptions made for holidays.⁵⁰ The author of Le Menagier is quite specific about the length of time meats should be kept (rabbits, eight days in winter but only three in summer) and frequently gives advice on how to recognise fresh ingredients (fresh cockles should be brightly coloured and cling together; those that are pale and dull in colour are old).⁵¹

Another theory is that spices were used as preservatives. The respected historian, Theodore Zeldin, writes that "Spices were esteemed, first, because they were a way of preserving food, secondly because they were considered to have medicinal properties, and lastly as a way of showing off one's wealth, because they were expensive."⁵² While his second and third arguments are credible, there is no justification for the statement that spices were a way of preserving food. Spices, alone, are not preservatives, and there is no evidence that they were

believed to be preservatives in mediaeval times, and used accordingly. The common methods of preserving food then, as now, were salting, pickling (with vinegar), conserving with sugar or honey, and drying, and all these are described in mediaeval recipes. Platina makes reference to the use of salt as a preservative: "If done in time, dead flesh keeps very well when dressed in salt, as we can see in the case of ham and other things preserved in brine."⁵³ Spices may often have been added in the preserving process - especially with fruits and vegetables cooked with sugar or honey - but they were not, per se, the preserving agents.

It is true that spices were credited with medicinal properties (assuming this to mean strictly therapeutic properties); the lovesick Flamenca was urged to take a little nutmeg each day to restore her health and good spirits.⁵⁴ The 'espiciers' and 'apothicaires' who sold the culinary spices also prepared and sold medicinal remedies, syrups and elixirs which incorporated such spices as pepper, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon and cardamom. However, herbs were also commonly used in medicines, as a compendium of medicinal recipes illustrates, yet they were not accorded the same esteem in the kitchen as spices.⁵⁵ Further, there is not necessarily any relation between the purported medicinal value of a spice and its culinary use, and dishes specifically destined for the sick do not, as a rule, include spices but rather, lots of sugar.

Nevertheless, spices, medicine, dietetics and cuisine

were all loosely associated in the same conceptual category in the mediaeval mentality, and a dietetic motive for the culinary use of spices can be introduced. According to the humoral doctrine still prevalent in mediaeval times, spices were typically classified as hot and dry (although one fourteenth-century Italian document anomalously puts ginger and saffron in the hot/moist category).⁵⁶ These qualities were probably assigned to spices because of their presumed origins in the hot deserts of Arabia; they were thought to be plants of the sun, dry and incorruptible. As such, they were particularly appropriate to winter, the cold, wet season. At least one version of the Tacuinum Sanitatis recommends counteracting the potential dangers of winter with warming foods; the author of Le Menagier remarks that all sauces should be spicier in winter; and the thirteenth-century Provençal dietetic suggests for winter a diet of roast meats and game with spices.⁵⁷ On the other hand, there are few indications that humoral harmony was to be established within a single dish - for example, by combining spices with cold, moist ingredients such as fish and many fruits and vegetables; indeed, fish was often dressed with lemon or orange juice, itself cold and moist.

But spices had another virtue, associated with their hot, dry nature: they were believed to aid digestion, and thus hypocras (spiced wine) and candied spices - caraway, fennel, anis and coriander seeds - were offered at the end of a mediaeval dinner.⁵⁸ According to Platina, pepper

warms the stomach and liver; cinnamon is good for digestion; ginger helps a stomach that has been chilled by too many moist or green things; nutmeg stimulates the appetite and soothes the stomach and liver.⁵⁹

(Incidentally, Francesco Datini believed pepper to be the only spice with a purely culinary function.⁶⁰) For the same reason, spices and spicy sauces were often prescribed to accompany ingredients reputed to be of difficult digestion, such as beef, venison, and pigeon. The fourteenth-century Italian physician Maino de' Maineri advised that the fattier the meat, the more difficult it was to digest and the more it needed sharp, hot sauces; porpoise, especially, needed a very spicy sauce.⁶¹

Finally, it has also been suggested that spices were regarded as powerful aphrodisiacs, a lingering relic of the mythological symbolism of ancient times. This aspect does not seem to have concerned the authors of cookery books or popular dietary treatises, but it is possible that, at least in some circles, the prestige of spices included a measure of respect for this superstition.

HOW MUCH?

The importance of their symbolic and emblematic roles argues against the idea that spices were used indiscriminately in mediaeval cuisine. A more vexing question, however, is how much spice was used. Were the dishes so heavily spiced as to justify the contempt of the nineteenth-century critics? Or were they more akin to

present-day Middle Eastern dishes? Mediaeval recipes rarely prescribe quantities and in any case, spice quality - the strength of flavour - could have varied considerably, according to the area of origin, harvesting practice, and duration of storage. Some spices may have deteriorated during their long voyages; and possibly the spices of six centuries ago were more, or less, pungent than those available today. Additionally, the risk of adulteration was probably high for those spices purchased already ground, such as the cheaper, ready-made blends. Wealthy households, however, typically had mortars, and spices were bought in whole form.

The answers to this question illustrate the two extremes; some depreciate the role of spices, others emphasise their primacy. "Much mediaeval cooking was so bland as to seem dull today. Spices, to judge by extant household records of a year's supply, not to mention cost, were no doubt used as sparingly as a modern cook uses pepper; when a dish is meant to be strongly flavoured with a particular spice, the directions call for 'a great deal of...'. Logically, then, unless 'a great deal' is called for, frugality was the rule."⁶² However, Bruno Laurioux counters this assumption, arguing that household accounts are not always a reliable guide to quantities of spices consumed, since spice purchases are generally only mentioned at the end of each month, and their relationship with quantities of other ingredients usually purchased on a day-to-day basis is difficult to establish.⁶³

The opposing argument has been presented by Peterson.

"A middle-class family in the [mediaeval] Levant would spend an almost equal amount on spices as on meat ... In the western text, the dominance of spices is stressed by frequent instructions that the dishes be 'potente de specie' or 'ponderossa de specie' (Libro di cucina) ... The Traité de Cuisine urges that a great deal of pepper, ginger, cinnamon and clove be used, ... while the fourteenth-century Viandier advises the cook that the food should be very spicy. ... Although measurements do not occur in most of the recipes, where they do occur they give a clear idea of the predominant character of spices. Two fourteenth-century Italian recipes, each to serve twelve persons, call for a base of one half pound of spice. ... While not all recipes are so heavily spiced, to a post-seventeenth century palate the lesser quantities of spice still seem very high."⁶⁴ However, a thorough search through the mediaeval recipes shows that indications as to lavish amounts of spices ('grant foison', 'largement', 'potente de specie', 'molt pebre e moltes d'altres especies') are rather infrequent; in Anonimo Veneziano, only ten recipes, out of a total of 135, insist on heavy spicing in such terms. Sometimes the recipe specifies exactly the opposite - 'ung peu de gingembre et ung peu de saffran'; 'ung peu de menues especes' - and very often the instruction is to adjust the spicing to taste (either of the cook or of his lord). In any case, these indicators of quantity are purely relative.

The reality lies somewhere between these two

extremes. Spices were not necessarily a standard ingredient in every dish, and some dishes would have been bland. In every collection of mediaeval recipes can be found some demanding elaborate spicing, in terms of both variety and quantity, and others in which spices rarely enter. The whole question of how much? is intertwined with those of by whom? and on which occasions? and naturally harks back to the motives for the use of spices, which were a distinguishing mark of mediaeval cuisine on more than one level, differentiating the rich from the poor, the town from the country, special feasts from ordinary dinners. Bruno Laurioux has concluded that "The quantity of spices used, on those occasions when spices were used, (that is, not with any regularity) were significant."⁶⁵ Indeed, spices could hardly have retained their image of luxury and rarity if they were ingredients of everyday usage. The author of Le Menagier clearly distinguishes ordinary dishes as those without spices ('Potages communs sans espices') but in his menus for a wedding feast and for a dinner for a group of court dignitaries, spiced dishes feature prominently.⁶⁶

Spices also marked the religious festivals of Christmas and Easter, an association which is retained to the present day in many countries.⁶⁷ On these occasions, special distributions of pepper, ginger and cloves were made to the papal chaplains at Avignon, and the custom of offering dainty spice confections at the conclusion of a feast applied particularly to the feasts of Christmas and Easter at the papal palace.⁶⁸

Christmas was a busy period for the spice merchants; in Flamenca is evoked an image of spices "giving such sweet and fragrant smell,/ As at Montpellier, where they sell/ And pound the spice at Christmas tide./ 'Tis then that their best trade is plied/ In spices."⁶⁹

The quantities of spices used - as also the frequency of usage and spice preferences - reflected the mediaeval social hierarchy. While wealthy households, such as that of the pope, or of the archbishop of Arles, the count of Angouleme or the duke of Burgundy, could afford to buy a diversity of individual spices, lesser citizens had to be content with the cheaper mixtures like 'pouldre fine' (although such mixtures were also bought by the wealthier households, in addition to the individual spices). In Burgundy in the fourteenth century, prisoners and prison guards were allowed a ration of pepper while fishermen received, in addition, saffron, ginger and 'pouldre fine'; court officials, however, were treated to the complete range of spices, including cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, grain of paradise and long pepper, especially at the time of the famous 'foires' when about 12 per cent of the alimentary budget was spent on spices.⁷⁰ For poor peasants and the inhabitants of small villages, it was not only lower status and lack of money that denied them access to the pleasures of spices; they simply did not have the same opportunities to obtain spices, depending as they generally did on itinerant merchants and pedlars, whose visits were infrequent and irregular.⁷¹ Spices belonged to the money economy, accessible to those with

the cash to buy them, traded in centres where money transactions were common. In effect, they belonged to the towns, to the wealthy bourgeois and nobles, and although commerce spread gradually throughout the countryside, spices remained fixed firmly in the towns, where the 'espiciers' and the 'apothicaires' kept their boutiques and where were manufactured the goods against which spices were exchanged.

Spices long held a fascination for mediaeval society, but were even more enthusiastically accepted in the thirteenth and later centuries, when supplies were larger and more reliable and prices more stable or even lower. Whether prices fell in response to increased supplies, or whether lower prices encouraged greater use of spices, remains a conundrum.

SPICE PRICES

By the close of the Middle Ages, spices were apparently more plentiful, more readily available and cheaper. Data on prices in the entrepots of the Orient suggests that prices in general were lower at the end of the fifteenth century than they had been a century earlier.⁷² At the wholesale market of Alexandria, pepper was very cheap for the first half of the fourteenth century, became very expensive early in the fifteenth century as a result of a brief period of scarcity, but subsequently returned to previous levels, or lower. Prices for ginger, cloves and nutmeg showed similar trends.⁷³

In France, the retail price of most spices apparently fell between the end of the fourteenth century and the middle of the fifteenth century, although saffron, notoriously erratic in its price movements, became more expensive. Ginger and pepper were consistently the cheapest spices (excluding rice and sugar, which were customarily classed with spices in mediaeval accounts), and cinnamon was slightly more expensive. Cloves, grain of paradise - and the mixture of the two known as 'menues especes' - and galangal cost roughly twice as much as pepper and ginger.⁷⁴ In relative terms, one pound of powdered ginger was worth about ten chickens at the time the author of Le Menagier was composing his treatise.

At first sight, the price relativity tends to repudiate the image of spices as the prerogative of the wealthy; anyone who could afford a chicken could also afford an ounce or two of ginger. Yet chickens did not feature on everyman's dinner table; at the end of the fourteenth century, a chicken cost as much as a dozen or so ordinary white loaves.⁷⁵ A daily wage of around five sous for an urban labourer in the first half of the fifteenth century would certainly not allow chicken and spices in the everyday diet, but might not preclude such extravagances for special occasions and feast days.

Although spices were available in ground form, many households preferred to buy spices whole. There were clearly perceived to be advantages in grinding one's own - apart from the more obvious ones of better, and more

intense, flavour and the control over the composition of seasonings for a particular dish. The prevalence of mortars may have been a sign of a growing sophistication of taste, as the more discriminating palate sought different blends and combinations according to the ingredient or type of dish. This trend is confirmed by analyses of cookery books; about nine per cent of recipes in the fourteenth-century Viandier call for spices, unspecified, while in the printed edition of the fifteenth century such blends are never mentioned.⁷⁶

A DISCRIMINATING CUISINE

The Middle Ages had, according to Umberto Eco, "developed fully a metaphysics of beauty", which included an aesthetics of proportion; in poetry, music and architecture, harmony of proportion was sought.⁷⁷

There is no reason why the same aesthetic harmony should not have been present in cuisine, and the popular fallacies which highlight what are seen as outlandish combinations of flavours and textures are totally unjustified. "Culinary art is a conquest of modern times," proclaimed Alfred Franklin.⁷⁸ "There was no sophisticated cooking in Europe before the fifteenth century," decreed Braudel.⁷⁹ It is doubtful that Braudel ever consulted a mediaeval cookery book, let alone attempted a recipe, despite his cautionary counsel: "We would not advise a cook to take them [mediaeval recipes] literally. All experiments have turned out badly."⁸⁰

This is not the opinion of those who have actually tried to reproduce mediaeval dishes, as authentically as possible, and several books of tried-and-tested mediaeval recipes, minimally modified and adapted to modern ingredients and resources, have enjoyed a widespread success.⁸¹

Indeed, in some respects the spirit which inspired the cuisine represented in mediaeval cookery books is no less inspirational in the twentieth century, and the representation of a sumptuous dinner in the Middle Ages is no less relevant to today. "Every effort was made to get as far away from peasant life and peasant tastes ... The cook paid homage with rare, expensive ingredients, daring combinations of the familiar and the exotic, mysterious, bewitching sauces. His aim was to send to table a dish transformed, by taste, texture and appearance, into a work of art."⁸² Ostentation is not incompatible with pleasurable edibility, as Carême has proven. The combinations decried as appalling by later critics should be seen not as evidence of warped palates but rather of different discriminatory standards or even as a mediaeval search for novelty, paralleled by the excesses of 'nouvelle cuisine' in recent decades. It is not for us to judge but to try to understand why mediaeval cuisine was right for mediaeval tastes.

The cookery books themselves provide the most solid proof that the culinary art was alive and well in mediaeval times. Concern for the quality of ingredients has already been mentioned, and at least as much care was

given the techniques of preparation. The author of Le Menagier instructs the cook to grind the bread after the spices have been pounded, so that it might absorb any remaining traces of spice in the mortar; parsley should be cooked only briefly, so that it retains its bright green colour.⁸³ The Sent Sovi instructs that the sucking pig on the spit is to be basted with oil; the drippings from roast meats should be collected and added to the sauce; oven-roast meats should be placed on a grid - even a makeshift one of knife blades - so that it does not stick to the pan.⁸⁴ Grilled fish is kept moist by brushing with a sprig of rosemary or bay leaves dipped in an oil-vinegar-salt 'salimora'.⁸⁵ When a sauce is to be thickened with eggs, recipes instruct that the eggs should first be beaten with a little liquid and added slowly to the pot, off the heat, stirring constantly.⁸⁶ Martino suggests adding a few drops of water or rosewater to almonds so that they do not become oily during grinding, and explains how to clarify stock with egg whites for a crystal-clear jelly.⁸⁷ Many other examples can be cited to illustrate the art of cuisine in the mediaeval era, although 'art' in the Middle Ages, as "the science of constructing objects according to their own laws", might today be termed craftsmanship.⁸⁸

Only misinformed opinion would suggest that mediaeval cuisine was haphazard, unsophisticated and unrefined - had it been so, would there have been any cookery books recording its traditions? The same care and attention are obvious in the use of spices; they were not used

indiscriminately but rather had "differential and precise uses".⁸⁹ In northern French recipes, ginger could flavour almost any ingredient but saffron had specific uses associated with its role as a colorant. Ordinary pepper was the customary seasoning for 'charcuterie' products made from blood and offal, the foods of the common people.⁹⁰

Similarly, appropriate accompaniments are prescribed for roast meats. The author of Le Menagier decrees Aillet blanc for roast goose, Poivre jaunet for pheasant and peacock; the Sent Sovi pairs pheasant and peacock with Salsa de pago, roast sucking pig with Ayllada blanca.⁹¹ With the aid of computer analyses, particular spices, or combinations of spices, may be able to be identified with specific ingredients or cooking styles, or even with particular symbolic roles, which would allow further elucidation of their functions, although the lack of precision of mediaeval recipes complicates such a task.

The discrimination obvious in the selection of spices and sauce accompaniments extended to menu planning. A mediaeval dinner may appear totally disordered to those imbued with the structure of 'service à la russe' but it nevertheless observed certain conventions. The suggested menus in Le Menagier provide a guide to the order of dinners in northern France. The fixed point of the meal was the roast, which succeeded and was succeeded by one or two other courses, depending on the grandeur of the occasion. Dishes served before the roast included boiled

meats and the 'potages' of fresh vegetables or legumes or meat in a sauce; after the roast came cereal dishes, jellies, fritters and other dishes similar to those offered in the earlier services, and finally came the tarts, fruits, nuts and sweetmeats.⁹² Similarly, a structure can be noted in English mediaeval menus, which "show a greater sense of order in the serving of a multi-course meal than has usually been perceived."⁹³ Italian and Catalan menus, while in many respects different to those of northern France, likewise observed similar formalities in their sequences.

TOWARDS DIFFERENTIATED CUISINES

Analyses of mediaeval cookery books have demonstrated different patterns of spice use, which have sometimes been interpreted as evidence of different cuisines. The limitations of such studies have already been discussed. Although it is possible that different frequencies of spice use from one text to another indicate fundamental taste differences, it is equally likely that they merely represent different availabilities in different places at different times.

It is more realistic to view spices, in general, as symbolic of mediaeval cuisine, in general. Spices were used in a systematic and judicious way, as though in accord with an unwritten code, in order to achieve desired results. A hierarchy of spices paralleled a hierarchy of dishes, a hierarchy of occasions and the hierarchy of

mediaeval society. The mediaeval cook was no less a craftsman or artist than his counterpart today. To Chiquart, cuisine was both a science and an art, and he himself "instruict et suffisant en celle science et art."⁹⁴

The idea of particular gastronomic conventions, of certain culinary traditions, even unformulated, lends support to the hypothesis that at a certain level - somewhere between the grandiosity of international cuisine and the monotony of the basic peasant diet - regional differences in mediaeval cuisine did exist and can be demonstrated. In the following chapters, various categories of dishes will be examined with a view to identifying those particular features which served to differentiate a Mediterranean style of cuisine from that of northern France.