

Suggestions to the Novice on Cooking Large Quantities of Food with Inadequate Facilities for Great Crowds of People

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In April, A.S. XXVII, I was one of two chief cooks for our Ealdormere Coronet Tourney (with Helen of Greyfells). I'd helped with feast cooking before, but I had never been *responsible* for the cooking before, and the experience proved most educational. I thought that it would be a good thing for me to record some observations on that event, and on other events for which I've assisted with the cooking, for the possible edification of those who may find themselves in a similar position.

Is This Job For You?

Let me be blunt here. *If you do not have at least moderate cooking experience, and at least moderate intuition with regard to cooking processes, then your being responsible for the production of a large banquet is probably a bad idea.* It is possible to gain cooking experience by proxy, as it were, by getting (and following!) advice from other people who know the business a bit better – but this can be stressful and diplomatically difficult. It is better to gain experience by serving as assistant cook to someone else for one of these events before trying it yourself. A large part of running one of these feasts is being able to spot potential problems while there's still time to prevent their becoming disasters, and experience is necessary for this. If you have modern cooking experience but little knowledge of medieval cookery, you will need to learn what ingredients and forms of presentation are appropriate.

References

Cariadoc and Elizabeth's [David Friedman and Elizabeth Cook's] *Miscellany* contains many wonderful recipes. So does Hiatt and Butler's *Pleyn Delit* [University of Toronto Press, 1976]. There are many other good references for medieval recipes. But don't neglect modern cookbooks in a pinch! Many basic recipes haven't changed much in the last few thousand years, and as long as all of the ingredients were available in the period you're emulating, unless your recipe involves some innovative technique of preparation it's entirely likely that it's quite acceptably medieval. Genuine medieval bread recipes are hard to find, but a modern whole-wheat bread recipe is probably just fine. If you do end up using modern cookbooks, it's probably a good idea to check with someone knowledgeable that the ingredients and presentation are suitably medieval; for example, a Pottage of Lentills is rather different from a typical modern lentil soup. Modern books also contain useful information about cooking times and temperatures.

Information about medieval cooking and serving procedures may be found in many sources. See the above. Also see the excellent article, "A Beginner's Feast Manual" by Mistress Enid Aurelia and Dame TSivia bas Tamara v'Amberview, in the Known World Handbook.

Don't neglect an obvious resource: people! If you know someone who's done this before, ask that one to check what you've planned. I'm very glad to have had Lady Sarra Graeham's input when we were putting our feast together.

Food Sources

Especially if you give them a few weeks' notice, you may be able to get some real bargains from local food retailers. Very likely you'll want to check out specialty stores for bulk dry goods, vegetables, meat, cheese, and so forth. Mention that you're buying in quantity for a banquet being put on by a non-profit organization. Be prepared to give a brief explanation of what the S.C.A. is about, of course. On the other hand, your best buy for large bags of flour, butter, eggs and so forth may still be the local supermarket. Remember that in many cases you'll be buying foods in unusually large quantities which stores may not have in stock at all times; a supermarket usually has lots of the standard staples, but the local bulk food

store may not always have ten kilograms of ground oats or brown lentils in stock for sale at a moment's notice. Make sure that your suppliers for such items have a couple of weeks' notice to ensure that they'll have what you need, when you need it.

Test Cooking

If you find a new recipe that you'd like to try using in a feast, try it out on a small scale before you commit to including it in your feast. That way, you'll get a better idea of how the dish tastes and will fit in with other dishes; you'll have a clearer concept of the processes required to cook it, and the resources needed. You'll know how it's *supposed* to look and feel through the cooking process, and will be able to tell if something's going wrong when you do the scaled-up dish for the feast. One very nice way of doing this test-cooking is to have a small dinner party consisting of dishes proposed for the feast.

Make sure that you're aware of any significant differences between the ingredients you use in your tests and the ones you'll be using in the feast. Different kinds of rice, or different sizes of beans or lentils, can have very different cooking times, for example. This needn't be a problem as long as you allow for such changes, as well as for the effects of scaling up the quantities, in your planning.

Quantity Cooking

One of the hardest things to appreciate is how long a BIG pot of liquid can take to heat up. Plain water at full heat can take an hour or more. Thicker liquids such as soups and stews, to say nothing of things like frumenty, can take considerably longer because they can't be safely heated as strongly. Take this into account when you're figuring cooking times. Put these pots on EARLY; most of these dishes won't be harmed by standing hot or simmering a little longer. If you find yourself in the horrible position of having to heat something more quickly than one burner safely allows, it is sometimes possible to portion out part of it to heat in another container on another burner, or in a microwave; this can be returned to the bulk and mixed in, and another portion taken out for heating.

This is especially a problem when you're planning dishes for a second course and need to re-use pots from the first one. Unless you get the pots back in service QUICKLY, you're going to be in trouble.

Adding a large quantity of cold substance to a pot of hot liquid can cool it a LOT. Even if you've got a pot of water at a rolling boil, adding a third of its volume of diced carrots will cool it off so that it won't be boiling again for half as long as it took you to get it boiling in the first place (assuming you started with the hottest water you could get from the tap – a useful short-cut, preferably for dishes in which the water is not incorporated into the food). Putting a lot of meat in an oven will cool it off a LOT, and it will take some time to return to the temperature needed for cooking. Start these sorts of things early.

It is difficult to manipulate large quantities of food. Draining and straining large pots can be a problem. It can be difficult to stir thick substances in large pots; often you'll be stirring the top part just fine, but the bottom will be poorly mixed. For very viscous substances such as frumenty or rice, local heating is a serious problem because the stuff just doesn't move around to distribute the heat; burning at the bottom is almost inevitable unless you're VERY careful. Frumenty and rice thicken as they cook and hold heat well in large quantities; when they get to be too viscous to stir, they might just as well be removed from the heat entirely, thereby freeing up the stove space.

The sheer quantities of food involved can seem daunting when you're not used to them. Try not to let this push you towards reducing the quantities you actually need. If anything, make sure that you've got a bit extra. If food is left over, it can be donated to a local shelter for the homeless or taken away by the feasters; if you don't have enough food you will have a lot of hungry grumpy people to deal with. If you calculate that you will need a specific number of pies or loaves of bread or pieces of chicken, make sure that you've got a little bit more – in case of a spill or an accident or an extra person at a table.

Facilities

If you possibly can, inspect the cooking facilities of your proposed site *before* you're committed to using it. Many a fine community centre has a beautiful hall, change rooms, showers, function space — and sufficient kitchen facilities to serve some lovely tea and cookies to your starving crowd. *This is not good.* Think: oven space for roasting meat and baking things, range space to have several LARGE pots going at once. Make sure that you have several large burners and that they work. Note that old ovens and ranges often don't put out as much heat as new ones. Warming ovens can be very useful too. Check the site's supply of hot water; you'll be needing it for cleaning if not for cooking, and running out can lead to a disastrous cascade of shortages.

A propane camping stove can help to give you the range space you need. These put out a lot of heat and are useful for getting pots of water hot in a hurry. These really should not be used indoors, though if your kitchen space is well ventilated (preferably with exhaust being drawn to outdoors) you might still be all right. Your local fire marshal would NOT approve. Make sure that you can actually put large pots on your camping stove! — some have lips or flaps that restrict their use to small pots and pans.

Most halls don't come with the serving bowls, platters, pitchers and implements you'll need to dish out your food. Make sure that arrangements for these things are made. The same goes for pots and pans. Don't forget about cleaning supplies, including soap or detergent. It's good to have towels to take care of spills.

Cleanup is something you need to consider. You'll need enough sinks to wash your cookware after you're done (and probably before you start, and possibly in between courses, if you need to re-use equipment). You'll also need *people* to do the cleaning. A kitchen with an industrial dishwasher is a *very* nice thing to have. Don't forget about the feasters and their tableware; options include providing plastic bags so they can take their dirty dishes home, and providing basins or large pots of hot soapy water and rinse water.

You'll be generating large amounts of wet cookware and wet towelling. Make sure that these are dried thoroughly before they're stored away. In particular, wet towels should not be allowed to sit in a closed container for more than a short time, or they'll become incredibly rank.

Most halls weren't planned for the sort of banquet you're working on. Even after you find a site you can live with (and afford), there still aren't enough facilities for comfort, are there? Things can rapidly get seriously worse if the facilities you DO have suddenly stop working, or aren't available for use as they are when you planned this thing. Be properly paranoid: make contingency plans, if you can, for using people's kitchens and the like. It would not be a bad thing at all to have available extra fuses for electric ranges, and someone who knows about such things. (An electric oven often will not work at all if ALL of its fuses aren't OK.)

You're trying to recreate a medieval feast. But the medieval head cook who was doing what you're trying to do had some advantages over you: experience, adequate facilities, adequate finances, and dedicated kitchen staff. It's okay for you to cheat: use food processors, microwave ovens, whatever modern tools are intended to take the place of lots of labour and large facilities.

Another thing that you DO probably have is modern refrigeration. Do as much of your cooking well in advance as you can! Many foods freeze quite nicely if you can find the space: bread, some pies (especially unbaked) — thaw and bake them during the day of the feast, and if necessary reheat just prior to serving; this reduces use of oven time when it's at a premium. Other items can be refrigerated. Some, such as chopped vegetables stored in water in plastic food buckets — check with the local bulk-food store, the local doughnut shop, etc. — can probably stand a day or even two of sitting around without artificial refrigeration as long as they're kept cool. Keep in mind the volume problems: large quantities of food take a long time to cool, a long time to freeze, a long time to thaw. As much as possible, don't let perishable food stand around at room temperature: keep it hot or cold. It's so *bad* for your reputation when people get food poisoning.

If you're planning to prepare soups and stews in advance, store and/or freeze them in small containers. Large containers of hot liquid can stay at dangerous food-bacteria temperatures for hours, even in the freezer. It can be difficult to thaw and re-heat large blocks of frozen stews; one runs into the problem of not being able to stir the large frozen mass, even while the stuff at the bottom of the pot is burning. Freezing in small containers can make this more manageable; add the frozen stuff bit by bit as the stuff in the pot melts. Small blocks can also be thawed reasonably quickly by standing — separated — at room temperature, while a large frozen mass can take several days.

On the other hand, there is absolutely no advantage to advance preparation of some items. Rice and barley require little attention from the cooking staff and are no great problem to cook on the day, and re-heating these sorts of things is next to impossible in quantity because of the usual mixing/heating/burning problems. Many things are most easily reheated by brief contact with large quantities of boiling water. One way of reheating pre-cooked barley (if for some reason you really *had* to do this) would be to dump it into full-boiling broth for a minute.

Cooking help

It's not at all a bad idea to have someone dedicating his/her time to sitting around in the kitchen ("kitchen slave") to help out as necessary. Perhaps this can be done in shifts. There are times when you, the chief cook, will suddenly need to have more done than you can do yourself. The kitchen slave is especially useful if you will need dishes or cookware washed while the feast is in progress.

We usually give a price break to those who help a lot in the kitchen and food distribution — usually by refunding half of the feast fee to those who are not able to sit and enjoy the feast because they're busy cooking or serving. *These people still get fed the full meal.* We try to have the same dishes set up for them, scheduled so that they get to eat, just before each course, exactly what everyone else will eat. (This can get tricky; sometimes the servers do have to grab some of their food between taking dishes out. A microwave oven helps a LOT.) This keeps your servers happy — it's *aggravating* to have to be giving out food while you're hungry! — and has the further advantage that the servers can tell everyone how marvelous the food is. ("Try at least a bit of the lentil soup. I just had some, and it's really good.") (And don't *you* forget to grab some food during all of this: it will do wonders for your blood sugar level and state of mind.)

Timing

After the fighters have finished fighting, tilting, listing, what-have-you; and the archers have finished arching, and Court is finished, people will want their food NOW, which means that you'll have to have been cooking it for several hours and have the first course ready to go. It would have been nice to have known, some time ago, what time this was to be, so that you could plan a schedule. On the other hand, if there are any activities scheduled for the afternoon, timing is likely to be uncertain, and you can't make a definite schedule until things are under way. No plan ever survives contact with the S.C.A... As a reasonable compromise, you should be able to drag out of SOMEONE, probably the autocrat, at least a couple of hours' notice. But a few hours before the feast is to begin is NOT the time to be sitting down and making up a schedule.

What you want to do is, well in advance, make up your schedule relative to the as-yet-unknown time 'T' when the first dish is supposed to roll out. Then the second dish should be out at 'T+5 minutes', the second at 'T+10 minutes', and so on. Last dish, first course will be at something like 'T+25'; then if there's another course you'll have a break, then the first dish in the second course will go out at 'T+60' or so. Having pinned each course down to a time, and knowing roughly how long it will take to cook, you can work backwards to other critical times. The roast has to go into the oven at 'T-75' (80 minutes' cooking time before it comes out at 'T+5'); the ovens have to be pre-heated from 'T-100' (25 minutes before the roast goes in at 'T-75'); some pies for the second course go in just after the roasts come out, and so on. When you find out what 'T' is, all you have to do is plug this into the numbers you've got, et voilà, you have a fixed schedule. (Five-minute intervals seem to be about right for dishes: it's about as fast as food can

be dished up, served out, and eaten, with nobody having to hurry TOO much. Longer intervals leave people bored between dishes and make for a very long, stretched-out feast.)

Some of your dishes will need to have been cooking for much longer than the kind of notice you'll get, but these will be things for which the time is rather flexible anyway. You will have from this an absolute minimum notice time, the earliest 'T-whatever', which is the shortest time you can possibly get food out after you're told and still keep to your scheduled order.

There are several advantages to working this way. One is that you will HAVE the schedule worked out; you won't have to worry about it while you have your hands full with details of cooking. You, the careful planner, can make life easy for your later self, the frenzied cook. Another is that you can plan, well in advance, to make sure that you have the necessary resources for each dish in its place in the schedule. 'Resources' includes things like cookware, oven and burner space, and serving dishes and trays. You don't want to start pulling pies out of the ovens, only to realize that the servers have nothing left to use to carry boiling-hot semi-liquid pies from the kitchen to the tables.

It is important to think through every step in preparing each dish from dealing with raw ingredients to serving it out: *what will you need?* With a timetable, you can determine what all of your resources are going to be used for and when; you can make special note that, for example, the serving trays MUST be brought back with the servers when they take out a dish, or that bowls from one dish MUST be brought back with a later one and washed immediately – kitchen slave! – so that they can be used for another dish in a hurry. Or that a set of pots must be cleaned immediately so they can be put back into service. Make sure you allow for the time to do that cleaning, with a margin for error in case something is burned onto the bottom of the pot.

Here's how it worked at our April, A.S. XXVII Ealdormere Coronet Tourney in Greyfells. Our menu, with times:

First Course

Herbed Bread; Garlic, Honey and Plain Butters	T
Roast of Beef	T+5
Frumenty	T+10
Lentil Soup	T+15
Sausage Hedgehogs	T+20
Cheesecakes	T+25

Second Course

Oatmeal Bread and Butters	T+55
Cheese and Mushroom Pies	T+65
Chicken Livers in Wine	T+70
Carrots with Mint/Honey/Butter Glaze	T+75
Paris Pies	T+80
Pears in Wine Sauce	T+85

This is, less the T values, what the feasters saw. In the kitchen, the schedule on the board looked more like:

Afternoon – cook Paris pies, hedgehogs
start lentil soup & frumenty
carrots, hedgehogs for servers
cheese & mushroom pies ditto
dish out butters

T-100 preheat ovens
T-75 head table roast in oven; servers' roasts in oven
T-55 roasts in ovens
T-45 heat servers' critter sauce, carrots, hedgehogs
T-30 servers eat first course
T-10 critter sauce on stove
T bread and butters OUT
T+5 critter and sauce OUT
T+10 frumenty OUT
T+15 lentil soup OUT
T+16 pots on stove w/ water for carrots
T+20 hedgehogs OUT
T+20 ovens -> 425'; servers' C&M pies in
T+25 cheesecake OUT
T+30 servers eat second course
T+35 cheese & mushroom pies into oven
T+40 carrots into boiling water, carrot sauces on stove
T+55 bread 2 OUT
T+65 cheese and mushroom pies OUT
T+65 Paris pies into ovens for re-heating
T+70 chicken livers OUT
T+75 carrots OUT
T+80 Paris pies OUT
T+85 pears OUT
T+86 collapse

The 'T' values were replaced by real times when we found out (at about T-180) what time Afternoon Court was due to end.

On the whole, it worked quite well; the only problems were that the frumenty burned on the bottom (and since we had ample amounts of the stuff, we never got anywhere near the bottom of the pot with the burned stuff); that the sauce for the roasts had thickened and had to be heated more carefully than we'd expected, so we ran into a time crunch – which was dealt with by heating portions separately in a microwave oven; and that it took longer than anticipated to get the water boiling for the carrots, and longer still to get it boiling again so that they cooked. Some of the carrots were rather underdone. There was the matter of one of the ovens conking out part way through the afternoon, but this turned out to be because of a fuse; a helpful person was able to swap around enough fuses to restore the oven at the expense of two burners which we were able to do without.

Dietary Restrictions

With a well-planned schedule, we were able to make special arrangements for those with dietary problems. A couple of the folks at head table had special restrictions, and it wasn't too much trouble to add a pot of rice and a few other things into the schedule. Most of the actual food preparation had been done over the preceding several weeks, with a few extra sessions in the last few days. (Many hands make light work! Have a vegetable-chopping party the night or two before your feast!) It was no great deal to have a few special pies made up for those who couldn't eat what everyone else was having, PROVIDED that they gave us those few weeks' notice. If you can manage it, this sort of thing makes people Very Happy. YOU MUST BE VERY CAREFUL WITH ALLERGIES – check lists of ingredients in any prepared food products you're using, and be careful not to contaminate dishes with bits of other dishes. Ultimately, the person with the dietary restriction is responsible for what he or she eats, but *you* are responsible for making sure that people are provided with complete and accurate information about what's being served. A mistake can lead to someone being sick, or worse.

Probably one of the most common forms of dietary restriction is vegetarianism. We generally try to accommodate vegetarians: we give them a bit of a price break, since they're not eating meats (generally

the most expensive element of a feast), and it's no great hardship to make dishes that don't explicitly involve meat vegetarian-safe. Gelatine is not vegetarian; use cornstarch or flour to thicken liquids (it's cheaper, anyways). Use vegetable broth instead of meat broth; remember to use vegetable shortening instead of lard for non-meat pies and breads, if you're doing this. Check that it really is VEGETABLE shortening; some cheap "shortenings" are mostly lard. Please take some care to check ingredients; you'd want people to for you, if you were in their place. Worcestershire sauce is not vegetarian, since it contains anchovies (nor is it a period ingredient, though it can be used as a substitute for some period condiments) and so should not be used to season a vegetarian dish. And think through all of the steps; there is little point in coming up with special pie fillings that are suitable for vegans if the pastry is made with butter.

The feasibility of this depends on how serious your vegetarians are, of course, but the most strict – vegans, for example – probably won't be feasting with you anyway. (They would need to be convinced that, despite a severe restriction on ingredients, they would still get a good meal – *and* that appropriate care was being taken in the kitchen. If their recent feast experiences are anything like mine, they will need a lot of convincing.) Ovo-lacto vegetarians do eat eggs and cheese, and it's easily possible to come up with a menu that gives a solid balanced meal even with the meat dishes left out. See our menu above, for example: omitting the roast and the hedgehogs still leaves bread, a hearty soup, frumenty, and a sweet in the first course, and more of the same in the second. Vegetarians like hot food too, including protein; make sure that all of your hot dishes don't contain meat.

If you are not used to cooking for vegetarians, PLEASE check your menu with someone who is. Vegetarians have nightmares about so-called "vegetarian meals" that turn out to include only bread, salad, fruit, and dessert. A meal of a block of cheese, a boiled egg, and plain vegetables is nourishing but neither interesting nor particularly medieval in style – especially if others are eating much fancier fare. Someone who lives with a dietary restriction may be able to give you some useful tips on preparation and serving.

And if YOU, the prospective cook, are vegetarian (as I am), you can still cook a banquet. You just have to delegate some of the meat operations to someone else. You weren't planning to do this entire thing by yourself, were you? Likewise for other dietary restrictions: get someone else to do things you can't.

Depending on who's attending the feast and how dry your site is, you may have some non-drinkers having trouble with wine-laced food. It's nice to cover this one if you can; along with the regular pears in wine sauce, we had one batch of pears that had been cooked with currants instead.

If you are preparing a feast which will be suitable for people with dietary restrictions on the principle that there will not be special food items, but that there will be enough dishes that one can still make a good meal by omitting one or two of them, it is important that multiple dishes be served separately. If someone is allergic to the garlic in a sauce, for example, it is good if that person can simply omit the sauce from his or her serving – and very bad if that sauce is already on the dish and on several other food items that were served on the same platter. Vegetarians may be able to do happily without one of the meat dishes, but will be less than happy if they have to pass up several vegetable dishes just because they were served on the same platter as the meat and managed to get laced with gravy. There's absolutely no point to your taking the trouble to come up with special dishes for dietary restrictions if those dishes are then contaminated before they can be eaten.

Ultimately, this aspect of the feast will depend on your having the time, staff and inclination to deal with special restrictions. Advance preparation helps. And you **MUST** have reasonable notice of such restrictions; you cannot make a lot of special preparations just in case. If you do make special arrangements, it is vital that the kitchen staff be coordinated with the gatekeeper and the servers, so you'll know as early as possible what dietary restrictions you have to deal with, and so the special dishes go to the people who need them. I've been to too many banquets where the gatekeeper knew that special meals were available, and told this to registrants – but didn't relay the requests to the kitchen. And to too many where the kitchen made special food, which was given to or grabbed by regular feasters, leaving none for the people who needed it. The gatekeeper should keep a list of special requests, and it should be made clear at registration (and in your advertising) whether such requests should be made to the

gatekeeper and/or the head cook; you must have an established policy for communication between the two. Servers should ask the people they're serving about their needs, and check back with the kitchen and the special-request list. Someone who tells the server that s/he needs special food, but didn't tell the gatekeeper, should be politely but firmly told that s/he's out of luck unless you happen to have plenty of the special stuff to spare: make sure you have enough for the people who gave proper notice, with a bit left for seconds.

Making allowances for dietary restrictions is a thing that is better not done at all than done badly. If you tell people with special concerns that you will make sure that they will have a good feast, and then don't give it to them, they'll feel worse than if you hadn't made such promises. (I am referring specifically to many banquets I've been at where I was promised a good meal for vegetarians, but ended up with something hopelessly disappointing. Not merely an inadequate meal, but at banquet prices...) And if you cause someone to unknowingly eat something — or perform any other action — that s/he would not want to, for reasons of religion, personal beliefs, or health, this involves serious bad karma for you. Even if s/he survives.