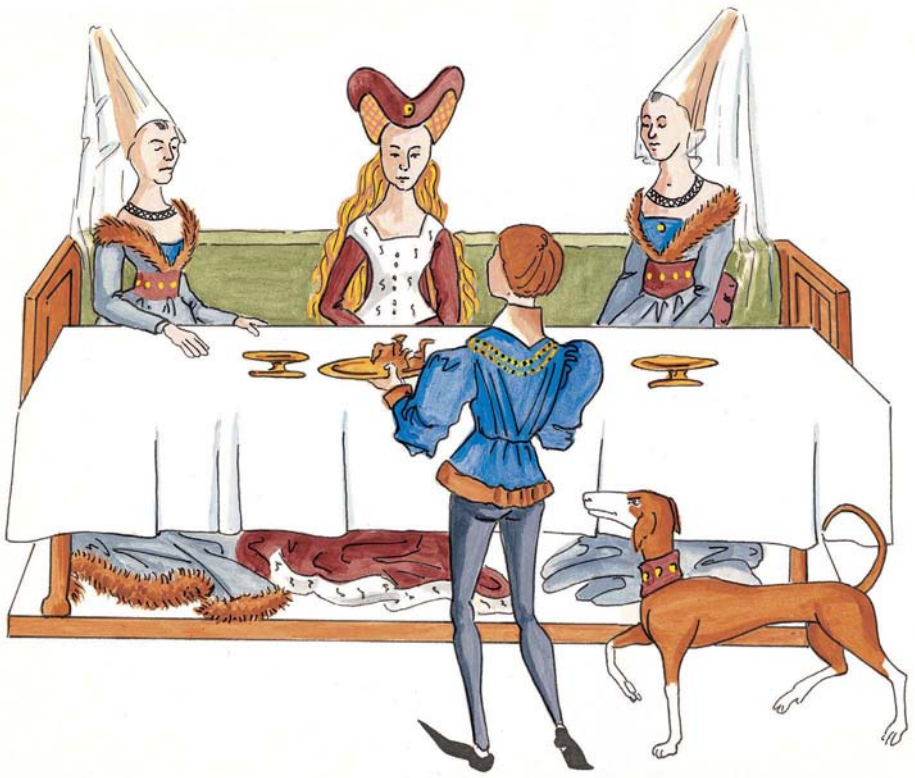

CHAPTER 9

Medieval Table Manners

Popular myth, heavily influenced by Hollywood, often envisions medieval feasts as debauched bacchanalias where bones were thrown on the floor to be eaten by the dogs and drunken brawls were an expected part of the evening's entertainment. Little could be farther from the truth. Medieval society demanded strict adherence to codes of chivalry in war and peace, absolute respect toward women, and the proper observation of religious duties at all times—not a social structure likely to sanction drunken orgies at the dinner table. Medieval table manners, if not as complex and rigid as those of the Victorians, were certainly more tightly structured and demanding than our own.

The Table Setting

To a great extent, table manners in any culture are established by the utensils with which food is served and consumed. In the broadest sense, the tableware available to medieval cooks, servers, and diners was not a great deal different from that used today, although the differences that did exist were fairly major. But before discussing table service and how it was used, let us look at the dinner table as it appeared to the arriving guests.

At the center of the high table, in front of the highest-ranking person or couple, was the salt cellar, which served as a symbol of status and hospitality. In use, the salt cellar held table salt, which was dispensed onto the food with a tiny spoon. Salt cellars usually took the form of a large, ornate cup, but some were made to look like small chests, animals, or even ships. Elsewhere at the table, between each pair of seats, was a large goblet and a small, luncheon-sized plate that was reserved for fruits or the occasional vegetable; two people normally shared one of these small plates and a goblet.

In front of each individual seat was a soup bowl made of wood or pewter, and a large dinner plate made of a similar material. On top of these dinner plates were placed thick slices of stale bread, known as a trencher,

usually placed with the crust downward against the plate. Trencher loaves, either round or square, were allowed to go stale for four or five days before being used. If the trencher loaf was round, it would be cut horizontally into two round "dishes." The rounded surface of the top crust sometimes had to be cut away to allow the trencher to rest on the plate without rocking. The top halves of the trencher loaves were always served to the most noble among the company, and from this practice came the term "upper crust" as a reference to the wealthy elite. From these trenchers, solid foods like roasts, thick stews, and meat pies were eaten. If you use rectangular loaves, after allowing the bread to go stale, slice the loaf into one-inch-thick slices. Place five slices on each plate, with four slices arranged into a square and the fifth placed on top to keep the food and juices from dripping between the slices. Small pizza shells, large pita bread, or Indian naan breads can also be used as trenchers.

Recreating the Medieval Table Setting

Your table settings should begin with tablecloths; cover all of the tables with a white or light-colored cloth and add a contrasting cloth that hangs as far over the front of the table as the bottom hem of the undercloth on the high table in front of the seats of honor. There should also be a salt cellar for every six or eight guests, the grandest salt cellar being at the center of the high table, and more humble ones on each of the lower tables. Between each pair of seats should be shared plates for fruit and bread. Provide each individual with large plates and trencher bread, a soup bowl, possibly a spoon, a drinking goblet, and a cloth napkin. Each table should be provided with several loaves of bread and bowls of butter mixed with herbs or honey (see chapter 10 and chapter 11 for recipes). Bread and butter were served as appetizers at medieval banquets and were already on the table before the guests took their seats. Sometimes the bread and butter were augmented by a selection of cheeses.

Table Manners

Medieval dinner guests were traditionally divided into pairs, who shared more than just a salad plate. Like plates, drinking vessels fell into the category of shared property. Until well into the eleventh century, nobles and commoners alike frequently slept together on the

A table setting for two as it might have appeared in the fourteenth century. Note the aquamanile wine pitcher; bread trenchers set on wooden plates; individual soup bowls; a shared plate for fruit, cheese, and vegetables; and a shared goblet. The spoon on the left is made of pewter, the one on the right is horn. The knife on the left is a gentleman's belt knife and on the right is a lady's table knife, sometimes also worn on the belt. All of these items are modern and can be found in specialty stores, or online through dealers in medieval reproduction goods.

A variety of leather, wooden, and pewter tankards, along with wooden bowls, can make even a modern table appear medieval.
STEVE LUND

floor of the great hall, so shared drinking vessels did not seem like sharing too much. After drinking, a person wiped the rim of the cup with his or her napkin before replacing it on the table. Wine was consumed from heavy-stemmed goblets usually made from pewter or silver, although there are surviving examples made of earthenware, horn, and even glass. Beer was drunk from tankards, also known as jacks, made from pewter, earthenware, leather, or wood. For your recreated feast, metal (pewter, silver, or a modern alloy) or pottery will make the best presentation. If suggesting that your guests share goblets seems like carrying togetherness a little too far, it is perfectly all right if everyone gets his or her own. Similarly, medieval diners often shared a napkin that ran the entire length of the table. Again, this may be too unwieldy or impractical for your event.

Surprisingly, until well into the fourteenth century, even spoons were shared. Because only the richest households were likely to have enough spoons on hand for all the guests at a large banquet, guests either had to share whatever spoons were available or bring their own. When bringing a spoon to a feast became commonplace, people began competing to own the grandest spoon. Some were even encrusted with jewels and worn around the neck like jewelry. Whether or not spoons were provided, everyone was expected to bring their own table knife. Small knives were constantly worn on the belt of every medieval person, regardless of social position. These "belt knives" (not to be confused with the larger daggers worn only by men) were the primary eating utensil of medieval society. To give your medieval banquet an air of authenticity, your guests could be encouraged to bring their own knives and spoons. Relate to them the above story and suggest that people decorate their spoons to see who can achieve the most elaborate results while still being able to eat with it. For belt knives, any standard hunting knife will suffice.

If there hasn't been any mention of medieval forks, it's because there weren't any. The fork did not become popular in most of Europe until nearly 1500, and not in England until nearly 1600. Although there were attempts to introduce forks into northern Europe from both Byzantium and Spain, where they had been widely popular for centuries, the northern Europeans thought the idea of putting an eating utensil into the mouth was a filthy habit practiced only by barbarians.

Those seated at the high table are constantly on display and their manners and courtliness are expected to set an example for the rest of the guests. CARA McCANDLESS

Seating and Serving

At the appointed signal, usually a sign from a servant or a herald, the guests at a medieval feast all gathered at the tables and stood behind their seats. When those at the high table had seated themselves, they signaled the beginning of the feast by inviting their guests to "take their ease," at which time the guests seated themselves.

When everyone at your feast is seated, wine, beer, and other drinks should be brought to the table so the guests can refresh themselves. For best period effect, serve the drinks from large earthenware pitchers—which were known as flagons, jacks, or aquamanailes, depending on their size, shape, and contents—and serve all the drinks at room temperature. Of course you have the option of using ice, but during the Middle Ages ice was only available during the winter when it was too cold to want ice in your drinks.

Once the diners have their drinks, the next order of business is for guests to wash their hands. The most common and universal eating utensil used during the Middle Ages was the fingers, so hand washing was raised to a near-ritual level of importance. Pages with pitchers, bowls, and towels moved from diner to diner, starting with the high table, allowing each guest to wash his or her hands. Additional washings between courses were not unusual, and a final washing at the end of the meal was absolutely mandatory. The water with which guests wash should be scented with fragrant oils (a bit of mint or vanilla extract will do nicely) and decorated with rose petals, violets, or fresh mint leaves.

Because of the importance of religion in medieval life, it was inevitable that a short service, or at least a prayer, would precede a special meal. If one of the guests at your recreated feast has come dressed as a monk or nun, having him or her read or recite the medieval Latin *Pater Noster* (the Lord's Prayer) would not be out of order. Below is the *Pater Noster* in twelfth-century church Latin. Latin is phonetic, so every letter is pronounced. For instance, each u in the word *tuum* is pronounced, making the word read "too-um." The prayer should properly be preceded by having the reader make the sign of the cross in the air, with the index finger and middle finger of the right hand extended upward. When making the sign of the cross, say, "Et nomine patre, et filis, et spitirtus sancti . . ." ("In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .")

Pater Noster, que es in calis,
sanctificúe nomen tuum.
Adveniáte regnum tuum.
Fiat volúntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra.
Panem nostrum cottidiánum da nobis hódie.
Et dimítte nobis débita nostra, sicut et nos
dimíttimus debitóribus nostrus.
Et ne nos indúcas in tentatiónem:
sed líbera nos a malo.
Amen.

After the opening ceremonies, the time has come to serve the first course, or remove. Those at the high table are always served first, and never served from behind—the risk of assassination was too high to ever allow a server to get behind a noble lord or lady. If necessary, serve other guests from behind, but not those at the high table; the servers for high table should stand in front of the table, where no one is seated, with their backs to the room, and serve the honored guests by extending the platters of food across the table. When the "nobles" have been served and the servers move away from the seats of honor, they must be certain not to turn their backs to the hosts; in the Middle Ages, this was cause for immediate dismissal from service, or at least a

Both pages and gentlemen are expected to wait on the ladies. When new dishes are brought to the table, the pages will offer the first serving to the ladies. Once the plate has been placed on the table the gentlemen are expected to anticipate their ladies' needs and be ready to fulfill them. EUGENE SIREN

good beating. Once the high table has been served, food is served to the other tables. If the remainder of the guests are seated on only one side of the table, serving should be done from the open side of the table as it was at the high table, but if guests occupy both sides of the lower tables they should be served in the traditional way with platters of food being placed on the tables by reaching between two of the guests.

Those who brought the food into the hall were never allowed to serve it directly to the guests; they only placed the dishes on the table. Just as diners were paired to share utensils, they were also expected to assist each other in the serving process. Gentlemen serve their ladies, younger diners serve elder partners, and pages and squires serve their masters. Such courtesy extended to carving meat from a fowl or roast. Two fingers were used to hold the meat steady on the platter, known as a charger, while the belt knife was used to carve away pieces of meat, which were then served to the dining partner, after which the server served him or herself. The chargers can then be passed among the diners at will. At actual medieval feasts, those at the high table were routinely served better food and more courses than the rest of the guests, but this would probably be considered rude at a recreated feast.

Small Courtesies

With the medieval emphasis on social position and courtliness juxtaposed with the fact that so much food was consumed with the fingers, it is easy to see that great emphasis had to be placed on good manners. Medieval etiquette dictated that "diners not spit on, nor across, the table, nor belch or break wind while seated . . . or pick your nose nor finger nails while dining."

Although food was cut both on the serving platter and on the trencher with the belt knife, under no circumstances was it put into the mouth on the end of a knife blade. Food was cut into bite-sized pieces on the trencher and then eaten with the fingers. Men alone had the option of placing one end of a large piece of meat in the mouth, holding it firmly between the teeth, and cutting it free just in front of the lips with the knife. For

your feast, it is a lot safer for guests to cut the food on their plates and put it in their mouths with their fingers than to risk someone inflicting severe damage to his lips.

The broth from soups was drunk from the bowl as though it were a cup, and the solids were eaten with the fingers or a spoon. Be certain that your soup bowls do not have sloping sides or wide lips. Small bowls with straight or inwardly curving sides are best or they will be almost impossible to drink out of.

Between Courses

Between courses, or removes, a short period of relaxation should take place to allow the food to settle and give diners time to excuse themselves briefly from the table, although during the Middle Ages it was considered rude to leave the table, and small containers were discreetly set beneath the table for taking care of nature's call. During these idle periods, the company can exchange toasts. Toasts to the host, hostess, honored guests, the occasion that brought the company together, and the cooks are all in order. The company may also wish to sing songs or play some of the games designed for the dinner table (see chapters 13, 14, and 15).

At the end of the feast, just prior to the start of the evening's main entertainment, if any is scheduled, the steward, butler, or cook presents the pièce de résistance, the grand subtlety. Subtleties are fantastical desserts made of candies, pastries, and cake. The idea is to create an edible fantasy for the entertainment of the guests. (Complete directions for creating your own subtleties are given in chapter 11.)

An integral part of courtly manners and religious duty was the practice of almsgiving. Alms was a polite name given to food left on the table at the end of the meal. The leftovers, including the trencher breads, were collected in a large bowl by the almoner, who was also usually the household priest, monk, or chaplain, and distributed to the poor who gathered at the castle gate. While we no longer pass out leftovers to the less fortunate, you can explain the practice to the guests and have either the person who said the prayer, the head waiter or the host, pass a bowl among the guests to take up a collection to be given to a local charity. This should probably be done prior to serving the grand subtlety, so

With the right setting, costumes, tableware, and food, even a small, intimate gathering can provide the illusion of a grand feast.
EUGENE SIREN

Once they develop the necessary skills, youngsters can be made to feel part of a medieval feast by helping to serve their parents.
EUGENE SIREN

the company has not begun to break up before they have a chance to contribute. If you are holding a play (such as one from the selection found in chapter 14, "Mummers' Plays") at the end of the meal, this can also be a good time to collect money for charity; pleas for money are often included at the conclusions of the plays.

Kids And Medieval Manners

As much fun as most people have trying to eat medieval style, you may find youngsters reluctant to take part. Kids have enough trouble trying to remember ordinary dining etiquette and trying to adapt to new and strange rules can be more than they can deal with. We find that children often enjoy playing the part of peasants at medieval feasts so they don't have to dress as fancy or sit at the same tables as their parents, who appear determined to embarrass their offspring by dressing in funny clothes and acting abnormally. Let the youngsters sit at their own table, or on the floor, at the far end of the hall, and, as peasants, they will not be expected to have all the manners of the gentry, giving them a little latitude to behave in ways not normally acceptable at a medieval dinner. This extra freedom will help make the celebration much less stressful for everyone.