

What Did They Eat?

Food and the Medieval Pilgrim

After my tenth or eleventh *menu peregrino*, I was listening to my walking companions engage in a little good natured grousing about the monotony of the *menu* — *ensalada o sopa; spaghetti Bolognese o filete o omelette*; with a *postre* choice of *helados o melón*. This prompted me to wonder what medieval pilgrims ate. What relation to our modern diet on the Camino did the foods eaten by pilgrims prior to 1500 have? For breakfast, the modern pilgrim usually has a *café* or *chocolate*, and if it is a true Spanish *desayuno*, also a sweet roll or a sugary *churro*. And a chocolate bar or a packet of peanuts for a midday energy boost is often to be found in pilgrim backpacks. How many of those things would a medieval pilgrim been familiar with?

The answer is not too many. For a variety of reasons, the medieval pilgrim ate a far different assortment of foodstuffs than those we now take for granted, and when the foodstuffs were similar, they were often prepared in ways quite different from the dishes we expect. The medieval pilgrim would undoubtedly be amazed at what we now eat, and we might be a bit surprised with what they ate, not to mention how they ate it. In other essays we will look at the medieval Christmas with an emphasis on food and then on recipes. By the way, I recognize that coffee is probably better considered a mood altering drug than a food, but I include it here anyway. For those of us addicted to caffeine, a day without coffee is like a day without sunshine!

Determining what medieval pilgrims ate must begin with a process of elimination. They did not begin their day with chocolate, nor did they have spaghetti Bolognese nor a side of fried potatoes at their main meal. Why not? Simply because those dishes use New World culinary gifts brought to Europe after 1492 by Columbus and those who followed him to the Americas. Although they are of immense importance in the Spanish



and more general European diet today, potatoes, tomatoes, red bell peppers (as well as related sweet and hot peppers) and chocolate were completely unknown before Columbus, and none of them worked their way into European kitchens until long after the medieval period ended. Indeed, there was strong resistance to the adoption of some of them. The tomato fruit was actually considered poisonous until many years after its introduction to Europe as an ornamental plant. The leaves and stems of the tomato, and those of the closely related potato, are indeed poisonous, so this was not a matter of mere superstitious resistance to new things. Even the pasta of spaghetti was a latecomer, though its origins were in Asia rather than the Americas!

Other foodstuffs we now consume in quantity were, or might have been, available in pre-modern Spain, but they were not a

significant part of the common diet. Most notable among those items were coffee and sugar, beet or cane sugar that is. Coffee was introduced from Ethiopia via Arabia and may have been brought to Spain by the Islamic invaders. I have yet to find an authoritative statement on that matter, but coffee was all but unknown elsewhere in Europe until long after 1600. It began its great role in European culture late in the 17th century, and for a long time after that coffee was a luxury of the upper classes not a common drink of the average person. Medieval pilgrims from outside Spain were unlikely to have been familiar with coffee even if it was available along the pilgrimage route. And it probably was not.

Cane sugar (beet sugar was not refined until Napoleon's time) was a rare luxury, imported from tropical and subtropical areas far from Europe. Some sugar cane had been grown on the Mediterranean Coast of Spain since the Moorish invasion, but the zone of cane production was far from the Camino. Requiring a large labor force, sugar was expensive to produce, and cane sugar was shipped to Europe only in small quantities until colonization began in the Caribbean with the use of slave labor to produce sugar. Medieval foods were sweetened with honey or with fruits in season, but the medieval pilgrim was unlikely to have relied on a sugary snack or desert, some kind of pre-chocolate candy or cake, for a midday energy boost. In the medieval period a major use of cane sugar was, often in tiny quantities, for medicinal purposes. Sugar used in cooking was treated as a kind of spice, a flavoring agent rather than a major source of calories.

Spices were available in pre-modern Europe, and one of them, saffron, that most expensive of spices, was actually produced in Spain. Most of the others were imported from great distances and were correspondingly expensive. On the other hand, only a small quantity was necessary to flavor a dish, so black pepper (black pepper comes from tropical Asia and is a fruit of a completely different species of plant unrelated to sweet and hot peppers), cinnamon, cloves or cardamom could have been used. At the aristocratic table, and on special occasions in more modest households, these spices were undoubtedly used, but the pilgrim was unlikely to have tasted many if any of them enroute to Santiago. Even salt, an absolutely essential component of the human diet, was sometimes expensive and hard to obtain, but that is a subject too broad for this essay (Mark Kurlansky has written a fine study of the role of salt *SALT: A History of the World*).

Having listed what medieval pilgrims could not have or were unlikely to have tasted, what then did they eat? Some of the medieval pilgrim's diet was based on the ancient Mediterranean crop triad: wheat, olives and grapes. The route of the Camino Francés is tangential to the Mediterranean climate zone so the pilgrims had access, in some places at least, to olive oil and wine. Wheat was available all along the Camino, and bread was one of the staples of the pilgrim diet, as it remains a staple for those who walk the Camino today. The leavened bread the medieval pilgrim ate, however, was more like the whole grain breads one buys from organic bakeries than like the *bollos* and *pan* made from refined flour that we mostly eat today. Leavening agents were not always available, and leavened bread has a fairly short shelf life, so a part of the bread was in the form of what we might call hardtack, more like a cracker than bread as we now use that term. Some grain was cooked in porridges not too different from our morning oatmeal.

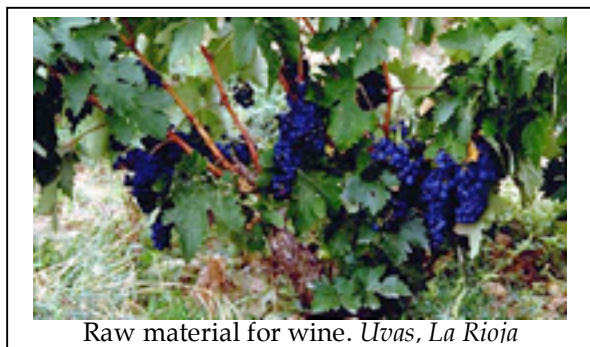
Today we worry about eating too much fat, so it is a little ironic that a shortage of fats was a major dietary problem faced by our ancestors. This was certainly true along the Camino. For physiologic reasons a certain amount of fat is required in the diet. More importantly, walking many kilometers every day requires lots of calories, and fats are calorie dense. Europe has been divided by culinary historians into two fats regions: the olive oil zone, that is, the Mediterranean climate area, and the butter and lard zone, most of the remainder of Europe. In a few areas other fats, for example goose fat in parts of France and fish oils in parts of Scandinavia, were predominant, but the pilgrim on the Camino Francés was likely to eat olive oil walking through Navarra, La Rioja and across the *meseta* and butter and lard elsewhere. The issue was less what kind of fat than simply getting enough of it to meet caloric and physiologic needs while engaging in the daily exercise of walking considerable distances.



The primary source of fats in the Mediterranean diet.
Olive orchard near Najera

Major sources of calories, and of some other nutrients as well, were the various alcoholic beverages pilgrims consumed. We can eliminate one of the beverages modern pilgrims may occasionally enjoy, distilled alcohols like brandy. Distilling was introduced to Europe by the Arabs, another irony as Islam forbids the consumption of alcohol. There are records of distilling in Moorish Córdoba and Sevilla, but prior to 1500 distilled alcohol was almost exclusively used for medicinal purposes. Distilling was a difficult art, and only tiny quantities of distilled alcohol were made until the 16th century when an industrial distilling technology began to evolve and distilled alcoholic drinks like brandy, eau de vie, genever, rum and vodka became common.

The alcoholic beverages consumed by medieval pilgrims included wine, beers brewed from various grains, as well as cider made from apples and pears, a list not too different from the alcoholic drinks consumed by pilgrims today. The wine would have come from a barrel not a bottle and would probably have tastes quite foul to us, for there were few of the preservative techniques now commonly used. Wines had no vintage. They were drunk as soon as fermentation ceased, usually during the winter and spring following the grape harvest. By the end of the following summer, much of last season's wine was already vinegar. *Denominacion de origen* was the locale where they were being



Raw material for wine. *Uvas, La Rioja*

drunk, for wines were generally consumed within a few kilometers of the grapevines from which their ingredients were harvested. Both the kinds of grape and to some degree the processes of production could vary from one zone to another, but if there were Medieval wine snobs, they were certain to be disappointed if they expected the qualities we now take for granted!

Beer was brewed from locally available

grains, and those also varied from region to region. None of it was brewed from corn (maize), a common beer ingredient today, for corn was, like chocolate and tomatoes, a New World species unknown in medieval Europe. Beer can be made from malted wheat, barley, rye and other grain crops (for whatever reason, it does not often seem to have been made from oats!). Connoisseurs of microbrews can readily tell the difference and most have preferences for beers made from one grain or another. Wheat-based beers are perhaps the most popular. The medieval pilgrim was unlikely to have been so finicky. Cider was common wherever apple and pear trees flourished, and it would not have been too different from barrel ciders available in bars today, although once again preservation techniques were not the ones we expect.

Fruits and nuts were most certainly eaten in season. Who among pilgrims walking in the harvest months has not snatched a bunch of grapes from a vineyard adjacent to the Camino or not been offered a freshly picked apple or pear when passing a farmstead? Melons of various sorts (but not watermelons) had long been a Mediterranean mainstay. The Islamic invaders were fond of apricots and peaches, planting orchards of those midsummer fruits throughout Spain. On occasion, the luxury of a lemon or orange might have been enjoyed, but those fruits were grown far from the route of the Camino Francés, and transport would have been difficult and expensive. Some fruits were dried, and just as many pilgrims today carry raisins or other dried fruit for snacks, medieval pilgrims were likely to have eaten them.

Walnuts and hazelnuts were important local products along the Camino Francés, as were almonds in places warm enough for them to thrive (but not cashews, pecans or peanuts for those are exotic species introduced to Europe after the medieval era). As snackers know, nuts are rich in fats and sugars with lots of calories and thus are great energy boosters. As an added benefit they are easy to carry, if not always easy to hull, so they were undoubtedly treasured as snacks. Chestnuts were especially plentiful in the mountainous zones, and although chestnuts must be roasted to eat out of hand, chestnut flour was a main commodity in remote areas as it remained well into the 20th century.

About vegetables we know a less for they were too base and common to get much attention from scholars and writers, but certainly cabbages, roots of various sorts (not potatoes, sweet potatoes and yams, all exotics or New World) and some vegetables we hardly ever now encounter like cardoon were included in soups and stews. Onions, leek, and garlic were used for flavor. Beans were also eaten, but not the dry beans most common today, for those once again are New World species. Old world beans include favas and chickpeas (*garbanzos*), both still widely used in Spanish cookery. Rice, known in Spain at least since the Moorish invasions, may have been eaten by pilgrims, but it was a crop of southern Spain and may not have been transported north to the regions the Camino Francés passes through. Several herbs we still enjoy grew well in various places along the Camino. Basil, rosemary, tarragon and thyme were often used to flavor dishes along with some herbs not often used in cooking today like hyssop.

In the medieval era as now meat was important. The medieval pilgrim probably would not be too surprised by most of the meat included in our diet nor we by his. Beef, lamb and mutton, kid and goat, pork and poultry (but not turkeys, another New World species) were mainstays along with eggs and milk. In some areas wild game was



available, including various birds, hares, boar and deer, but pilgrims were unlikely to have carried arms for hunting and thus were dependent on game meat caught by others. In some zones hunting was restricted, and poachers who brought the game meats to kitchens were subject to severe punishment if they were caught. Likewise, some of the streams were off limits to fishing, being royal and aristocratic preserves, but fish and shellfish were included in the diet when they were available. Dried cod fish was a

staple toward the end of the medieval period, and fresh ocean fish were sometimes available in inland towns, especially in Galicia. But *pulpo gallego*, a favorite of present-day pilgrims as they walk across Galicia, was unknown, for peppers and tomatoes, New World species, are major ingredients of that delicacy.

So there were great differences and there were similarities but perhaps the most important message to be taken away from this exploration of the medieval pilgrim's menu is the importance of the contributions made to European cuisine by the New World after 1492!

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