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Alimentary Anglophilia:
A Short Personal History of English Food

by

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Introduction
The Anglophile's Dilemma

The summer after my junior year of college, I lived in a small apartment near Morningside Heights in New York City, with my boyfriend. It was the first time I had ever built a home with someone, and the first time I had ever really existed as an adult in the world. It was the most beautiful summer of my life. We had a genuine one bedroom apartment, rather than a railroad flat with the bathtub in the living room or a convenience with the bathroom down the hall. We were very lucky to get the place, but the previous tenants needed someone to finish out the lease, and we were in the the right place at the right time. Our apartment had high ceilings and good windows, and gave the impression of being much more spacious than it was. It sat on the top floor of a four-floor walk up, with a tiny, mossy skylight in the bathroom and a rickety terrace out a glass-paneled door from the living room. The decking was coming up, so we often tripped over the boards and stubbed our toes, but in the mornings we could drink our coffee in the sunshine. I grew basil, thyme and rosemary in a pot in the corner, and we ate dinner watching the sun set over the buildings on Broadway and Riverside Drive.

I made our terrace-dinners in the apartment's tiny kitchen. It had a stove with four gas burners, small enough that my largest pot sat across two at once. The oven was so cramped that we had to bend the handles of my cookie sheet to close the door on it. The range was tilted, but the flame was wonderfully sensitive, and for the first time ever I had a kitchen of my own. I made dumplings with thin skins and turkey

filling, cutting out traditional pork for the sake of my kosher boyfriend. I made tarts filled with *crème patisserie* and fresh blue berries with red currant glaze. I made chicken soup and rich moist gingerbread on rainy days, and soba noodles with dipping sauce and cold sesame-spinach salad or tabbouleh on hot days. Most days were hot.

I found such happiness in making food, whether in pre-baking tart crust or putting together leftovers for lunch, that I took that joy in sandwich form with me to work every day. Our lunches for work were always the same: a little section of baguette, sliced in half and layered with mayonnaise, a few leaves of romaine lettuce, and very thin slices of a hard beef salami specked with black peppercorns. Lunch was my daily comfort, because as joyful the summer was, it was so in spite of what occupied me eight hours a day, not because of it. I hated my job. I interned in the editorial department of a lifestyle-and-cookbook imprint at one of the largest publishing houses in the country. I didn't like the environment, I abhorred the business casual dress code, I was frightened of most of my co-workers, but what I liked least of all was what the job did to my brain. One of my duties was reading unsolicited manuscripts. I was the first line of defense: if a manuscript came in that was not interesting to the editor, or from an agent they didn't know, it came to me. I read it, and reported on whether it was okay or terrible or a wonderful surprise.

Reading these manuscripts was by far the most fun of all my duties. Occasionally they were well written, interesting and enjoyable, and I felt lucky that as part of my job I just read books and recorded what I thought of them. More often they

were awful, and I must admit I somewhat enjoyed feeling superior as I shot them down. But that feeling turned against me. Because it wasn't only about *bad* manuscripts that I wrote such disparaging reports; that wasn't what I was getting paid to do. I wasn't being asked to write about whether or not I liked the recipes in a book, or about whether I personally thought the subject interesting. I wrote reports on whether or not I thought there was a chance the book would sell. And if it wasn't going to sell, it didn't count a button or a fig how good it was. I felt dishonest and uncomfortable in my skin when I thought about the job like that, and I did my best not to think about it much at all.

I believe it's because of this discomfort with the task that I remember so few of the actual manuscripts I read. I remember the first one they gave me to review, which I decided didn't work because its epistolary form made it more of a novel than a cookbook, and while it might have sold from some imprint, it didn't fit with our "list." I remember a book of modern Israeli food, full of beautiful pictures of figs and falafel shops, a book I wanted to take home with me. I found the book fascinating, but I couldn't really imagine it flying off the shelves. Israel does not have much of a culinary reputation, and mostly stirs up thoughts of cease-fires and displaced Palestinians. I wrote that I did not think the book would sell, and I don't know if anybody ever published it. We didn't.

One of the few books I remember rejecting whole-heartedly and without any residual guilt was a cookbook of English food, marketed specifically towards Americans. I gathered the author had set out to disprove the stereotype that

everything the English eat is bland and uninteresting, but he had failed utterly in that cause. The book had more than one recipe for fish and chips, several for curry and a few for shepherd's pie. It could teach you how to make five different types of scones, but it didn't have anything that I, with my truly limited knowledge of English food, found remotely surprising. And none of the dishes it included looked particularly appetizing. In his attempt to save the cuisine's reputation, the author had seen fit to include a large number of big, full-color photographs. These went a long way towards proving that England isn't very pretty, that it is generally cloudy, and that its food is predominantly shades of off-white, gray and brown. I began to feel a little blasé just from looking at it, which is odd, considering how much I like food.

Actually, I like food so much that even this dismal manuscript caused my obsession to flare, and to team up with another, older peculiarity of mine – Anglophilia. I have a crush on England, as a country. When I'm flipping through channels on the TV, a British accent stops me in my tracks, and I find myself watching hours of “Fawlty Towers” and “Keeping Up Appearances.” My favorite stand-up comics are uniformly British, and I am likely to like a poet or novelist better in a blind test if I think they're British rather than American. I like Victorian fashion enough to seek out and purchase well-made corsets at ridiculous prices, and I love stories about the British Empire.

When I am feeling overwhelmed by the world and confused about my place in it, when my nerves are getting frayed and I simply need distraction, I curl up with a mug of Earl Grey and Roald Dahl's memoir, *Going Solo*. I am comforted by his

stories of being a young pilot for the Royal Air Force in North Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The surety of the empire-building Brits, the knowledge that they were doing the right thing in the world, and Dahl's steady belief that joining the RAF to fight against the Nazis was the only correct thing for him to do make me feel safe when I myself don't know what I am doing with my life, or even with my afternoon. Even as a child I knew that it wasn't as simple as that, though. I saw movies about the English slaughter in India and read books about the terrible effects of their opium trade in China. I realized that, justified by their belief in the white man's burden, the English increased their glorious empire by taking territory they had no right to and governing the savage natives they believed could not govern themselves, exporting and exploiting their resources. But even when what they did was horrible, they were doing what they believed, what they *knew*, was best, and their certainty remains attractive, wondrous and consoling to me.

I adore pretty much everything I know about English culture and history for no other reason than its very Englishness. So why didn't I love that book of English food? Why did those big glossy pictures leave me bored and vaguely disgusted? I realized I'd never given very much thought to what the English eat. I like reading Dahl's memories of eating ripe pawpaws for breakfast in Dar es Salaam, picked fresh by Piggy the cook and flavored with the juice of a whole lime. Dahl says that nearly every white man or woman in Tanganyika ate this for breakfast, but still it is not English food really, so much as food that the English ate when they were in Africa. I realized that what they ate at home I'd never learned, except for the vague idea, given

weight by this proposed cookbook, that it was bland and probably not very good. Suddenly I was back to that feeling of my skin not quite fitting. How could I like the English so much, and not know about or be interested in their cuisine, given how greatly I care about food?

I know exactly when it was that I first realized the importance of food. I was thirteen, visiting New York with my parents, and I had just gone to a very posh New York hair salon for the first time, and gotten the nicest (and most expensive) haircut I'd ever had. I was feeling very classy and grown up, and my mother and I met up with a couple she had been friends with a long time, at a restaurant called Bouley in downtown Manhattan. The entrance hall had back lit shelves lined with apples, which gave off a wonderful smell and seemed to mark a portal to the somewhat dim interior. The restaurant was decorated in deep reds and browns, with large tables and chairs, and seemed very far away from the street outside. My mother's friend knew the chef, and so we were sent out several tiny, unexpected tasting dishes. These were little nibbles of tuna tartare, spiked with pepper and smoothed by avocado, served in china soup spoons, and bites of ricotta and watercress wrapped in flaky pastry, and miniature saucers of vichyssoise drizzled with chili oil. My mother was solicitous, worrying I would not find things I liked to eat. In my family I was known as a picky eater, the type of child who has vegetables cut up on her plate because she will not eat salad. But that day was different. It didn't make sense to me to let things go untasted, not in that lovely restaurant where the chef was doing us special favors.

When we got to the entrée, there was a swath of pureed potatoes flavored with

basil forming a graceful teardrop around the perfectly roasted chicken, and they were delicious, with a texture that I could barely comprehend. A few years later I learned about the concept of mouthfeel, but at that point I was simply stunned. I think I moaned a bit, they were so good. I had never realized you could do that with a potato. I had thought my mother's creamy, smooth mashed potatoes to be the epitome of the vegetable, but as good as they are, I was wrong.

Since the potato discovery, I have almost never refused to try a new thing when it's offered. I have found out where my preferences really lie, and discovered a wide variety of flavors and textures of which I was once almost afraid. As I've said, I have learned to love cooking, and with the practice of that summer in the apartment I have become tolerably good at it. A tolerably good cook, intolerable in the kitchen. I have formed opinions and ideas, and have become someone who bores my friends to death just looking at menus. I am a foodie.

It seems like a contradiction in terms to be simultaneously a foodie and an Anglophile. Foodies love good things to eat; the English by reputation eat things that are not very good. For instance, they famously consume sausage casings stuffed with congealed blood and pork fat for breakfast. These two loves of mine don't fit together very well. But until I set out on this project, I didn't really know anything about English food. I bought into the stereotype that it is bland and boring and never went further. I even used to make jokes to that effect, thinking for some unknown reason that the gastronomic failures of the English must be some sort of universal comedic common ground. My jokes were seldom well received, and made my feel a little

guilty towards my beloved Brits. I was making negative assumptions about them without ever taking the time to find out if the hearsay was legitimate. At this point my foodie kicked back in, and made me *want* to know the truth. And it occurred to me that perhaps there might be other people in the world who loved both rosemary and rhyming slang, and who might want to know the truth behind the stereotype. My disparate interests meshed in a kind of obsessive's epiphany: I would research the food of England, I would research its history and its cultural impact and I would discover if it really is bad, or if it has merely been maligned by uncomprehending outsiders. And if the worst should turn out to be true, I would discover whether the food was always awful, or when and why it began to go downhill. I would find answers to these questions that were suddenly so important to me, and I would record them for everybody else who might not have known that they needed to know. I would write the True Story of Food in England.

And as I arrived at the idea of writing this story, I remembered the terrible manuscript that had started me down this train of thought. Of course, I didn't want to write a book like that. But I also didn't want to write the kind of book my imprint, perhaps any imprint at my vast publishing conglomerate, would choose to publish. Because while food in general is growing ever trendier, English food in specific did not strike me a subject that's easy to sell, and I didn't know what I would have to do to it make it saleable. I wanted to create an honest record for people who found such stuff interesting, in as elegant, pleasing and instructive a manner as I could manage; something that was clear and vivid, full of interesting facts and ideas. I imaged a text

that was accurate and informative and didn't drag on, something that evoked the time and the people and most of all the flavors of food throughout English history. I wanted to write something that you could lose an afternoon in.

Now it is a cold and sunny afternoon in April, and the air is beginning to smell of grass and earth, and I am writing about the work that came out of my incongruous epiphany and my awful summer job. It is a set of three essays, each its own beast, that together I hope make a whole. My subject, I realize, is far too big to be contained in such short pieces, but I never really hoped to contain it at all. The word “food” encompasses nearly as much as the word “history.” I couldn't have covered all the history, or discussed all the food. Each of the three articles looks a specific period of time, and within each period I chose to focus on one or two particular themes. The history in each chapter is that which gives context to the aspects of food that I examine. I researched chronologically, from the early medieval period to the effects of the World Wars. As I read for each essay, I found I did not feel the same way about my subject matter from day to day or even paragraph to paragraph. I read with delight and disgust and bafflement, and once or twice something like wonder. In each essay I tried to put together a picture of the period's food that was both accurate and entertaining, filtering through 16th century royal decrees and 10th century texts in Old English for the kernels of interest they contained.

The first essay covers the period between the late 7th century, when the Angles, Saxons and other sundry Germanic tribes established themselves on an island off the European coast, to the mid-14th century, just after the Black Death. During this

period the people living in the place that would eventually be called England began, very slowly, to become the English people. I focused my research and writing for the chapter on how this transformation was reflected in the food these people consumed, and how that food changed over time to reflect the gathering of a complex, unique English culture. At the beginning of the period, the food of the warring tribes was fuel, even fodder; simple and straightforward, reflecting the minimal amount of attention they paid it. By the end of the period even the peasants had a mode of cooking that was tied into their identity as Englishmen, and the food of the elite was truly English cuisine.

The next chapter looks at the period between 1500 and 1800 AD, what is often called the Age of Exploration. I focused on the impact of three foods on English diet in that period: potatoes, coffee, and sugar, all of which were (and are) terribly important to Britain, but which come from across the ocean. Each of these foods followed a distinct route into the kitchens of the English, and each shows a different side of England's interaction with its far-flung colonies. The three case studies are short mini-essays which together allow a glimpse at the increasingly inextricable enmeshment of food and politics in one of the most complicated periods of English history.

My final section deals mostly with the decline of food in the 19th century, and touches on how poor nutrition in the Victoria Era lead into food reform in the two World Wars. I look at the startling and depressing effects that industrialization and expanding empire, combined with rigid morals and a gaping distance between

classes, had on the English diet. It was during this period that food began to be produced and marketed on a massive scale for the first time, and less and less care was taken with its flavor, consistency, or even its nutritive value. The combined effect was the bad reputation that English food still has today. Even then, though, that reputation was not entirely just; and part of the chapter focus on the virtuous, if not always correct, beliefs that fueled the food's decline. I look, as well, at the attempts to feed the masses and the governmental control of food that meant that the English populace overall was healthier at the end of the second world war than at the beginning.

Writing this manuscript was my first foray into food history. I wrote it out of curiosity, and out of the desire to reconcile the perhaps contradictory fixations of food and England. These fascinations, even when confusing, make me happy, and as I wrote I had in mind the possibility that there are other people out there who obsess over the same things I do. This text is for them, and its style is constructed to make their reading interesting and useful. In order to preserve the flow of the writing, the citations are in endnotes rather than within the body, but they are many, so that the reader can be comfortable with the essays' basis in fact. In addition to these notes there is a bibliography, with all of the works consulted, cited or no; my readers can, if they like, use this list to continue reading about England's culinary past. The footnotes are for these extra-eager readers, as well. Good footnotes are the literary equivalent of tasting dishes: delicious and unexpected little morsels for the mind. I have just a few, very small footnotes, which include a little extra information that I found interesting,

or a little bit of explanation about the project or my opinion on matters.

I wanted this to be a book that people might read for pleasure. You will notice that parts of this are written in the first person, and some parts even in the second person, and that the whole thing is somewhat conversational. You can see me in the writing, because as interesting as food is, if it weren't for people eating it, it would just be so much flora and fauna. People are what turn bits of the world around us into food, and turn that food into feasts and jubilation, and as a person I am writing for you, whoever you, reading this, are. So the bits that are in the second person, and the conversational tone, are because I would have told you all of this in person, if I could have. After all of this writing, I think I would have liked this to be a conversation. I think food and conversation go together like red wine and hard cheese. Or chips and fried fish, I suppose.

Chapter One
The Medieval Era: Food in England and English Food

In 1136, a man named Geoffrey of Monmouth completed his *History of the Kings of Britain*, which he opened with a glowing description of that land:

> Britain, the best of isles ... has plains of large extent, and hills fit for the finest tillage, the richness of whose soil affords variety of fruits in their proper seasons. It has also forests well stored with all kinds of wild beasts; in its lawns cattle find good change of pasture and bees variety of pasture. Under its lofty mountains lie green meadows pleasantly situated, in which the gentle murmurs of crystal springs gliding along clear channels, give those that pass an agreeable invitation to lie down on their banks and slumber. [1]

It would not be unfair to call Geoffrey biased by his love of country, especially considering that he continues in this bent for most of a page. Nor does much of his history coincide with what modern historians understand as the actual succession of kings and tribes on that island. Geoffrey, for instance, explained that a Roman named Brutus first discovered the land, giving his name to the country; there is no evidence that this actually occurred. By the time of Geoffrey's writings, England had been unified for seventy years under the Norman conquerors, and was beginning to become a nation. Although people had lived on the island for thousands of years, until several generations after the Conquest they were never one cohesive, English people, and so there could be no coherent mode of English food. This chapter looks at the end of that period of dissociation, tracing how and why and when the people in England became the English.

Etymologically, 'English', as a descriptive adjective, means 'of or belonging to

the Angles', one of the Germanic tribes who migrated to England in the 5th century, after the withdrawal of the Romans. They also gave their name to the island itself, but they were far from the dominant tribe even in their heyday. I have never understood why the country did not wind up being called “Saxia,” considering how much greater the impact of the Saxons was on history – it was a Saxon king, Alfred the Great, who came closest to unifying the people in England of anyone before the 11th century. By the earliest recorded usage of the word *Englisc* the Saxons were included in its meaning, 'of or belonging to the *Angelcynn*,' a word which referred collectively to all of the various Germanic tribes that had settled on the island.[2] In its next iteration in the early 11th century, 'English' began to be used to describe all people who were born in England, whether they were of Germanic descent, or Celtic, or Scandinavian, or what have you – it meant anyone who lived in England, even though this comprised many disparate groups. But in 1066 the Normans came from across the channel and conquered whole of the island. They became the rulers of the place, but they did not consider themselves to be *of* the place, and for several generations after installing themselves as the elite in England, they continued to think of and describe themselves as French. During that period, 'English' meant everyone whose ancestors had settled on the island before the Conquest; which is to say, those who had been subjugated by the new French elite. Eventually the Normans became naturalized, and English went back to meaning 'of or belonging to the people of England', who were finally becoming, in the centuries following the Norman Conquest, a unified people with a unified English culture.

Before William's arrival, the people in England were diverse, chaotic, at war with each other. The skirmishing Germanic tribes had not little to focus on matters of home and hearth, and the food before the Conquering reflects that: it is simple, basic, and close to the land. Even after the Normans took over, they at first only succeeded in unifying everyone they conquered as a subjugated class, creating an England split down the middle rather than every which way. The people they left alive, mostly peasant farmers, ate just what they had been eating, and the dining traditions the Normans brought with them weren't English, but French. The history of the modern English language reflects this dietary disparity as well; words for the animals we raise as livestock come from the Germanic, such as 'cow' from the Anglo-Saxon *cu*.[3] Words for the meat of such animals, on the other hand, come from the tongue of the conquering elite, such as beef and veal, from the Old French *boef* and *veel*, respectively; a reflection of which racial group raised the meat, and which ate it.[4, 5] Over time, though, the land where the Normans lived became more important than the land they came from, and by the middle of the 12th century the people – all the people – in England grew to be one race. The French flavors of the Normans and the simple fare of the *Angelcynn* meshed into one cuisine, after a long and many-staged journey from heterogeneity. It started, as all food does, with farmers and the land.

The farmers of the *Angelcynn* sowed their fields with crops of cereals and pulses. The cereal crops included wheat, the great bread-maker of today, but wheat is finicky and difficult to grow, and so alongside it they raised hardier crops of barley, rye and oats. Hardier than all of these were the protein-rich pulses, legume crops of

beans, peas and lentils. The feudal people portioned out the fields in which these crops grew with relative equality. Each family had a piece of land called a “hide” of about 120 acres. Rather than laying out their fields in the patchwork quilt system of square plots that comes to mind when I picture farmland, they set up their holdings in long thin strips in order to make the plowing process easier.[6] Plowing is hard work to begin with, but turning the plow is far more difficult and time consuming than pushing it forward, so it made good sense to create a setup that allow a series of long straight runs with comparatively few cumbersome turns.

The land was the farmers' to work, but it did not belong to them. They rented their farms from the local lords to whom the area belonged, and in return for the privilege of working the soil they paid most of what it produced in rent. In the late 7th century, the yearly food rent for ten hides would have been something like ten vats of honey, three hundred loaves of bread, fifty bushels of dark ale, a hundred and twenty bushels of clear ale, ten rams, ten geese, ten hens, ten rounds of cheese, four bushels of butter, ten small salmon, twenty pounds of fodder for animals and a hundred eels.[7] Food rents probably varied from region to region; salmon, for instance, cannot have always been available in every part of the country. But no matter where he lived, the farmer paid the food rent to his lord before he fed himself or his family, and he hoped for a harvest that could provide for both.

The farmer did not have to rely solely on his portion of the harvest from the fields for sustenance. Around every dwelling, however humble, there was a small garden plot and the yield from this scrap of land belonged to its cultivator alone. The

peasant farmers planted their gardens with leeks, cabbages and lettuces, and hearty greens like spinach and kale and dandelion. They grew peas and carrots and turnips, shallots, garlic, and parsley. The farmer tended this garden either in the dark of morning and the dark of night, fitting it around his field work, or his wife found the time, between all of the other many jobs which occupied her day. To women fell the job, among many others, of finding and drying for use a wide variety of herbs, from worts and sorrels to rosemary and thyme. Some of these they might have transplanted to their gardens, but many more they sought out in the woods. Peasants at this time lived significantly closer to the land than the nobles did, and the farmer's wife was generally an adept herbalist with a good working knowledge of woodland lore. She collected not only herbs, but also mushrooms and fungi, and knew how to put what she gathered to good use as both food and medicine.[8]

Little more than these vegetables and portions of the pulse and cereal field crops ever made it to the bellies of the *Englisch* peasant farmer. His life was one of constant work. *The Colloquy on the Occupations*, a 10th century Anglo-Saxon-to-Latin language teaching aid composed by Ælfric of Eynsham and his student, Ælfric Bata, outlines the difficult lives of those with various lower-class occupations. When the teacher asks the farmer about his work, he replies:

> Eala, leof hlaford, þearle ic deorfe. Ic ga ut on dæg-ræd, þæwende oxan to felda, ond iugie hig to syl. Nys hit swa stearc winder þæt ic durre lutian æt ham for ege hlafordes mines, ac ge-iukodum oxum, ond ge-fæstnodum sceare ond cultre mid þære sæl, ælce dæg ic sceal erian fulne æcer oþþe mare.[9]
>
> Each [day], dear lord, I work very hard. I go out at day-light, drive oxen to field, and yoke them to the plow. There is no winter so stark that I dare

> to hide away at home for fear of my lord, but the oxen having been yoked and the plowshare and coulter having been fastened with the tie, each day I must plow a full acre or more.[i]

This plowman, out from dawn on even the “starkest” of days, lived and worked in the shadow of his lord, refusing to shirk for fear of punishment. His fear points to the great gap between the lord in his castle and the peasant in the field, which their diet also reflects. The plowman had time for only one real meal a day, probably in the evening after the work was done. This meal was uniformly a simple but nutritious pottage made primarily of peas, beans or lentils, with kale and vegetables from the garden, herbs and mushrooms from the woods, and perhaps a bit of salt pork or fish to give it flavor. He and his wife and several children ate their pottage with flat, coarse, dark brown bread.

Inefficiency in medieval mills explains the bread's coarse nature, and its dark, flat qualities were the result of being made with little or no wheat. Wheat has many properties that make it excellent for bread making, but it is also the most difficult to grow of all cereals, which is why soft, high-rising white wheat bread could generally be found only on noble tables. Breads made with wheat rise higher than breads made with barley, oats or rye because wheat has a significantly higher glutenin content. Glutenin is a protein that interacts with water to form elastic nets of molecules called gluten, which trap the carbon dioxide bubbles produced by the interaction of yeast and sugar, giving dough a higher rise. Although bakers were not adding yeast, a tiny sugar-eating, bread-leavening organism, to their breads, and would not learn to do so for a long time, they were using it nonetheless. There is always a bit of yeast floating

[i] All included translations from Anglo-Saxon are my own.

about in the air, and it moved into the dough on its own. When yeast encounters barley, rye, or oat doughs, it behaves just as it does in wheat dough, eating the sugar and producing gas, but, because of the grain's lower gluten content, little of this gas is trapped, and so the bread produced is heavy, dense, and flat.[10]

Peasants baked their bread from flour made of rye, barley, perhaps wheat, or some combination: one of the most common types of flour was called “maslin,” and was a combination of rye and wheat. Bread making was a multi-step process for the farmer. First he (or, more likely, his wife) had to take the grain to the miller to have it ground, for which service the miller took a portion of the flour. Then, because peasant homes generally did not have ovens in them, she had to take the flour to be baked at the communal oven, for which the baker surely took a little something, too.[ii] Just getting their bread, one of just two staple foods, meant a lot of work for not very much yield, but that was largely the rule for peasants in those days, as Aelfric's *Colloquy* so clearly shows.[11]

Flat brown loaves in hand, the peasant would head back home to a one-room cottage. She put the meal together by dumping the pottage that had cooked all day on the embers of the fire onto the disks of bread, and eating it with pieces broken off from the edge. This practice strikes me as a particularly efficient method of consumption, as every extra bit of flavor and nutrition from the stew soaked into the bread below it, so that nothing at all was wasted. Imagine coming home after dark, as

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[ii] Some peasants got around this by baking their bread at home, on flat pieces of stone or metal in the embers of the fire. This produced bread even denser and flatter than that baked in an oven, and, along with the use of hand-querns to grind one's own grain, was of dubious legality, as it undermined the profits of the millers and bakers and, ultimately, the Lord.

the plowman did, to a warm, dim smoky room by the light of the fire that served as furnace and cook top as well as lamp, eating thick hot stew on dense, filling bread. Every ingredient in the stew came from your own labor, and little enough of the fruits of your labor made their way into your meal. But in the ruddy firelight, out of the cold and resting at last, it must have been good. And to wash down your simple and nutritious meal, there was ale. In fact, to wash down every meal there was ale. Water couldn't be trusted, juice was unheard of, and wine cost a lot, so ale reigned as England's basic beverage for a very long time. All levels of society took even their breakfasts with ale until well into the sixteenth century, if not later.[12]

Women traditionally took care of brewing in the home, and it used a large portion of the all-important cereal crops, particularly barley. Brewing had not then become the advanced science it is today – they fermented their ale in open vats, which meant, among other things, that the carbon dioxide produced by the process rose to the surface in bubbles, and popped. Ale had no more carbonation than wine, but unlike wine, it did not benefit from sitting around for long periods of time. It didn't keep very well at all, actually; hops, the ingredient in modern beers that gives them their long shelf-life, had not yet come into use. The Germans realized its merits and began including them in beer by the 9th century, but the English did not start adding them to their brews with any regularity until the early 1700s.[13] Not that there was any harm in having to drink the ale quickly; they drank so much of it that there was no reason it should have to keep for long. Outside of alehouses and home-brews, the monasteries ran the major brewing operations, and for good reason. Ale at the

time was so thick and dark and rich in carbohydrates and calories that it barely counted as a beverage. It was essentially liquid bread, and for the monks, who observed every fast day to the best of their ability, liquid bread came in very handy indeed.

Beginning in the 7th century, most monasteries ran according to the proscriptions of the Rule of St. Benedict, instructed on all parts of monastic life, from the self-sufficiency of abbeys to the celibacy of monks. Of course, monastic self-sufficiency did not necessarily translate into the brothers themselves working the abbey's fields and gardens. Sometimes they did, and in these places the monks typically kept true to the simple life advocated by the Benedictine rule, raising and processing the grain needed for bread and ale, as well as crops of leeks and other vegetables. They also raised sheep and cattle, but these were for milk, butter and cheese, for the rule states: "let all except the very weak and the sick abstain altogether from eating the flesh of four-footed animals."[14] These more strict and pious abbeys also followed the rules urging that a holy silence should be observed, particularly during meals, so as not to interrupt the Biblical readings that took place.

Benedict hoped that the monks would help each so constantly and considerately that no-one need ask for anything, and advocated the use of hand signals, should the need to make a request arise.[15] Documents from one of the manuscripts in which the *Benedictine Rule* is printed include instructions for some of these signs. Among them are signs for leeks, cheese, butter or other spreads for bread, beer, milk, fish and oysters. Bread lacks a sign, perhaps because it was so common

that there would simply never have been a need to ask for it. They did have a sign for water, and it is particularly informative of the diet of the times:

> Gyf þu wæter ge-neodie, þonne du þu swylce þu þine handa þwean wille.
>
> If you need water, then do as if you would wash your hands.[16]

The sign for water has nothing to do with drinking, but with washing. Water that had not been boiled was generally not good to drink for this period (and throughout much of history), and was therefore much more associated with washing. Ale remained the most prevalent drink because even relatively low concentrations of alcohol inhibit contamination by bacteria and other illness-causing microbes.

Of course not all monasteries adhered so strictly to the Benedictine rule. Many of them functioned much as the feudal lords did, owning estates near or distant and receiving rents for them in food or money that were often quite substantial. The monasteries received these estates as donations, sometimes as part of their foundation, sometimes bequeathed in the wills of lords or bishops, and generally in exchange for prayers. The food came in by cartloads: bullocks and pigs, measures of honey, cheeses and loaves by the hundred and fish and eels by the thousand. These well-bequeathed monasteries grew rich and fat, and the monks did not have to work for their livelihood, but rather devoted themselves to 'higher pursuits'. A decree from King Æthelred in 1008 saying that “henceforth we desire that abbots and monks live more according to the Rule than they have been accustomed to do until now” indicates that perhaps these pursuits had more to do with the flesh than the spirit.[17] Later monastic rules, intent on reforming corruption that had crept into Benedictine

monasteries, complain that often priests or monks who have worldly wealth do less holy work and have more and better food. These rules prescribe that all members of a monastic community have exactly the same to eat and drink, so that an end should be put to this inequality.[18]

Truly pious monks maintained a diet frugal even on the feast days, and it was interrupted by periods of fasting, which for them made up most of the Christian calendar days. The Church already had some hold over the populace, and many fast days soon became legally mandatory for laymen.[19] Such legislation would not have been a problem for the peasants, though, because fasts were more restrictive than prohibitive, and were most often just a ban on the consumption of flesh meat.[iii] The largely vegetarian laborers can't have been much put out, but to the upper classes, a meal comprised entirely of plant parts was more or less unthinkable, and the ban of flesh meat lead to a booming fish industry.

The peasant fishermen brought the fish to shore or bank, but the feudal lords and their households ate it, just as they ate the rest of what the peasants' labor produced. Aelfric's *Colloquy* lists twenty-one types of fish by name, but most popular were salmon, herring and cod from the oceans and perch and whitefish from the rivers.[20] More than all of these, though, they favored eels of every type, including conger eels and lampreys. Still, whenever possible, the nobles ate meat with every meal. They grazed cattle and put pigs out to feed in wood pastures, which created a sort of semi-domesticated symbiosis: the pigs ran more or less wild in the woods,

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[iii] The tithes required of every peasant and lord by the local church or abbey, on the other hand, could be quite problematic.

feeding off nuts that their masters occasionally had knocked down from the trees for them. When the lord wanted pork, he or one of his men simply went out to the woods and killed one of the local herd of swine. They also raised sheep, and, in the north of the island, goats, but sheep they valued more for wool and milk than for meat, and goats were not popular farther south. While the peasants were out tending their crops, the lords and thanes had the leisure to hunt, preferring the pursuit of larger game like deer and boar. They also took great joy in fowling, the practice of training and using captive raptors to hunt other birds. One of the more remarkable character sketches in the *Colloquy* is that of the Fowler, in which the Teacher figure who interviews about each occupation demonstrates the desirability of fowling, breaking the flow of conversation to demand: "Syle me ænne hafoc." – "Give me a hawk."[21]

Of course, there were no effective means (other than winter) of refrigeration in the medieval period, so any meat not eaten immediately after slaughter had to be preserved, which was accomplished with great skill and creativity. Meat and fish could be dried and smoked, or dried and preserved in salt. They might be preserved wet, either pickled in brine (which was traditional for certain staple fishes, most notably herring) or even preserved in honey. Salt pork and stockfish – dried and salted cod – were cheap and common enough that even peasants might have had some on hand to add to their stews, and in the leanest months of winter these staples would have made up quite a bit of the elite diet, as well. Fruits and vegetables could also be kept into the winter months if they were first boiled down or pickled.[22] During the gray days of March, in the dull time of Lent, it is easy to envision tables surrounded

by sullen faced, short tempered nobles sitting down to their third meal in the week of pickled eels in jelly and boiled, salt-preserved fish. At least they had good wheat bread to go with it.

Fresh or preserved, meals were generally cooked simply, either by roasting or boiling, even in the noblest houses. Most of the art of cooks in the period before the Conquest went into sauce making. They created fine and delicate sauces that required a deft hand, in combinations that are striking, if not always appealing, to the modern palate. Boiled meat might be paired with a sauce of strawberries, fish cooked with almonds (imported from the Mediterranean) or served with a green sauce that combined a wide variety of herbs. Cooks carefully measured out spices, which were already being imported through Spain and its ties to Arabia, at incredible cost. They used cloves, cinnamon, caraway seeds and more, but ginger and pepper were particular favorites. In fact, although the value of gold rose and fell throughout the period, the worth of pepper remained high and constant. These spices, along with honey, wine, vinegar and local herbs, made sweet, sour and savory sauces, and cooks took great care in pairing them with meats. The only local spice, mustard, also made its way into sauces and because it grew all around the peasants could, and did, eat it as well.[23]

The lord and his thanes took their meals in a hall that was used for no other purpose than consuming food and drink. These halls had timber frames and thatched roofs just like the poorest cottage, but were many times the scale. Meals there featured roast meats, but always offered many dishes, a variety of flesh, fowl and fish

passed around the table on platters. With these they served vegetables with butter and salt, but not in nearly the same quantities as meat. With every meal they ate bread, made of glutenous wheat, milled into fine flour, light and soft (at least when compared to the stuff the peasants were eating). For special feasts their bakers added eggs, cream and spices to the dough, and strew the tops with fragrant caraway seeds. They drank ale, predominantly, but also wine and mead, and followed the meal with fruits, when in season, and nuts, especially almonds. With these they served sweet little morsels made of flowers, almonds, honey and cream, called *eft-mettas*, which means, simply, 'after meats'.[24]

These confections marked the hight of culinary sophistication in England prior to the 11th century, and they were not so very complicated. The *Angelcynn* had other things on their mind than cooking; the period between the end of the Roman occupation and the Norman Conquest was one of great fragmentation in England. By the end of it, the Saxons had set up several distinct kingdoms, but these did not necessarily recognize each other, nor did the various other peoples on the island recognize any of them. There was constant small-level raiding, bickering between lords on the island and infringements from beyond the shores. Peacetime did not exist, and so no time was available for the culture to build up, develop and become complex. Food changed little from the beginning of the period to the end, remaining simply prepared and not overly flavored. The peasants ate their pottage in thatch-roofed huts and the lord had his roasts in a thatch-roofed hall.

In 1066 this simple food in simple hall went the way of the peoples that

produced it. The Normans came howling from across the channel like their Viking ancestors centuries before them, and laid waste to the land they would possess. Their leader William, who had been called the Bastard in his native land, but now went by the triumphant nom-de-guerre of Conqueror, killed all but a tiny handful of the lords of the *Angelcynn*, replacing them with those Normans who had been most deserving of favor in the bloodbath that won them the land. For himself, William kept one whole fifth of the land, and divided the rest between his nobles and the church, for he was as pious as he was ruthless.[25]

After twenty years, the Normans had established themselves as the elite in England, but they remained a separate class of French conquerors, and so the country was not really unified, merely split. William, now king, had the shrewdness to run the country he had captured, and in 1085 he commissioned the Domesday Book, the great-grandfather of all censuses. This tremendously useful historical document was brought into creation so that the Conqueror could find out exactly how much he could squeeze out of the peasants he now ruled. In 1086 it was completed, and having taken stock of all his lands, William had gathered a lot of information about how many hundreds of thousands of pairs of pulling oxen there were, and how many plows for them to pull, and how much land there was for how much livestock to graze. Perhaps he realized how much lower these numbers were than they would have been in 1064, before the vastly damaging war that he enacted to get the land he now surveyed. Perhaps he did not.

William used the information from the Domesday Book to implement a new

system of taxation, based on the French legal system, which had mastered the concept of stratified bureaucracy. Under the Norman system, the king taxed only his French lords, who taxed those below them, who taxed those below them, and so on down to the serfs, who had no one to tax, and suffered. It was easy for each level to tax a bit more than he needed to give to the person taxing him, and pocket the extra for himself. Thus, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, and for the next two hundred years the peasants, still of mostly Saxon stock, would eat the bread and pottage they had been eating before, but there would not be quite as much to go around – it was less of the same, really.[26]

The food of the elite, on the other hand, changed a great deal in this period, which is understandable, considering the elite itself changed so drastically. When they unified the country, the Normans brought with them technology ranging from advanced cavalry fighting to advanced castle building, and advanced cooking techniques were right in the mix. They also brought a religious zealousness that Christianity in England had not seen before. In 1095 the first Crusade began, and for a century and three quarters these holy wars would bring the Norman Englishmen into close contact with a southern culture and its sunny climes. There in the warm they found exotic, amazing things to eat. Round, sweet fruit the color of the sun, with a thick, pulpy skin that, when peeled back, revealed wedge-shaped segments, sweet, plump and juicy. Tear drop shaped fruit, soft and dusky on the outside, pink-purple and jeweled with a thousand tiny seeds within. They found people cooking with far greater quantities of spice: cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves, pepper and

ginger and bright, golden, strings of costly saffron. They learned to make dishes with rice and elder flowers, and they brought back these foods in ever increasing quantities. There is seldom a first recorded usage of a particular spice, but as cooks took to recording their lore in recipe books, spices appear more and more throughout the period.

If extant documents can be trusted, the first real recipes began to appear around 1275. They were probably very useful when passed from one trained Norman cook to another, but to me they read like some strange code. They are a sort of anti-jargon: rather than making use of words which are incomprehensible to those not of the trade, they simply leave out entirely all but the barest bones of information. Take, for example, a recipe for elder flower fritters from the late 13th or early 14th century text *Liber de coquina*:[iv]

> To make fritters, take flour mixed with egg whites; and add elder flowers, or any other flowers desired, and color it as you wish, and flavor it with any spices wished. Cook in lard.(Lib.III, 7)[27]

A modern cook, even one of relative skill, would be hard pressed to prepare the dish described by following this recipe. Should the flowers be fresh or dried? Whole or chopped or ground to a powder? How much flour and how many egg whites? What would one use to color it, and for that matter, why? What spices might flavor it, and in what quantities, and how exactly should it be cooked in lard? None of these questions are answered, but none of them would have been asked. Cooking was then a trade that one learned by apprenticing to a master, and anyone calling themselves a cook a

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[iv] This is a text in Latin and is in fact Italian, not English, but there are amazingly similar recipes in English works from just a little later, and due to the close contact of courts, what was stylish to eat in one part of Europe was generally stylish in another.

would have learned a wealth of culinary material before they learned to read. So these recipes are not very useful to one hoping to recreate long-ago dishes but they do provide an interesting picture of what tastes and ideas had captured the palates of the Norman upper class.

Norman courts featured food ostentatiously exotic, elaborate, highly spiced and carefully colored. They liked their food to be as pretty to look at as it was good to eat, or more so. Many recipes, like the one above, include some note on coloring the food. Saffron, which can be used as a dye as easily as a flavoring, was particularly favored for the pure, bright golden tones it produced. The Normans used egg yolk to produce the same color more cheaply, and would carefully prepare foods that were red, blue, green and white. I wonder if this emphasis on looks didn't detract from flavor at least some of the time, but perhaps taste was just not as important to eating in those days.[28]

The skill of making food beautiful extended to the skill of making food interesting, and in that Norman chefs excelled. The nobility of the period loved foods that tricked the eye, that resembled what they were not or behaved in odd and fascinating ways. Cooks would roast peacocks and force them back into their feathered skin before serving, or hide live birds in pastry shells so that when the dish was cut the air would fill with the fluttering wings of frightened fowl. They cooked mixtures of finely chopped meat, breadcrumbs and spices inside earthenware pitchers, and servers would bring them to the table as though to replenish water and wine. Once there, the jugs were broken and the dish, still shaped like its vessel, could be

cut. Between courses, at truly impressive feasts, great colored sculptures of sugar pastes, called 'subtelties' would be brought out. These depicted scenes often allegorical or even religious in theme, golden eagles with messages in their beaks or the Trinity, with crucifix, in a gilded sun surrounded by kneeling saints, beautiful and terribly terribly costly. The monstrous creations were intended to entertain, and often despite the incredibly high price of the sugar of which they were composed, were not even really meant to be eaten.[29]

A perfect example of Norman food fashion is a dish called the “orange.” Not the fruit itself: crusaders may have tasted its sunny flavor in the holy land, but it would be impossible to keep fruit fresh on the long sea journey home. Cooks in England made the dish of the same name by forming a mixture of minced pork and egg yolk into a ball and then rolling it in more egg yolk and roasting to create a golden color. It was then rolled in a little more egg yolk and dusted with sugar. The same qualities of Norman cuisine are illustrated in a similar dish, which bears the same name and is also made in the tropical fruit's image; in this one, balls of rice colored yellow-orange with saffron were deep fried in oil.[30] These dishes, called by the name of the exotic fruit they resembled, entertaining in idea, costly in ingredients and rich in flavor, were everything that high-class Norman cuisine strove to be.

Both “oranges” are also good examples of another very prevalent, and perhaps less intentional, quality of normal food: mushiness. A very large number of the recipes that appear in early Medieval cookbooks are made of food that is minced, cut small, ground, or otherwise made into tiny, easy to eat bits, and mixed with almond flour or

almond milk, eggs, breadcrumbs and more. These dishes were soft amalgamations of the flavors of meat and spice, easy to eat in a time when dental evidence from skulls tells us the teeth of the upper classes were even worse than those of the lower, which were none too good. The nobility, of course, had access to much richer foods and much more tooth-decaying sugar than the peasants, who worked their teeth and gums with coarse bread and had little in their diet that could do any damage.[31]

Despite their love of rich and opulent dishes, the Normans were subject to the even more religious dietary restrictions than their Saxon predecessors had been. Through the centuries the Catholic Church had become an ever more entrenched part of society. One third of the calendar days were designated fast days, another third taken by feasts or holy days of one sort or another, so that only one in every three days had no religious strictures placed on what or how one should eat. Fridays, Wednesdays and Saturdays were regular fast days, and several long fasts throughout the year complicated things even further. The most important of these was the forty day's Lent before Easter, but at that time fasts of equal length preceded both Pentecost and Christmas, as well. Of course, Easter, Pentecost and Christmas themselves were feasts – as were a surprising number of days. There were quite a lot of saints that needed to be honored. The Church did not enforce feasting, except by forbidding intentional fasting on a feast day, but some penance was assigned for fast breaking.[32]

Forced to pass up meat many days of the week, the Normans consumed quite as wide a variety of fish as the Saxons before them had. Eels remained as popular as ever; the Official Website of the British Monarchy explains that the death of King

Henry I in 1136 was "allegedly caused by eating too many lampreys."[33] Unchastened by this grim sign, the Normans – now simply the English elite – continued to eat eels boiled and jellied and baked into pies. But just like the lords and thanes before them, the nobility ate meat whenever they were not specifically prohibited from doing so, and favored especially beef. They ate fowl of all varieties, from swans to guinea hens. In fact, one very popular feasting dish was made by boning birds and stuffing them one inside the other, starting with a tiny lark and ending with what must have been a very corpulent swan.[v]

These dishes came from a time of plenty, but towards the end of the 13th the country was struck by a series of natural disasters, out of the fires of which would be forged the beginnings of the England we know today. The dark times began in famine, with failed harvests for two years from 1293 to 1295, and again from 1310 to 1312. In 1313 there was sheep plague, from 1315 to1318 there were torrential rains which ruined the harvests once more, and in 1319 there was cattle plague. During these years between 10 and 15% of the population starved, but the worst was yet to come.[34]

The first outbreak of the bubonic plague occurred in 1348, and it was the first of many. They called it called the Black Death, because it turned portions of the body black and necrotic as it killed, which it did within a week of contraction. Another outbreak hit in 1361, and five more struck the country in the forty years that followed. Like all plagues, it preyed most on those who were weakest, those who worked hardest, who had the least protection from the elements and the poorest food

[v] This dish lives on in the modern day Turducken, in which a chicken is stuffed into a duck, which is then stuffed into a turkey. I hear it is very good.

nourishing their bodies. It preyed on the field laborers, the peasants and the working class. Their death toll was astronomical: there is no census data to confirm numbers, but some estimates claim that the population fell by as much as 50%.[35]

But for the few who survived, the deaths of their peers meant the first step forward into a better future. Suddenly field workers were as valuable a commodity as the fields they worked. For the first time, laborers could move from place to place in search of better wages, and could get them. Those who worked skilled trades found that they could charge more for their products and services, and others found that they could make demands upon their lords and employers: they demanded, and received, better, larger houses on larger plots of land. These homes included beehive-shaped bread ovens, so that for the first time the peasants could bake their own bread. They could afford to buy better clothing, and cook more and better food, and they did.

Peasants now had the resources to keep their own livestock, and they typically kept pigs, which are easy to feed and tend, grow quickly, and produce many offspring and lots of meat. Although they had more than they had ever had before, they did not have enough to become wasteful, and so made use of all parts of the animal. They made sausages out of organ meats, and anything that was not eaten immediately after slaughter was, of course, preserved, by salting, drying or smoking. Because they could eat more meat, the peasants ate less bread, and dined with more variety than the ubiquitous pottage of earlier times. A good thing, as they also began to eat more than one meal a day, and eaten thrice a day instead of once, pottage would have grown boring indeed. But higher wages meant enough money to purchase small stores of

spices of their own, with which they could mimic the cooking of the upper classes. Those who lived in the country had larger plots of land on which to grow their gardens and were able to demand more time to tend them. They now ate their vegetables with butter and salt in the winter, and made salads out of the greens in the summer. But a thick mess of peas cooked down into a stew never ceased to be heartwarming, and peas porridge remains an English comfort food even today.[36]

All of this was well and good for the peasant who lived in the countryside and worked the fields, but during this period England's cities, London, Kent and others, were growing, and with them grew an urban working class that lived a very different life than that of their country brethren. These were the butchers, the bakers, the candlestick makers, the blacksmiths and the dock workers and the servants who worked for the nobility in town. They worked for a wage and bought their food rather than growing it, and it was their new buying power that helped fuel one of the great changes in culinary history. Enterprising people began cooking food for ready-made sale. By the late 13th century most large towns in England had at least one cookshop, where one could buy pottage, boiled peas, pies filled with fish or meat or custard, and a mug of ale to drink with it. Before most peasant houses had ovens one could also purchase cooking time from these shops: if you brought them a rabbit or other small game or piece of meat they would wrap it in dough and bake it for you. This service dropped out as homes became equipped for baking and roasting, but the popularity of the cookshop virtually never declined, from then until today. And like today, they were frequented most by those who could least afford to, and would continue to be

even as the urban working class began to split into an urban poor and a class of mercantile and trade-wealthy bourgeois.[37]

In the years to come, it would be this new middle class, more than any other social group, that would solidify and create the culture of England. The emergence of the class had been coming for a long time, and they came from both Norman and Saxon stock. Some had filtered down from nobility, from the angry Barons who had objected to incontestable royal power and forced King John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. In 1381 it was the same rising class that had allied itself in revolution with the peasants, whose ancestors had been serfs in England before the Norman Conquest. At the end of the Middle Ages, the nobility were still closely connected to their French roots, and the peasants had not moved far from their *Angelcynn* ancestors, but the new Middle Class class came from everywhere. They were different from what their ancestors had been, and they had the power to better themselves, and to explore the world and change it. And from head to toe and merchant to missionary, they were Englishmen.

Chapter 2
Food and Politics in the Age of Exploration

In 1577 Sir Francis Drake set sail from Plymouth England with five ships and a hundred and sixty-four men. By the time he turned away from the coastline of British Columbia and set out into the open ocean, he had already lost several ships to the arduous journey across the Atlantic and through the Strait of Magellan. As his fleet grew ever smaller, he crossed the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, then sailed down past Madagascar and around the southernmost tip of Africa. He returned to England in 1580 with just one ship and fifty-six men, having in three years headed the first English voyage to circumnavigate the globe.[38] Most of what he carried home with him holds no interest for me, being routine things like diamonds from Africa and gold captured from the Spaniards. But some of the vast riches in his hold came in the form of spices, the dietary ramifications of which interest me very much indeed. Although they are not the specific subject of this chapter, spices were the edible wealth that first fueled the great European ocean voyages that eventually introduced the imported dietary staples that would permanently alter the English diet.

The age of exploration turned the entire world into a playing ground for European politics, and made every new island and coast a possible source of wealth for invaders from across the sea. In England, new imported foods mostly fell into two categories: those desired and accepted by the populace, and those pushed upon them by the monarchy and its trade interests because they were most profitable. Of the three foods I examined in this chapter, one was favored by the people but not the

government, one was desired by everybody, and one nobody particularly wanted until they realized they couldn't get along without it; these foods are coffee, sugar, and potatoes, respectively. Their histories before and after they reached England are markedly different from each other, but all three of them point to one striking truth: in the period between the beginning of the 16th and the end of the 18th centuries, food, especially food coming from the colonies, became politically charged to an unprecedented degree, both domestically and internationally.

Sugar

I have found, in my day-to-day life, that sugar is somewhat problematic. For instance, I can no longer eat sugary foods without suffering a terrible ache in my teeth, and so in order to avoid a big helping of pain with my treats I have both cut down on confections and largely switched to artificial sweeteners. Practically, this means little more than that I really need to get myself to the dentist, but it is a decent analogy for the history of sugar in England and the world: there was never a time when that sweetness did not come at a high price.

In 1773, J.H. Bernardin de Saint Pierre wrote:

> Whether coffee and sugar be really essential to the comfort of Europe, is more than I can say, but I affirm – that those two vegetables have brought wretchedness and misery upon America and Africa. The former is depopulated, that Europeans may have land to plant them in; and the latter is stripped of its inhabitants, for hands to cultivate them.[39]

Bernardin's clear-eyed assessment of the situation makes obvious the strain that colonial trade had already put on the world. Even so soon after the trend had begun, doubt had crept into some as to whether or not the importation of New World luxuries could be worth the high price the native peoples had to pay for it. Bernardin was certainly not the last to make such an observation, and although my research into the subject has not been exhaustive, I would guess him to be one of the first. Certainly Europe in general and England in particular did not pay any great heed to his sad observation. It would be at least a century before any movements were made toward correcting the incomparable injustice done in appropriating the people of the New World as slaves who worked their own land or were kidnapped to others to produce

exports for captors.

The sugar industry established on the islands and coasts of the warm Atlantic in the 16th and 17th century may have been the first European venture of its kind, but the production of sugar began far earlier. Islamic peoples originating in what we now call the Middle East brought sugar cane with them in their westward explorations and conquests between AD 650 and 850, beginning a Mediterranean sugar trade along the coasts of southern Spain and Italy and northern Africa. Sicily produced sugar nearly constantly (though not always successfully) from as early as the middle of the 9th century until as late as the beginning of the 18th century. In the same period, sugar came into Europe in fits and starts from Spain, Cyprus, Crete, Morocco, Egypt and Palestine, and all of this sugar was routed through the ports of Venice.[vi] In fact, the Venetians held control of all spice trade with the Orient until the end of the 15th century, and when their control was broken the Mediterranean sugar industry broke with it.[40]

It was not the English but the Portuguese (those famous early ocean-goers) who took the first steps towards the Atlantic sugar industry. In 1425 they landed their ships on the island of Madeira off the northwestern coast of Africa. The Portuguese intended this new colony to help with their chronic grain shortage, but once they had cut arable land from the island's steep and wooded slopes, grain fields quickly gave way to a more lucrative crop, sugar cane. Madeira had already begun exporting sugar by 1460, and by 1500 the Portuguese were shipping out nearly all of the 100,000

[vi] During this period sugar was considered a spice trade, both because it came from the same regions as spices and because it was just as costly and rare as they were.

arrôbas – a total of just under a ton and half – produced there annually.[41]

The Portuguese had started a trend with their sugar-colony at Madeira, and in the next few centuries nearly every European country with an inch of coastline set out to explore and claim territory in the New World. They organized this territory into systems of plantations. Each plantation exported vast quantities of a single cash crop back to Europe, produced by the enslavement and exploitation of native peoples. In many colonies, particularly those in the Caribbean islands, sugar quickly became the most popular of these crops. The Europeans had long enjoyed sugar, despite its cost, from the Mediterranean, and the new growing areas could produce vastly more than the old ones. Sugar cane is a tropical plant, and the growing areas in southern Spain and Italy and even Northern Africa were very occasionally visited by frost, which ruined the harvests. The more southerly islands held no such threat, which, along with the efficient (and morally reprehensible) organization of production allowed the Atlantic sugar industry to far outpace that which preceded it.[42]

Considering the vast empire they eventually amassed, the English had a hard time breaking into transoceanic trade. Early on they expended great amounts of money searching for a Northwest or Northeast passage, fabled all-water shortcuts to the Orient. Neither they nor anyone else ever found such a passage, and for nearly a century the English had to content themselves with privateering, winning considerable quantities of sugar by dint of stealing it from other nations' ships. The fortunes the English hoped to make when, in 1600, Queen Elizabeth granted the East India Company a charter for fifteen years of exclusive trading rights to that area were

not in sugar but in spices, but that was not to be. By 1651 the Dutch had monopolized the markets on most spices, and the English were forced to pursue another venue towards New World wealth.[43]

The venue they chose was sugar. By 1640 there were already English colonies producing sugar cane at Barbados and the Leeward islands. Through colonization, battle or treaty they gained Antigua, Jamaica, and in the 18th century Grenada, Saint Vincent, Dominica, Tobago, Santa Lucia and Trinidad.[44] These colonies generated an ever-increasing quantity of sugar and soon the small native populations forced to grow it simply could not provide enough manpower. Europeans found a new source of slaves in Africa, which, as Bernardine notes, which they exploited to the point of depopulation. In the infamous triangle slave trade, ships would travel from Europe to Africa with cargoes of manufactured goods and trinkets, with which the traders bought captured Africans, often sold to them by members of other tribes. The traders packed the new slaves tight into holds (just as they would any other cargo) and the ships carried them to the sugar colonies, where they were exchanged for the very crop they would be forced to grow. In the final leg of the triangle, the ships returned to Europe laden with cargoes of sugar and rum. It may have been an efficient system, but as Sydney Mintz so eloquently points out, it was based on a false commodity, because "a human being is not an object, even when treated as one."[45]

Long before the colonies the colonies produced sugar large in enough quantities to necessitate this brutal system of oceanic trade, before England had appropriated its first island, the English had been making money from the other side

of the sugar business, refining. The process of transforming the bamboo-like canes of sugar into the granulated white particles we are familiar with today has many steps, and as in the process of turning grain to bread in the Medieval period, canny people could find a way to profit at each and every stage. Because cut cane deteriorates very rapidly, the first processing of sugar always takes place close to where it was grown. Processing begins by pressing short sections of cane to release the syrupy juice, which is still raw and full of impurities that the refiner must remove before it can be boiled to the "strike point," the degree of reduction at which crystals will form.[46] Once crystallization has been achieved, the remaining dark-colored, bittersweet liquid is drained and the raw sugar poured into molds to dry.[vii] The quality of the resultant sugar depends on the level of sophistication of this first refining, but in the 16th century it was not what we, today, would call good. Actually, raw sugar in the 16th century was hardly what we, today, would call sugar. It came out of the molds in loaves, sticky lumps of crystals coated inside and out in the remainder of the liquid that had been drained off earlier. It didn't taste any more like modern granulated white sugar than it looked, having a flavor that was much more complex and less purely sweet. The colonies exported sugar in these loaves, but it seldom remained so raw.

The English quickly realized the opportunity available in melting down and re-refining the raw sugar from the colonies. With each processing the sugar became purer, whiter and more expensive, and the various degrees of purity could be sold at different prices to different people. By 1540, a hundred years before England had claimed its first sugar-producing colony, the first sugar refining factories had

[vii] Molasses. More on this later.

appeared in London, improving the sugar they imported for taste and profit. In the next few decades enterprising people would set up refineries at most of the larger ports around England, where they re-melted the raw sugar and boiled it with lye to draw out impurities. The process might be performed once or several times, depending on the desired quality of the finished product, but eventually the sugar would be poured off into cone shaped molds with small holes in the bottom and covered with a layer of wet clay. The water from the clay slowly filtered down through the sugar, drawing out the last of its impurities and escaping through the cone's perforations. Only sugar that had been boiled many times achieved sparkling whiteness, and even this was not sold granulated, but in cakes or loaves from which one scraped what was needed.[47]

Bluntly stated, 16th century English sugar refinery makes me uncomfortable. The business of refining may have been just one more way to earn a few pounds, but behind it lay a sinister ideology – as Mintz puts it "the idea that the purest sucrose would also be the whitest is probably a symbolically potent aspect of sugar's early European history."[48] This racialized symbolism is especially evident in the English refining business. The darkest sugar came fresh from the boat and was in that sense closest to Africa and the dark-skinned slaves who had grown it. With each refining, the sugar became purer and lighter and therefore better; it more closely resembled the European norm. The whiter the sugar, the greater the price, the higher the value. It seems to me the English were uncomfortable with the idea that something they valued so highly could come from a land and race that they considered beneath them.

The obsession with refining sugar ever paler was an attempt to wash the African off of it, removing the taint of those conquered peoples and rendering it fit for their alabaster oppressors.

But even as they refined sugar to greater whiteness the English found ways to profit from the sticky, bittersweet molasses. Molasses is the liquid that remains and is poured off after the strike point is reached and the pure sucrose crystals come out of solution. The molasses produced by sugar's first refining in the tropical lands where it is grown was (and still is) generally distilled into rum, for which there is an obvious market. But when England began further refining the sugar it imported, more molasses was produced as a byproduct, and this had other destinies than rum.

The first major market for domestically produced molasses was actually medicinal. The English inherited their taste and ideas about sugar from the Islamic people who first introduced it to them. The idea that sugar and its byproducts had medicinal qualities originated with them, in what is now the Middle East. To the English at home, the liquid byproduct of sugar production was not called molasses at all, but “treacle,” a word with roots in ancient Grecian medicine. The word comes from the Greek *theriaca antidotos*, meaning, essentially, “antidote for the bites of animals.” The Romans used the term to refer to mixtures of honey and spices that they used as remedies for poison. By the Tudor period the phrase had been shortened to *theriaca*, and then anglicized to “treacle,” and the medicines it identified were increasingly based on molasses or sugar syrups. Treacle was sold in England in the 16th and early 17th centuries by apothecaries and a class of people who made selling

treacle-based medicines their specific business: treaclemongers.[49]

Eventually treacle began to be sold unmedicated as a cheap sweetener, called "common treacle," and as its medicinal use died out entirely, eventually just "treacle." As a sweetener, it replaced honey in gingerbread, which had been made all over Britain since the early medieval period, and was beginning to emerge as one of the country's traditional foods. Originally gingerbread had included honey as a sweetener and liquorice as a flavoring and coloring agent, but the addition of black treacle allowed the costly liquorice and honey to be omitted and replaced with a much smaller amount of sugar. By the late 18th century, treacle had become regional to the rugged north of England, where it was combined in many different ways with the ubiquitous oats. The northerners added treacle to oatmeal biscuits, used it to sweeten oatmeal porridge, and put it into parkin, a northern variation on gingerbread, which differs from southern English gingerbread primarily in that it is made with, yes, oats.[50]

In the south of England, sugar use tied in closely to class. Rich ladies took to the kitchen for perhaps the first time in order to take charge of household candying. The making of sweets was a kitchen task well suited to women of leisure, for it took a long time and required a lot of costly, specified equipment. Comfit making was the most popular candying, a job that involved coating small fruits or aromatic seeds (famously caraway seeds) in layer upon layer of liquid sugar, which had to be given time to cool and harden between each dipping.[51]

At least until the middle of the 16th century, when England had procured its

own colonies for production, sugar remained too expensive for the working classes to enjoy. It became affordable, though still dear, almost coincidentally with the arrival and instant success of the bitter, caffeinated beverages coffee and tea. From their arrival onward, sugar's history in England is inextricably entwined with theirs. The English government and its trade interests promoted sugar and made it available to the poor, and by the end of the 18th century the English worker was getting an alarming portion of his caloric intake from a heavily sweetened, caffeinated drink.

Sugar and its byproduct treacle grew increasingly popular in England from their first introduction during the crusades on, until eventually the country relied heavily on its sugar producing colonies. They abandoned the native sweetener honey as an ingredient and relegated it to an occasional flavoring for hot drinks, never again to be used or consumed in large quantities. Although they could not always get it, by the end of the 18th century the English uniformly preferred the purer, sweeter taste of sugar from across the sea. They had begun to become famous for this preference even by the earliest years of the 17th century, when a German traveler wrote of a meeting with Queen Elizabeth I:

> The Queen, in the sixty-fifth year of her age, as we were told, very majestic; her face oblong, fair but wrinkled; her eyes small, yet black and pleasant; her nose a little hooked, her lips narrow, and her teeth black (a defect the English seem subject to, from their too great use of sugar).[52]

By the middle of the 17th century, coffee had begun what tea would finish, and the English, regardless of class or social standing, viewed sugar as one of life's necessities.

Coffee

Within just a few short decades of Drake's 1577 voyage, Englishmen with interests in trade or adventure had made their way to all points of the world, taking in the sights and sounds of places wildly different from their home. In 1607 William Flinch, an English merchant whose journey's had landed him in Yemen, described one of the country's customs, saying:

> Their best entertainment is a china dish of Coho, a blacke, bitterish drinke made of a berry like a Bayberry... supped off hot, good for the head and stomache.[53]

Finch was certainly one of the first Englishmen ever to taste coffee, and he tasted it on its home turf. The coffee tree, *Coffea arabica*, is native to eastern Africa, where its energizing beans, rolled into balls of fat, once made excellent provisions for nomadic peoples. Arabic traders encountered the trees, and the fresh light beverage originally made from their unroasted beans, and brought them home with them to the Arabian peninsula. The practice of roasting and grinding coffee beans and infusing a dark, bitter drink from their powder originated in the Moslem Middle East around the 13th century, and it is from the Arabic word *qahwa* that we get our word "coffee."[54] Coffee found its way to England at almost exactly the same time as two other exotic new beverages, tea and drinking chocolate. Most early coffeehouses sold these other options as well, but for the first century after their introduction – until English companies developed major interests in the tea trade – coffee remained much more popular.

The first person known to have drunk coffee in England drank it in Oxford, in

the first half of the 17th century. John Evelyn, the famed diarist, observed him, writing in 1637: “There came in my tyme to the Coll: one Nathaniel Canopios, out of Greece... He was the first I ever saw drink coffee.”[55] Canopios had been a disciple of Cyrill, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and had fled to Oxford for refuge after his mentor's murder. He was not only the first person Evelyn saw drink coffee, he was the first anyone had seen, and perhaps his caffeinated presence worked some subtle magic on Oxford, for it was there, twelve years later, that England's first coffeehouse opened its doors. Anthony à Wood, a 17th century antiquarian, noted that in 1650 “This yeare Jacob a Jew opened a coffey house at the Angel... and there it was by some, who delighted in noveltie, drank.”[56] He mentions the opening of two more coffee houses in Oxford within by 1655, which seems to me perfectly natural. Oxford is, and was even then, a university town, and scholars are a class of people that might particularly value coffee's aid in reading late into the night. Scholars at my university certainly do.

Coffee's appeal quickly became apparent to the populace at large, and especially the populace of London, with the help of a Turkish man who knew the drink from his home. Pasqua Rosée was the servant of Daniel Edwards, a Levant merchant. Edwards had acquired a taste for coffee (and presumably the servant who brewed it for him) while in Turkey. He so appreciated Pasqua's skill in brewing the drink that in 1652 he encouraged and assisted him in opening London's first coffeehouse in St Michael's Alley. Pasqua's skills extended beyond brewing to publicity, and some of the extraordinary popularity of his wares must be attributed to

such excellent publications as his handbill *The Vertue of the Coffee Drink, First publiquely made and sold in England by Pasqua Rosee*, which touted coffee's many medicinal properties.[57]

Not only was the drink itself desirable, but coffeehouses themselves had an obvious appeal. The French traveler Misson put this charm into eloquent words:

> These houses, which are very numerous in London are extremely convenient. You have all Manner of News there. You have a good Fire, which you may sit by as long as you please. You have a Dish of Coffee, you meet your Friends for the Transaction of Business, and all for a Penny, if you don't care to spend more.[58]

Coffeehouses were warm and clean, and a cup of coffee cost very little. You could stay as long as you liked, you could smoke your pipe, you could read the newspaper and discuss its contents with those around you. They were characterized as places for political discourse and debate, and places of commerce and business.[viii] They tended to have a primarily, even exclusively male clientele, but it is uncertain whether the atmosphere attracted the men or the men created the atmosphere. Given coffeehouses' reputation for being light on the purse, these men may not have been the best off, but that does not mean that more well to do fellows let a good thing pass them by. By the 1670s coffee had made its way off of the streets and into the homes of the wealthy, becoming the first drink to displace the traditional accompaniment to the English breakfast, ale. By this time, the mode of coffee drinking was set. Originally it had been served black, with optional accompaniments including cloves, cinnamon, spearmint, honey and ginger, but within two decades all these had gone in favor of

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[viii] Occasionally the commerce outgrew the coffeehouse, as in the case of Lloyd's Cafe, opened in 1688, which eventually became Lloyd's of London, the world's largest insurance company.

the simple additions of milk, cream and sugar.[59]

Coffee may have been popular with rich and poor alike, but that does not mean that it was popular with everyone. For every enthusiast who hailed it as a wonderful alternative to the horrors of strong drink, there was an innkeeper or brewer who thought it as atrocious as it was bad for business. For every man who valued the intellectual activity and convivial sociality of the coffeehouse there was a woman loudly proclaiming that it made men “barren as the dessert out of which this unlucky berry has been imported.”[60] The most fearsome of these detractors was the crown itself, as is evident from King Charles II's 1675 “Proclamation for the Supression of Coffee Houses,” which stated that “Tradesmen and others do therein misspend much of their time” and that because of the discussion, in such establishments “diverse false, malitious, and scandalous Reports are devised and spread abroad, to the Defamation of His Majesty's Government”[61] But by the time the proclamation was issued, coffeehouses had already become so popular that until an alternative was offered, legislation attempting to outlaw them proved impossible to enforce.

It was the good fortune of His Majesty's government that there was already in England the perfect alternative to the dangerous coffee culture. The last part of the story of coffee in England is not actually the story of coffee at all, but the beginning of the story of tea. Tea and chocolate were introduced in England almost in the same instant as coffee. For the first century of their presence in the country, coffee held the lion's share of interest and popularity among the three beverages, but in the 18th century tea began to slowly gain ascendancy. Early on it had been hobbled by a

markedly feminine image, probably because it was associated with large quantities of expensive, delicate equipment.[62] Tea services included an array of tiny silver spoons and sugar tongs, delicate china teapots and cups and saucers that were just too much fuss for a redblooded Englishman. Half of the population, however, is made up of redblooded Englishwomen, and the first venture to successfully market tea in the country capitalized on this and on tea's lady-like image. In 1717 Thomas Twining opened his “tea shop for ladies,” offering women a place of their own to frequent as men did coffeehouses. Seventeen years later the failing Vauxhall pleasure gardens were converted into the first ever tea garden and the drink began to edge coffee out. Within a hundred years the national preference would be indisputable. Tea had a great advantage in economy over coffee and drinking chocolate. It is less expensive than either in the first place, and it is much easier to stretch when necessary. A weak cup of tea is much better than a weak cup of coffee, and a weak cup of chocolate isn't worth drinking. This economy led the working classes in the industrial revolution to associate tea with a break from labor. Factory owners could afford to provide their employees with tea, and its pleasant connotations and affordable price tag quickly made it popular with the masses outside of work as well. Tea became popular with the upper classes because they found themselves a bit peckish in the afternoon. In her essay *Everything Stops for Tea*, Laura Mason explains that afternoon tea was taken to counteract “that sinking feeling” one got “during the long hours between a light lunch and a fashionably late dinner at 8:00 PM.”[63] A cup of tea around four o'clock, stimulating in itself and enhanced with calorie-rich sugar,

perhaps taken with a bite of something to eat, made a perfect solution.

A cup of coffee would have provided the same service admirably, and the upper classes certainly could have afforded it. It was not just a low price point that allowed tea total mastery over the caffeinated beverage market. It had a very important backer in the form of the Honorable East India Company and its concerted exploitation of a very large country called China.[ix] In the late 17th and 18th century, English trade interests pushed tea hard. They were attempting to claim a monopoly over the market, but it was hard work: other nations wanted to keep their share as well, and smugglers ran rampant. Even clergymen received smuggled tea, as Parson Woodforde of Norfolk illustrated, writing in 1777 that "Andrews the Smuggler brought me this night about 11 o'clock a bagg of Hayson Tea 6 Pd weight. He frightened us a little by whistling under the Parlour Window just as we were going to bed."[64] The Hon. East India Company rose above such inconveniences and succeeded in gaining the greatest part of the tea trade, tea that sold primarily to the English. By the end of the 18th century, drinking coffee instead of tea was well nigh unpatriotic.

Coffee held the position of England's favorite (non-alcoholic) drink for one brief, important century. The penny philosophers of coffeehouses included such figures as both Samuel Johnson and Samuel Pepys, and, during the first and only non-monarchical period in English history, a place to sit and talk politics was more than just a luxury, it was a societal necessity. Historian John Brewer put words to the great importance of coffeehouses to English culture during the Interregnum and

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[ix] The Honorable East India Company was chartered in 1660, and is not to be confused with the earlier East India Company of 1600.

Restoration, explaining that these establishments:

> undermined the hierarchical values of monarchical absolutism centered on the court: they encouraged a polyphony of public conversations which challenged the voice of the crown, trying to assert its monopoly over opinion and taste, and they usurped the prerogative of the prince by debating politics, religion and literature.[65]

Coffeehouses made it possible for people to meet and interact in a way they never had before, and they fostered grass-roots politics in a culture that had never suspected such a thing existed. Had the monarchy had its way, such places never *would* have existed, and by the middle of the 18th century, governmentally approved tea had erased counter-culture coffeehouses as a social institution. In its place, tea held little but the empty calories of added sugar, liquid energy to fuel the upcoming industrial revolution. Coffee cannot, however, be viewed in an entirely favorable light, however egalitarian its domestic politics may have been. Across the oceans its cultivation was no less brutal than that of tea, and when Saint Pierre lamented the depopulation of the African continent and the plantationing of the American one, coffee, not tea, was the sugared luxury he held in doubt.

Potatoes

In 1797, in a treaties concerned with feeding England's poor, Sir Frederick Morton Eden made the claim that:

> Potatoes are perhaps as strong an instance of the extension of human enjoyment as can be mentioned; and progress which various districts have made in the cultivation of the valuable root... [suggests] that in the course of a very few years, the consumption of potatoes in this Kingdom will be almost as general and universal as that of corn.[66]

Strong words of praise for a praiseworthy vegetable, but the date is definitely of note: he also observed that this fact was something that "the Naturalists of Queen Anne's time would probably have been astonished to hear." Queen Anne ruled England from 1655 until 1714, fewer than a hundred years before Eden was writing. Potatoes first came to England during her reign, but they were by no means an immediate hit. They had much more success across the Irish Sea, where they became the primary – if not the only – dietary staple. By the 1800s the Irish so depended on potatoes that when blight struck their fields in the middle of the century thousands of people were forced to sail for America or starve. Over time the English working classes would come to rely heavily on potatoes as well, but never to the same extent as their impoverished cousins. In England, potatoes occupied a place in the diet of the poor alongside tea and sugar, two other imports, and the desire for these two costly items was much of the reason for the dependence upon the cheaper one.

Potatoes originated in the Andes mountain range of Central America, where Inca and Aztec civilizations had long cultivated them. Spanish conquistadors encountered the tubers there and returned with them to Europe. Potatoes store well,

and the Spanish likely used them as ships' rations before they made it back home. Once in Spain, potato cultivation probably began by 1570, and the Italians picked it up not long after.

This much of the potato's history is clear, but information on how the root made it to England is strangely lacking. At the time, most people credited Sir Francis Drake with popularizing the vegetable in Great Britain and continental Europe, believing that he had brought it back with him from Virginia. This theory was so widespread that the Germans put up a statue of the navigator at Offenburg,depicting him holding a flowering potato plant, with inscriptions attributing its cultivation to him.[67, .x] Drake probably did bring potatoes home to England from one of his voyages (though he may not have been the first to do so) but if he did he brought them from Colombia. The confusion is due to a stop, on the same voyage, at the Virginia colony to pick up passengers on his way back from South America. Still, *Solanum tuberosum*, the roots we call potatoes, were for a long time called Virginia Potatoes in England, to distinguish them from Sweet Potatoes. The “potatoes,” which another theory credits Sir Walter Raleigh with having brought to Europe were likely of this variety, which were said to have been grown early on in the gardens of his properties in Youghal, in Ireland.[68]

There is even less solid information available about the potato's arrival in Ireland. Raleigh is credited with bringing the root there as well, but some of the other theories are much more far fetched. For instance, one conjecture holds that the Irish plundered the vegetables from the stores of a Spanish Armada ship that had wrecked

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[x] It stayed there until the Nazis tore it down during World War II.

off the Irish coast. Another hypothesis featuring the Spanish derelict posits that perhaps the tubers floated ashore and took root, and Irish peasants found them growing on the beaches. However the potato got to Ireland, the inhabitants recognized a good thing when they saw one: the English had barely gotten around to tasting potatoes when, in 1657, soldiers returned home to England to report entire fields of them growing in Ireland.[69]

The English first began cultivating potatoes in the north of the island, the part of the country closest to Ireland. Farmers in Lancashire and other northern counties began to grow them in the later half of the 17th century, realizing, as the Irish had before them, how useful a crop they made. Wheat is nearly impossible to grow in the wet earth of the north, and even such standbys as barley and rye prove troublesome. The only cereal that can be reliably cultivated there is oats, and with tough consistency and low gluten contents, oats are not very tasty. They produce a hard, barely-risen bread that cannot be formed into loaves and must instead be baked in small cakes. They do make thick, hearty oatmeal porridge, but it must grow tiresome to eat porridge for several meals a day. Potatoes not only provided a welcome respite to such dietary blandness, but they also grew even better than oats in Lancashire's wet soil.[70]

The Lancastrians took to potatoes quickly and totally. Their method of farming suited the crop as well as their ground: farming in the region was mostly in the hands of small land holders. Potatoes, unlike wheat and other cereals, grow well and productively over small areas. By 1700 references to “lobscouse,” began to

appear – a hash of potatoes, onions and a little meat that was already becoming traditional to the region. The sailors of the Lancashire ports particularly enjoyed the dish, so much so that they earned the nickname “lobscousers.” These sailors turned potatoes into England's first major export, sending shipments as far as Gibraltar, but mostly helping allay the ever-increasing demand for the vegetable just across the way, in Ireland.[71]

From Lancashire, cultivation of potatoes spread slowly south through England. It took a very long time for early biases against them to die, however, and they were originally accepted only as fodder for livestock. In years of lean wheat and cereal harvests, the English discovered that flour could be made from potatoes as well grains. Once people had accepted the root as a possible stopgap for wheat, they did not have to leap far to think it a vegetable that might be pleasant and nutritious to eat on its own. With every poor yield of cereals potatoes became more popular, and although they were originally only cultivated in gardens they soon became a field crop. Once their place in the diet had been established, they virtually never saw a decline in popularity, and what was at first thought of as a strange, foreign, likely poisonous and certainly useless plant became a staple in the English diet.

Although there are many ways to cook potatoes that will turn out a very delicious dish, the method of cooking them during their early English history was more or less set: until the beginning of the 19th century the vast majority of potatoes served in England were boiled. The English dished up their boiled potatoes with butter, salt and pepper or with gravies or ketchups. They served boiled potatoes with

roasted meat, and by the beginning of the 18th century this combination was beginning to become an English culinary standby. Particularly clever cooks had even begun placing their boiled potatoes under the meat as it roasted to catch and soak up all of the delicious, satisfying fats and juices.[72]

As English cooks became more comfortable with the new vegetable, they began branching out into new methods of preparation, some of which did not include any boiling whatsoever. The 1744 cookbook *Adam's Luxury and Eve's Cookery* lists recipes for pork broths thickened with mashed potatoes, potato based stuffings, potato sausages, potato cakes, puddings and fritters, potatoes baked with herrings or stewed with mutton, and simple fried potatoes. Potatoes fried in a pan on their own or with onions had become a particularly popular concoction. The most famous and quintessentially English preparation deep-fried chipped potatoes did not make its way over from France until 1870, when they were immediately and everlastingly paired with pieces of fried fish.[73]

The English enjoyed their potatoes in a variety of ways, which suits the versatile nature of the vegetable. The roots of this enjoyment, sadly, lie not in an innate appreciation for potatoes themselves, but in necessity, and as with tea's rise to popularity, in the societal changes of the Industrial Revolution. In the 18th century industry was demanding more and more manpower, leaving less and less available for agriculture. There were too few workers in the fields to produce enough wheat to feed the workers in the factories, and hardier, more readily available cereals would no longer do. Arthur Young noted in 1767 that “Rye and barley bread, at present, are

looked on with a sort of horror even by poor cottagers, and with some excuse, for wheat is now as cheap as rye and barley were in former times."[74] White bread had once been a sign of affluence, which is likely what attracted the lower classes to it in the first place, and it had been available to them for much of the 17th and 18th centuries due to the low cost of wheat. As the numbers of agricultural workers producing it declined, however, prices began to rise again. But the working class would not return to brown bread anymore than they would buy raw sugar when they could, even by stretching, afford purer stuff; across the board the English preferred paler, more processed and more expensive foods to their darker, cheaper (and generally more nutritious) counterparts. Bread made of rye and barley did not taste as good, and perhaps it reminded the working classes of the coarse bread of their ancestors. For as long as they could they continued to buy expensive white bread, even when doing so meant that they could afford to eat little else. At the end of the 18th century, though, many were forced to change this pattern. The war with the rebelling American colonies made the grain shortage even more urgent than it had been previously. Workers at that time had access to only about two thirds as much wheat as had been available to them at the beginning of the century, and the gap in nutrition had to be filled some how.[75] Potatoes were common all over the island, they were cheap, nutritious, easy to grow and easy to store, but the working class resented them, as I think people will always resent food they are forced to eat by necessity. Potatoes were linked with the Irish, of whom the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, the originator of the "you are what you eat" concept, said: "You [Irish]

cannot conquer, for your sustenance can only arouse a paralysing despair not a fiery enthusiasm. And only enthusiasm will be able to fight off the giant [the English] in whose veins flow the rich, powerful, deed-producing blood [roast beef]."[76] The Irish had been stigmatized as thoroughly as they had been colonized by their English neighbors. The working classes obviously could not get the roast beef by which Feuerbach characterized their nation, but it stung them to eat the same diet as those they had conquered. But in times of extreme dearth, the working poor were faced with three options: brown bread, potatoes, or starvation. Brown bread was no longer conceivable, and even eating like the Irish was preferable to not eating at all.

England entered the 16th century only barely settled as a nation, after bloody years of plague and civil war. As soon as they were done fighting within their borders, the Englishmen began to look beyond them, and entered the Age of Exploration only a little ways behind the rest of Europe. In their quest for wealth and glory, the gentlemen not only perpetrated vast injustices on the peoples of the lands to which they sailed, but also began more than ever to tread upon and abuse their working poor at home. These laborers lived on potatoes and sugar-sweetened tea, three imports. The bulk of calories came from a vegetable that grew and nourished so efficiently that they were forced to accept it. The rest they took in a drink that cost enough to put much of their wages back into the pockets of the rich, while at the same time making them better workers. Coffee became a thing of the past or the eccentric, because coffeehouses gathered a clientele likely to spread slanderous rumors to the

effect that the His Majesty's Government might not be perfect. At the end of the period, the rich – the gentry and the merchants – were richer and the poor – the agricultural and industrial laborers – poorer than they had ever been before. Large-scale trade interests like the Honorable East India company had succeeded in nearly all of their goals, from transplanting slaves from Africa to supplanting coffee with tea, and the English Empire spanned the globe. England became more and more industrialized, the classes grew further and further apart, and in the next few centuries the new, extreme stratification would have a huge impact on how society functioned and thought, and, of course, how it ate.

Chapter 3
The Victorian Food Crisis and Wartime Nutrition

By what criteria can you look at a culture's food and judge it to be bad? The question has lurked in the back of my mind since the beginning of this project, which is, in the end, an attempt to discover whether or not the food of the English culture is as bad as people often say it is. If you choose as your criteria great attention to subtle, exciting flavor and sublime texture, without distraction by fashion or politics, the food of the Victorian era does not come out looking very good. In fact, if you ignore these things entirely and look instead at the society's efforts to provide nutritious meals, and to feed all of its members, the period still looks bad. But although this last area of my research includes some of the lowest depths to which I have seen English food sink, it should be stated that nobody was *trying* to sabotage cuisine. There were other standards in place during that era, which did place value on fashion, and moreover, many of the worst sins stemmed from a simple lack of good information, and many more had good intentions at heart.

The word 'gastronome' cannot be applied to many people who lived in England in the 19th century, and it must have been an unhappy time for those few who received the epithet. One of them was a man named Thomas Walker, whose expression of his feelings about English dining gives a good indication of the state of meal taking at the time:

> The legitimate objects of dinner are to refresh the body, please the palate, and to raise the social humour to the highest point. But these objects, so far from being studied, in general are not even thought of,

and display and adherence to fashion are their meagre substitutes.[77]

It is a damning statement. Walker is complaining – and who would know better than he? – that society has abandoned all of the same standards of food that I came to in my research. Bodily sustenance, delicious flavor and even good conversation have been abandoned in favor of keeping up appearances, and the perpetrators were the bourgeoisie. The middle classes that had taken root at the end of the medieval period had by the Victorian era become the dominant force in the social machinery of the day. Urban life necessitated many more types of jobs, many more levels of organization, and those who owned one shop or several, who published the newspaper, indeed who wrote for the newspaper (but not those who sold it on the corner) often made enough money to employ servants themselves. There were companies in which one could hope for promotion, and the social ladder had many more rungs than the three set out by the estates model of society. Social mobility became a real possibility of everyday life for the first time, and within the middle classes, everybody sought to climb to the next step up. This desire for upward social motion explains Walker's complaint that dinner has been sacrificed to “display and adherence to fashion.” Making sure to serve fashionable dishes, dishes that allowed one to show off one's wealth, claimed a far greater share of the effort put into meals than ensuring that these dishes were actually palatable.

Why didn’t more people say something about it? I did run across an explanation of this tendency towards suffering gastronomical indignities in silence, in an 1826 note about society in Sir E. Bulwer-Lytton’s book *Pelham*:

> The distinguishing trait of people accustomed to good society, is calm, imperturbable quiet... they eat in quiet, move in quiet, live in quiet, and lose their wife, or even their money, in quiet.[78]

I doubt there were then (or are now, for that matter) many people who would have wanted to be thought of as unaccustomed to good society. If silence was the mark of the upper classes, who did not talk about such things as heartbreak, bankruptcy or dinner, then attempted silence on such subjects would be the mark of those that emulated them. What did, or did not, make for poor breeding seems to have been common knowledge, but I think the more pertinent point is that what did or did not make for good food was not. As we shall see later, children's feeding during the Victorian period was some of the worst of all, and it seems very likely to me that many people simply did not know what they were missing. If dinner is always dull, why bother mentioning it?

Merely keeping silent about lousy food does not make the stuff inferior; the era's food did not astonish palates in the first place. And while it is easy to blame all of the shortcomings of the Victorian era on its *nouveau riche* middle class, in a period so devoted to social climbing it seems likely that they were just doing their best to mimic the aristocracy. What they saw when they looked to those above them was a movement away from the cooking of the Englishman and towards the cooking of the Frenchman. They did not make this move entirely spontaneously, however. A gory circumstance lay behind the shift.

The French Revolution of the end of the 18th century had a surprising effect on the food of France's neighbor across the channel. In her lovely essay *Set Piece for a*

Fishing Party, M.F.K. Fisher touches on the effects that the French revolution had on the kitchens of its own country, after "great chefs had scuttled to safety with their masters."[79] Madam Guillotine prevented many of the aristocrats who employed them from taking the same flight, so the chefs had to go it alone. These masters often ended up in England, employed by the aristocracy there, who discovered that their new employees really knew their business. French chefs became valuable social assets in England, and the many of English finally believed what the French had been telling them all along: that French food was far superior to their own.

The cuisine brought to the uppermost level of society by these highly trained chefs from across the channel, capturing English palates and their pocketbooks alike, was probably truly delicious. But the aristocracy made up some 2% of the English population, and the effect that the Gallic invasion had on the rest of society was not so tasty. The middle classes, of course, did not generally employ expensive French chefs. In fact the class had expanded so rapidly that the number of cooking positions they made available significantly exceeded the pool of trained cooks, so it seems likely that many of those they employed as cooks (mostly women) were not trained to the position at all. Instead of classically trained French chefs preparing their food, the middle class had to make do with fancy French names for their food. In the beginning of the 19th century began the trend towards writing menus, no matter what the type of food, in French.[80]

This trend towards fashionable appearance affected the pacing of dinners as well as the writing of menus. Throughout the 18th and into the beginning of the 19th

centuries, the mode of dining for dinner parties in England was called "*à la Française*"– in the way of the French. In this mode of dining, servants brought all of the platters containing the offerings for the first course of the meal to the table at the same time. Diners served themselves and each other from the dishes, with the men, in a spirit of chivalry handed down all the way from the Normans, helping the ladies first. Large roasted or boiled joints of meat or whole birds were carved by the host at the table, and carving was one of the accomplishments required of men in polite society. When the host decided that the guests had done with a course, he signaled the servants, who removed that course and brought out the next in the same manner as they had the previous. Each meal had at least three and as many as seven (or more) courses, so this performance would be repeated several times throughout the meal; first the soup course, then the fish course, then at least one meat course, and of course desert, would all be ceremoniously brought in, and later removed again.[81]

In the second half of the 19th century, a new, even more fashionable style of dining began to replace *à la Française.* Now candelabras and flower arrangements sat on the table in place of platters of food. Servants brought the courses in ready-plated, and the butler carved large roasts from the sideboard (if the host carved the roast, the meal might be called *demi-russe*). Each place was set with numerous utensils and wineglasses, and a good host proved a different wine to accompany each course. This new style of eating was called dining "*à la Russe*" – "in the way of the Russians." In her essay on the subject, Valerie Mars sates that:

> There were a set of rules to be followed from arrival to departure that could have only slight variations... The whole structure of *à la Russe*

> dining imposed a formal etiquette that overtly divided those who knew how to dine from the rest.[82]

The entire mode of eating was based around the fashion of the thing, about who knew the rules and who, for lack of breeding or education, did not. And only those who knew their part flawlessly had a hope of being accepted into society's upper echelons.

Much of the Victorian middle class, somewhat paradoxically, managed to take great care to be economical in their food at the same time as they placed such great emphasis on appearances and entertaining. In fact, given the vast expense of these dinners it seems a family might eat leftovers and sausages for a week in order to afford to put one on. Perhaps it was *because* of the necessity of entertaining that they took such care with their pennies. One way or the other, this tendency encouraged the production of food that appeared to be expensive without actually costing much. The emphasis here is on 'appeared': the dish did not actually have to taste like what it imitated, it simply had to *look* a bit like it. Mock Turtle Soup made with a lamb's head was by far the most celebrated, and Mrs. Isabella Beeton gives a recipe for this dish in her wildly popular 1861 cookery book *The Book of Household Management*. Other cookbooks of the era included recipes for imitation crab and lobster salads made with ingredients such as Cheshire cheese and chicken for the first and boiled potatoes and beets for the second.[83] It doesn't seem to have been thought necessary to include any fish in these imitation seafood dishes, so long as they were colored a bit like cooked lobster meat or served upon a crab's shell.

The cooks who prepared these depressing dishes were paid little and trained less, and were eager to make use of all of the tools at hand; and by the mid-1800s a

wide range of new and very useful tools began to emerge. Packaged convenience foods had become commonplace by the last quarter of the century. Sweetened condensed milk and dehydrated, powdered milk, the first products of this kind, had been available since 1855, and they were followed by a multitude of tinned, bottled and powdered conveniences. Cooks could depend on custard mixes and blancmange mixes made of gelatin and powdered milk and egg. Soup mixes and gravy mixes came in packets, and dried vegetables could be bought in bulk. Everything from beans to tripe to cherries to asparagus came in cans, and sauces and pickles came in bottles all ready to use. Canned and packaged foods achieved almost immediate popularity with all levels of society that could afford them, and those who could not afford the more expensive canned fruits purchased and soon relied on cheaper canned goods, especially the first and cheapest canned good of them all, sticky, saccharine tinned milk.[84]

Mass-produced food products in the hands of cooks must have done a certain amount of damage to the quality of eating, but ill-informed opinions held by their mistresses made things much worse. Mrs. Beeton states that "As vegetables eaten in a raw state are apt to ferment on the stomach, and as they have very little stimulative power upon that organ, they are usually dressed with some condiments..."[85] The quotation comes from her section dealing with Salads, which take a very small place in her already diminutive chapter on vegetables, most of which she advocates stewing or boiling. For very young green peas, she suggests boiling for 10 to 15 minutes, which may not seem long, but think of it like this: during my summer at the

apartment, I cooked peas fairly often, and I always blanched them for only a minute or two before shocking them in cold water to stop the cooking. Boiling for quarter of an hour seems like murder to me, and it is fair to assume, given the danger of "fermentation" associated with raw vegetables, that an inexperienced cook would err on the side of longer boiling. Indeed, the tendency to boil vegetables for long periods of time often left them stripped of their nutritive value, leading to vitamin deficiencies that would not be discovered or corrected until government control of food during the two World Wars.

Cooking vegetables until they were lifeless, nonthreatening watery masses was a symptom of a larger set of beliefs held by many in the Victorian Era. In his history *British Food*, Colin Spencer laments that "a fear of the untamed, the raw, the hearty and the vulgar caused dishes to be bland and overrefined..."[86] The discomfort with raw food was part of the same twisting discomfort that made it social suicide for a woman to show an ankle or go uncorsetted, which I believe was not only a reaction to the lax social standards of the Restoration, but a reaction to the quickly expanding English Empire. As the English conquered more and more land in Africa, India, China, and the Caribbean, there seems to have been a tendency to define themselves against what they were not. Many viewed English as a race of evolutionarily superior to those dark-skinned peoples whose homes they had claimed, and considered themselves to be moral and religious saviors to those people who did not understand the crime of their own near-nakedness. Those people seemed as fleshly as moralist Victorians were not, and it seems to me that the reason the one group wasn't has

everything to do with the fact that other group *was*.

There was another class of people about whom Victorian society was very worried: their children. Innocence and childhood did not, to religious Victorians, go hand and hand. Those with religious zeal believed in the doctrine of Original Sin, which is a part of all people but which children are not yet equipped to resist. Physical luxury or pleasure opened an avenue for sin and indulgence in children, and so ought to be avoided at all costs. Dr. Pye Henry Chavasse, in his best-selling book on child care *Advice to a Mother on the Management of her Children*, asserts that one should never give cakes or confections to children, saying "I consider them so much slow poison. Such things cloy and weaken the stomach and thereby take away from the appetite and thus debilitate the frame" and that "If the child is never allowed to eat such things, he will consider dry bread a luxury."[87] He states that lunch is unnecessary for children, and that if they are hungry between breakfast and dinner, they should be given "a piece of dry bread." For dinner itself, he explains that "[the child] should now have meat, either mutton or beef, daily, which must be cut up very small, and should be mixed with mealy, mashed potato and gravy."[88] He does not mention vegetables here, and when he does, he suggests that potatoes (which of course function as a carbohydrate) are the best vegetable to serve to children.

Dr. Chavasse shows the propensity for Theories regarding the feeding of children, which were often tied in not only to beliefs about health, but also to morality and race distinctions as well. Gwen Raverat, in her charming memoir *Period Piece*, records with great wit the effects of Theories on the feeding of herself and her

siblings during her late Victorian childhood:

> The Theory that Beef was Bad and Mutton was Good [*sic*] died harder; though even my mother's 'muttonic habits' passed off in time; and the Theory that Gingerbread Pudding gave you cancer caused us very little trouble, as we did not much like Gingerbread Pudding. But there was a permanent ban on brown sugar, because it was made by negroes, who were dirty.[89]

Many Victorian children grew up on theories, some relatively harmless as the idea that a specific pudding might be carcinogenic, and ought be avoided, some as upsetting (and misguided) as the idea that brown sugar was unclean because of the unclean people who produced it. Of course, all sugar was produced by dark-skinned slaves, no matter how shiny white it eventually became, but I suppose that was not widely known. I suppose – and I very much want to believe – the austere and uninteresting food of the nursery was enforced by zealous parents who loved their children and sought to keep them out of the way of both harmful substances and sinful notions. It may be true that the emphasis on dry bread and the lack of emphasis on vegetables left children with vitamin deficiencies and stunted growth, but it was all in a spirit of caring. However, when children outgrew the nursury they could expect to be fed no better, and love was most certainly not the underlying force behind the horrors of school food.

The meals served by Victorian public schools achieved nightmare status, and school food would retain this pedigree for a very long time.[xi] Harold Acton, in his

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[xi] Remember that "Public School," to the British, means the same thing that "Private School" means to Americans: one pays a tuition to attend, and most of these schools board some or all of their students. What Americans call "Public School" the British call "State School," and there are fewer horrified reminiscences about the food at these institutions, likely because students did not board there and so were not forced to eat what they provided. I'm sure their school lunches are just as bad

book *Memoirs of an Aesthete*, recalls his experience at Lawnwood towards the end of the first World War.

> During this phase of the war one could not expect good food, but the food at Lawnwood was so unpalatable that I smuggled as much of it as possible into my handkerchief and threw it down the lavatory later. Goaded by my repulsion for the hair brawn and knobbly porridge... I whisked whole platefuls into my pocket without being detected. The blotched oily margarine that accompanied our meals flavored my entire stay at this institution.[90]

Acton, a self-described aesthete, had the good sense to get rid of such foods, but I am sure that most growing English boys did not. Given that English public schools placed a great deal of emphasis on success at games, the growing young men who attended them were probably hungry enough to eat whatever was put in front of them, and so grew up on diets greasy, bland, and devoid of vitamins. When they became bankers and publishers out in the world, they would have no particular desire for meals cooked lightly or seasoned delicately, having never been introduced to such things in the first place. A poorly fed child often, lamentably, grows up into an adult who only wants to eat bad food.

I suppose it might have been good fortune, in one sense, to develop a taste for bad food, as it was certainly the most available sort of provision in the late Victorian period. Not only had bland pre-packaged and tinned foods become widely available, but there was a proliferation of restaurants that served fare that looked and tasted similar, if not downright identical. In 1894, Joseph Lyons, with the backing of the Salmon & Gluckstein tobacco company and having already successfully catered several large exhibitions, opened a tea shop at 213 Picadilly. The interior resembled a

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as the ones I remember from my attendance at American public schools.

French café in the style of Louis XVI, but the food was cheap and unassuming. Lyons served cakes and fresh brewed tea, scones, toast, mutton pies, apple pies and pastries, and nothing on the menu cost as much as a shilling. Evidently people loved being able to eat familiar, comfortable, inexpensive foods while surrounded by an air of class with just a touch of opulence, for although J. Lyons & Co. was not the first chain of teashops in England, it was the fastest growing and most popular. By the end of the year two more shops had been opened, followed by twelve in the year after that. By 1900 there were thirty-seven Lyons teashops in London alone, as well as shops in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield, and its expansion continued to accelerate. On the heels of this success would come large Lyons establishments, including the famous and fancy Trocadero restaurant and the Lyons Corner Houses, which were multi-departmental eateries capable of seating thousands. These last were more like food-themed shopping malls, incorporating counters which sold flowers, dry tea and chocolates, and even hair salons.[91]

As classy as these establishments might have appeared, either the food they served declined quickly or it was never very good. Spencer describes the items on offer at the Lyons Corner Houses (the first of which opened in 1909) as:

> tinned sardines, anchovies and celery, hardboiled egg in mayonnaise, diced beetroot and sliced cucumber in malt vinegar, soused herring, potato salad, tomato salad, Russian salad, cole-slaw, sweet corn with diced red peppers (from a tin), cocktail onions, marinated mushrooms (also from a tin), slices of honeydew melon with dyed scarlet maraschino cherries, diced ham and gherkins.[92]

The list reads like looking at the salad bar of a particularly bad cafeteria. Items from tins, items dyed and items diced, and nothing that seems the slightest bit tasty or

interesting, except perhaps the diced beetroot and sliced cucumbers with vinegar. This list of unappetizing variety is just the hors d'oeuvres, and for a few extra pennies you could also get a course of soup and a mutton cutlet or roast beef, followed by ices or meringue, though I don't think that I would have wanted to.

The Lyons teashops and Corner Houses catered to the middle classes, but during this period cookshops catering to all classes began to pop into existence. By the 1870s the technology of chipping and frying potatoes, and the brilliance of pairing them with fried fish, had become well established in London. The Temperance Movement meant a rise in tea and coffee shops as alternatives to taverns, and while many industrial workers had been accustomed to taking their dinners at pubs, some of them made the switch to these less boozy options.[xii] By 1900 or so the industrial districts of London and other manufacturing towns were crammed with not only fish-and-chip shops (many of which also sold hot boiled peas, an accompaniment to fish and chips that has since dropped away in much of England) but also shops selling tripe and trotters, which came with bread and tea for a few extra pennies. These shops provided laborers with cheap, hot meals, although laborers would increasingly view the food they provided as not-quite-filling enough. It should be noted that the rule of menus written in French did not apply to these eateries, which catered to people too focused on getting through the week to care about social pretensions.[93]

The working man could expect a decent meal, including at least some meat, whether he ate at a cook shop or at home, which is somewhat surprising given that

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[xii] This makes good sense if you recall the way Medieval Britons used beer as liquid bread; although it was probably thinner, a pint of beer still contained some 200 calories, and made a valuable addition to a cheap meal.

industrial wages ran about a pound a week.[94] On this wage he had to support his wife, whom taboo prohibited from entering the work force outside of war-time or the necessity of starvation, and typically several children. There seems to be some magic at work, but the unfortunate truth was aptly explained by B. Seebohm Rowntree in his book *How the Labourer Lives: A Study of the Rural Labour Problem*:

> The women and children suffer from underfeeding to a much greater extent than the men. It is tacitly agreed that the man must have a certain minimum of food in order that he may be able to perform the muscular work demanded of him; and the provision of this minimum, in the case of families with small incomes, involves a degree of underfeeding for the women and children...[95]

Looked at in that light, the term "bread-winner" – which the OED tells me originated in 1821, this exact period – for the working man in the family takes on a terrible accuracy, for the meat the family purchased went entirely to him, and it was bread that he won to feed his family.[96] His wife and even the children might eat meat from a cheap joint bought on Sunday, but for the rest of the week the cold meat would furnish meals only for the husband, and the rest would make do on bread and potatoes and sweetened tea. Children, particularly, were fed upon white bread more than any other substance, which was a problem, because white bread during this period was worse than ever before. At best, these white loaves of bread were without the nutrition and fiber of bran and wheat germ, at worst they were full of adulterants such as chalk, ammonium carbonate, or even ground pipe clay or powdered bones, added by bakers to produce a whiter loaf.[97]

The poor had been accustomed to getting some animal protein from milk, but in the cities milk was often contaminated and more often soured by the jostling

transport from farm to town. It would seem, then, that the advent of tinned sweetened condensed milk, one of the new packaged goods cheap enough to be within reach of the working classes, would be a godsend. Unfortunately, before tinning the milk was skimmed of its fat, and with the fat went the vitamins A and D, some of the most important of milk's nutritional values for the working poor. Not only did this contribute to widespread rickets among the children brought up on condensed milk, but once opened, the sweet sticky milk attracted flies, which factored in to the epidemic gastritis and enteritis that caused astonishing infant mortality until the beginning of the first World War.[98]

During and after World War I, contrary to what might be expected, diet in England actually improved for most classes of society. Before the war there had been some hundred factory canteens in England, but due to government encouragement there were ten times that many by 1918. The earlier canteens were mostly in factories with largely female employees, and were essentially philanthropic in nature. These newer ones came into being as part of a campaign for national efficiency, as the government began to realize that a worker who has had proper nutrition is much more effective than one who has not. The Ministry of Munitions, acting as a sort of precursor to the Ministry of Food that would not be established until World War II, made it compulsory for all factories producing munitions to establish canteens. The new dining arenas typically sold meals to their workers at or near cost, prices well under a shilling. The Ministry recommended that the mid-day meals they provided supply 1,250 calories to men and 1,000 calories to women, about a third of what the

government understood to be their daily requirements.[99, xiii]

Not only did the wartime factory canteens help alleviate hunger in the working classes by giving the male workers cheap alternatives to eating at home, but, as is well known, wartime jobs allowed many more women to enter the work force. These women were mostly employed in factories that had the same sorts of canteens as those in which their husbands worked, so the extra money that two-parent employment provided could go even farther, as it didn't have to cover expensive lunches. The factory canteens of the first World War helped the urban working poor to far better nutrition than had been available to them before the war began, and for that class, at least, more than made up for the scarcity war inevitably brings with it.

The English government was slow to react to food shortages during World War One. At first, although there was some rationing, it was fairly limited and nutrition in general remained an improvement over the subsistence diets of the previous period. Sugar was the first food to be rationed, in 1916. Everything else went unmonitored, but that did not mean that all was well; there were shortages of many staples, and in the mid-war years women could be seen waiting in long lines outside of London shops for a chance to buy bread, margarine, meat or tea. In February of 1918, at the hight of the war, general rationing was finally put in place and the queues of women disappeared.[100]

The twenty-one years between the two World Wars were years of intense and rapid social change. The hyperfeminized, bustled and corseted woman's attire of the

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[xiii] I would wager that, especially for women, each of these meals supplied more calories than everything they had previously consumed in a day.

Victorian and Edwardian periods gave way to the short skirts and boyish silhouette of the 1920s. While in America the people were cheating Prohibition, a 1921 Licensing Act in England extended drinking hours to 11:00 PM, and even to 12:30 AM if a little food was served along with it.[101] A generation of flapper girls and dandy boys enjoyed these late, well-irrigated evenings; a generation that scorned Victorian sentimentalities and Victorian attire alike. Unfortunately, social change and widespread government involvement do not go together well, and the projects that had led to the factory canteens that by 1918 served a million meals a day just dropped away.[102] By the beginning of the 1930s England, following America and in company with the rest of the world, was struck by the Great Depression. Streets were once again marked by long lines of waiting people, this time outside of Labour Exchanges. The government had cut the programs that alleviated the widespread hunger, and among the working classes diet and nutrition sank down below even pre-war levels.

After the success of the factory canteens in the previous war, the British government was convinced from the beginning of the Second World War that food and food control were necessary for victory. They had set up a Food Defense Plans Department by 1936, and by 1939 a Minister of Food existed in place of the first war's Minster of Food Control. The ministry rationed food in the interest of making sure that everyone got their fair share, but it also went a step farther than that, and hired nutritionists to make sure that this evenly distributed food was meeting the body's requirements. The discovery came that it was not; the preference for white bread had left the English population deficient in vitamin B1, and the declining

quantities of whole milk in the diet had left them deficient in calcium and vitamins A and D. The ministry moved to avert this problem by adding these vitamins into margarine, butter's wartime cousin, and putting an end to bread making with white flour.[103]

The government did its best to make sure that the new knowledge of nutrition made it into every English mind. They printed propaganda posters with slogans not only along the lines of “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” but also “For Vitality: Eat Greens!” and “MILK: The Essential Food For Growing Children.”[104] Popular comedians, recruited to do radio ads, spread the message even farther, as did newsflashes in the cinema and even advertisements on food products themselves. These advertisements included information on cooking vegetables briefly to retain their nutrients, and on making use of the water in which they had been cooked to recapture what was lost anyway. A 1943 article in the popular magazine *Woman* hoped to see the dietary changes stay:

> Food discoveries that ought to stay long after there's no stringent need for them are our new habits of eating raw vegetables in salads, raw cabbage and raw carrot; our new wisdom in cooking vegetables so that all the goodness and health-giving qualities stay in; our wartime substitute for a glass of fruit juice is a glass of the water that the vegetables were cooked in...[105]

So much for the Victorian fear of the raw. The English population showed a remarkable ability, during the war, to adapt to a wartime diet, not only eating vegetables fresh, but eating meat tinned. Spam and other boneless canned meats, as well as dehydrated foods, became popular when their fresher counterparts became unobtainable.

Rationing during this period became so severe that it seems to me that going to the store to get one's shares was hardly worth it. Ham and bacon, butter and margarine, tea and cheese were all restricted to between one and four ounces per person per week. Sugar was rationed at 12 oz per week, with extra in the jam-making season.[106] If you wanted vegetables, you tore up your lawn or your flower garden and grew them yourself, for there were certainly none to be had at the store. During the war, the English population waxed creative in adjusting to the severe dietary restrictions. Women began asking for the portions of carcasses normally left out by the butcher, and in the country people went back to snaring game the way they had centuries before.[xiv] People made use of nuts and rose hips and nettles and did their best to keep up with societal conventions. Even restaurant chefs had to muddle along, and one recalls making "mayonnaise" from flour and water flavored with vinegar, mustard, and a little powdered egg.[107] It is depressing to know that there was ever a period when what was essentially flavored library paste could be sold to the public, in good conscience, as an item of food.

As disgusting as that particular example may be, this period of innovative culinary substitution and intense dietary restriction saw widespread improvements in British health. Rickets ceased to be epidemically disastrous and anemia decreased as well. Dental care improved and tooth decay became less common; by the end of the war children, given milk now from an early age, were growing stronger and taller than their fathers had. Yet the English population did not happily suffer the

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[xiv] Shooting, of course, depended on ammunition, all of which was going to the war effort. If there were spare cartridges it might be possible, but a bit of wire for a snare must certainly have been easier to come by.

governmental control of its diet, and as the war ended and rationing continued, disgruntlement rose. The Ministry of Food became less and less popular and less and less effective, and in 1954 it ceased to exist entirely.

The period before and between the two World Wars marks, in many ways, the nadir of quality in English food. Knowledge of nutrition came slowly and was hard won, and when fashion did not eclipse flavor, scarcity did. But in the wake of the Victorians a few people began to change their minds about what counted in a meal. A subculture grew up quietly alongside the flappers and the gin-joints, headed by cookbook writers including Florence White and Alice Martineau, but begun by an herbalist named Hilda Leyel. Mrs. Leyel devoted time to discovering the flavors of English cuisine that had been forgotten since before the Victorians. She rediscovered the spices and flavors of England's medieval cuisine, the same flavors which still flourished along the coast of the Mediterranean and in France. She opened her cookbook *The Gentle Art of Cookery*, published in 1925, with a quote from John Ruskin defining cookery:

> It means knowledge of all herbs and balms and spices, and all that is healing and sweet in the fields and groves, and savoury in meats. It means carefulness and inventiveness and willingness and readiness of appliances. It means the economy of your grandmothers and the science of the modern chemist...[108]

Elizabeth David, who published nine cookbooks in her lifetime (and 8 posthumously) and is widely considered the most influential English cookbook author of all time, acknowledged Mrs. Leyel as part of her inspiration in both cooking and writing about cooking. Had I read her before beginning this work, I believe she would have inspired

me to write it. Her choice of quotation set out the goals for a generation of English cooks who thought about their food, and even about other peoples' foods, and inspired them to invent, create, and taste. And when I have left my university and returned to my kitchen, her quotation will have set out my goals in cooking, as well.

Conclusion
Subtle Grace

Recently I stole a break from work to read a little bit in one of my favorite books, only to find that it was a part of my writing, after all. The book is called *Home Cooking*, a set of essays by fiction author and home-cook Laurie Colwin, and it includes a chapter called "English Food." I first read it years ago, but I had forgotten entirely about this essay until I picked up the book for a bit of relaxation last night. I suspect, though, given how dear *Home Cooking* is to me, that it has been lurking in the back of my head as I've been writing all along.

In it, Colwin writes about her own travels to England. She talks about reading the same English cookbook authoresses that I read for this, about her first experience with double cream and about her first trip to Harrods, where she found a stunning array of food. She explains her admiration of the often scoffed-at English cuisine, saying:

> In England you could get chicken that tasted like chicken, and gooseberries and tomatoes and those long pale green cucumbers with a silvery taste. In specialty shops there were raised pies: veal, ham and egg, chicken, and cottage pie. You could buy a bag of delicious cream cakes and eat them in the movies. You could even find a decent cup of coffee, although nothing compares to plain old English tea.[109]

She does make it sound good. In fact, she describes the sort of food I like best. Most of the time I don't want the elaborate fare of restaurants like Bouley – that is for special occasions only. At home, I like simple food with an emphasis on a few good ingredients that enhance one another, rather than canceling each other out. My body wants salads, especially with cucumber, in the summer, and solid, hearty, stick-to-

your-ribs food in the winter. I like coffee in the mornings and tea in the afternoon, and she seems to be telling me that England can do all of that, and do it well.

I want this excellent description to sum up the developments in English cuisine in the years beyond the end of my research. I want it to be true of today, but of course she didn't have this revelation this year, or last. Colwin published *Home Cooking* in 1988, when she was already a married woman with a growing daughter, looking back on her trips to England as a college student. She talks in another essay of making sandwiches for her fellow students during their occupation of the President's Office and other campus buildings at Columbia University in 1968, so her English visits must have been in the sixties or, at latest, early seventies.

It would be very hard to describe the English food of my own period, the first few decades of the 21st century. It cannot be studied the way I have studied food in history: there is too much outside influence, too much constant communication and exchange of information. Social classes have ceased entirely to be rigid or stratified, and living situations are so individuated that it seems each person or family is a class in itself. English food today, like American food, is Chinese and Italian and Indian and French and Thai and Cuban and Senegalese. The world is becoming the much-touted global village, and for better or for worse, it makes it hard to find an unadulterated culture.

Yet the greatest thing my research has shown me is that England has never been a unified and unaffected land. From the very beginning there has never been one England. First there were the *Angelcynn* and the Normans, but when they came

together and the country was racially unified, it split regionally and socially into the 'Lobscousers' in Lancashire and the ladies in London. At no point did everyone in England eat the same kind of food, or live in the same kind of house, or wear the same kind of clothes.

The consistent, ancient disparity of the English people does not mean that no parallels can be drawn about their food or that I can come to no conclusions. To be sure, over the years the English have eaten everything from mince meat baked in jugs to fake crab salad made with cheese, but there are some similarities over the ages in how they interact with food. The English have, again and again, reverted to seeing food not as an art, they way the French surely view it, on par with ballet or painting, but as a craft more like carpentry or even midwifery. There have been periods when this was not the case; the Normans certainly put more ceremony into their dishes, but at heart, they were really still French. French influence also explains the Victorian flights of fancy – and even then the English did not really seem to have their heart in it. But the *Angelcynn* peasant and the World War II housewife and the men who frequented London's coffeehouses all seem to me to have favored things that were good and solid and simple, from pottage to vegetable broth to a cup of coffee, the paper and a fire. It is my guess that this preference remains with many Englishmen (and women) today.

In truth, I have been to England more recently than Mrs. Colwin, and I wish that meant that I could back up my suspicions with observation. Sadly, that is not the case. I was eight years old at the time, with my family, and too young to remember

anything but lions in Trafalgar Square and the peacock whose raucous screaming woke me up in the morning at our Yorkshire bed and breakfast. I remember the bed, but not the breakfast.

I do have one clear memory of eating from my trip to England, and it, as well, is from Yorkshire. There was a short cut we could take that let us walk to the closest pub, instead of driving, and as it was summer, we took it. I have no recollection of the pub itself, but the shortcut took us along the edge of some Yorkshire farmer's pea field. The plants were taller than I was – in my memory they are taller than my father – and the pea pods as long as my hand. They were ripe and beautiful and we figured he wouldn't miss just a few. I could not guess the variety of pea, but we ate them straight standing by the vines we stole them from, and they tasted green and fresh and sweet when we popped them from their shells.

It is sort of fitting that the only food I can distinctly remember from my childhood trip to England is peas, because peas are one of the very few foods I would call traditionally English. I kept an absent eye out for any traditions that wended all the way back to the beginning of my research, looking for those things that people just always ate. Peas had a place in the English diet from the earliest period, and mushy peas still feature with fish and chips, especially in the north. The only other two foods that struck me as English, and particularly English, are gingerbread and ale. Cheese could be counted, but cheese has been made all over the world since the beginning of time, as have bread and butter. Beer could be considered, but it was really a German innovation, whereas ale is peculiarly English. Fish and chips and tea

and scones have roots that go no further back than the 17th century, but peas and ale and gingerbread have been with England since before the crusades, and to me, that makes them the most English foods of all.

I like peas and gingerbread and ale, and I like them even better because I know that they are quintessentially English. Having read so much about the England, and all of the wrongs Englishmen perpetrated on their own people and on the rest of the world, I still love them. I am often disgusted by and angry at them, but that never quelled my interest, never made me want to stop reading. The anxiousness to know more about these people, and especially more about what they had for breakfast, dinner and lunch has not abated, and that thirst for information is what I call my Anglophilia. And I think that it might not be so hard to be both an Anglophile and a foodie. After all, I don't have to eat a dish to find it interesting, and food need not be artful to be delicious; that is illustrated quite clearly by these three traditional English foods. Peas and gingerbread and ale embody the simplicity that is the core of English food at its best. Part of me considers that perhaps this quality of their food has to do with the fact that the English always seemed to have something else on their minds, from industrializing a nation to expanding and controlling an empire, but a quotation I came across has led me to another thought.

In his 1988 novel *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese immigrant to England, wrote of the English landscape:

> ... it is the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, the sense of restraint. It is as though the land knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to shout it.[110]

Ishiguro's character, the English butler Stevens, makes this observation in the course of justifying the “Great” in Great Britain, and he scorns the flashier landscapes of Africa and America. Greatness, to him, is a subdued thing, that need not boldly adorn itself to show its nature. We should not paint either Stevens or England in glowing terms; the butler is at heart simply restating one of the many myths of England, the myth of its quietness. But many artists and poets, and perhaps the English themselves, embrace this myth, and why not? The greatness of English food is the same; it may be obscured by mishandling at times, or by brief trends of fashion, much as the English landscape can be obscured by clouds, but its value, at heart, lies in its artlessness. There is something endlessly comforting about the simple, nurturing nature of English food. On a Saturday night, when we are lively and ready for an adventure, let us go to fancy restaurants and eat many delicate, complicated courses. But on a cold, wet, Thursday afternoon, when we are fraying at the edges and in need of care, let us have gingerbread and tea.

Ishiguro's description of the English landscape, with its subtle greatness, brings to mind the opening of Geoffrey of Monmouth's book from so many centuries before. Both men – the 12th century Welsh scholar and the 20th century Japanese immigrant – found much to love in England. That two such different men, in periods that bracket the country's history, could write such glowingly similar accounts illustrates how England has and has not changed. The land has never lost its grace and beauty, but as the the world connects point to point and becomes a global community, a variety of peoples who in earlier centuries would never have seen

England have been able to admire it. I hope, soon, that I will be one of them again. Writing this work has created a yearning in me to see it all for myself, to taste the honest flavors of England's food in the quiet grandeur of its landscape. I hope that reading it has created such a desire in you.

Notes

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[8] Spencer, 25.

[9] Ælfric of Eynsham and Ælfric Bata, *The Colloquy on the Occupations*, in Robert Hazenfratz and Thomas Jambeck, *Reading Old English: A Primer and First Reader* (West Virginia: West Virginia University Press, 2005), 419.

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[16] *Monasteriales Indicia*, quoted in Hazenfratz and Jambeck, 249.

[17] Quoted in Ann Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink*, 433.

[18] Hagen, 348.

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[20] Ælfric of Eynsham and Ælfric Bata, *The Colloquy on the Occupations*, in Hazenfratz and Jambeck, 428-429.

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[22] Hagen, 275-277.

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[24] Ælfric of Eynsham and Ælfric Bata, *The Colloquy on the Occupations*, in Hazenfratz and Jambeck, 395.

[25] Spencer, 38.

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[37] Peter Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, Ltd., 2005), 47-50.

Chapter 2

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[41] Ibid, 51.
[42] Ibid, 46.
[43] Wilson, 298, 292.
[44] Ibid, 298.
[45] Mintz, 43.
[46] Galloway, 16-17.
[47] Wilson, 298.
[48] Mintz, 22.
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[51] Ibid, 302.
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[53] William Finch, (1607) quoted in Antony Clayton, *London's Coffee Houses: A stimulating story* (London: Historical Publications, 2003), 7-8.
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[55] John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn, Esquire, F.R.S.*, ed. William Bray (London: William Clowes and Sons, Ltd., 1818), 7.
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[63] Laura Mason, "Everything Stops for Tea," in *Eating with the Victorians*, ed. C. Anne Wilson (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), 70.
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[79] M.F.K. Fisher, "Set Piece for a Fishing Party," in *The Measure of Her Powers: An M.F.K. Fisher Reader*, ed. Dominique Gioia (Washington: Counterpoint, 1999), 181.

[80] Valerie Mars, "*À La Russe*: The New Way of Dining" in *Eating with the Victorians*, 114.

[81] Peter Brears, "*À La Française*: The Waning of a Long Dining Tradition" in *Eating With The Victorians*, 86.

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[83] Spencer, 288.

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[85] Mrs. Isabella Beeton, "Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management," in *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* http://www.mrsbeeton.com/25-chapter25.html (accessed February 27, 2008).

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[87] Dr. Pye Henry Chavisse, "Advice to a Mother on the Management of her Children," in *Project Gutenberg* http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/dvmth10.txt (accessed February 27, 2008).

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[90] Harold Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), 67.

[91] John Burnett, *England Eats Out: A Social History of Eating Out in England from 1830 to the present* (New York: Pearson, 2004), 123-125.

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[93] Burnett, *England Eats Out*, pg. 44-47, 108-109.

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[95] B. Seebohm Rowntree and May Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives: a Study of the Rural Labour Problem* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1913; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 309.

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[100] Spencer, 302.
[101] Burnett, *England Eats Out*, 197.
[102] Ibid, 108 and Spencer, 302.
[103] Spencer, 314.
[104] Paul Vysny, "British Propaganda Posters of the Second World War," *University of St. Andrews, Scotland* http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pv/pv/courses/posters/posters6.html (accessed February 28, 2008).
[105] *Woman Magazine*, 1943, quoted in Colin Spencer, *British Food*, 315.
[106] Spencer, 316.
[107] Burnett, *England Eats Out*, 240.
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Conclusion

[109] Laurie Colwin, *Home Cooking* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 123.
[110] Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 28-29.

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