

Tudor Food

Rich Tudors ate vast amounts of meat. However they rarely ate vegetables. Rich people were not necessarily well fed because they ate too few vegetables. Poor people ate plenty of vegetables because they had no choice! Vegetables were cheap but meat was a luxury.

Tudor vegetables included cabbages, onions, cauliflower, cucumbers, leeks, lettuce, spinach and turnips. Early carrots were not orange. They were black, yellow, purple or white! Carrots were introduced into southern Europe about the 12th century. Orange carrots were grown by the 16th century and they first became popular in England during Queen Elizabeth I's reign. People ate the leaves of beetroot plants rather than the roots. Brussels sprouts and broccoli were grown in Europe in the 16th century but they were rare in England.

Common fruits were apples, strawberries, pears, plums, blackberries, melons, raspberries and lemons. Gooseberries were used as a medicine. The rich could afford exotic and very expensive fruits such as pomegranates, peaches, oranges and walnuts.

On certain days by law people had to eat fish instead of meat. At first this was for religious reasons but later in the 16th century it was to support the fishing industry. If you lived near the sea or a river you could eat fresh fish like herrings or mackerel. Otherwise you might have to rely on dried or salted fish.

Poor people lived on a dreary diet. In the morning they had bread and cheese and onions. They only had one cooked meal a day. They mixed grain with water and added vegetables and, if they could afford it, strips of meat. All classes ate bread but it varied in quality. Rich people's bread was made from fine white flour. Poor people ate coarse bread of barley or rye.

In the 16th century people thought fresh fruit was bad for you. They did eat fruit but usually after it was cooked and made into a tart or pie.

The Tudors were also fond of sweet foods if they could afford them. However in the 16th century sugar was very expensive so most people used honey to sweeten their food. The rich ate preserved fruit, gingerbread, sugared almonds and jelly. Marzipan was introduced into England in the late Middle Ages. It is a paste made of almonds and sugar. The Tudors used marzipan to make edible sculptures of animals, castles, trees and people called subtleties. People also ate simnel cakes. Simnel was originally the name of a fine flour.

At Christmas the Tudors enjoyed mince pies, but they had far more significance than today in that they had 13 ingredients to represent Jesus and the apostles, they contained fruit – raisins, currants, prunes – and spices – cloves, mace, black pepper, saffron – and also mutton to represent the shepherds. The fashion was for them to be shaped like a crib. The Tudors also had Christmas pudding but this was shaped like a sausage and contained meat, oatmeal and spices. Twelfth Night cake was fruitcake baked with an item included like a coin

or dried bean and whoever found it became King or Queen or host for the evening's entertainment.

Another dessert, syllabub was invented in the 16th century. Moreover Banbury cakes were first mentioned in 1586.

In the 16th century new foods were introduced from the Americas. Turkeys were introduced into England about 1525. Potatoes were brought to England in the 1580s but at first few English people ate them. Tomatoes were introduced from Mexico.

Rich people liked to show off their gold and silver plate. The middle classes would have dishes and bowls made of pewter. The poor made do with wooden plates and bowls. There were no forks in Tudor times. People ate with knives and their fingers or with spoons. Rich Tudors had silver or pewter spoons. The poor used wooden ones.

People in Tudor times made much of their own food. A farmer's wife cured bacon and salted meat to preserve it. She baked bread and brewed beer. She also made pickles and preserves and preserved vegetables. Many prosperous farms kept bees for honey.

In the 16th century it was not safe to drink water so for ordinary people drinking ale or beer was essential. Young children drank milk but only the poorest people drank water. Ale was still the main drink of ordinary people in the early 16th century but beer gradually became more common and by the end of the century it had replaced ale. In the 16th century housewives were expected to brew their own beer although it was also sold commercially. In the 16th century, beer was not just a drink it was also a food. It contained valuable nutrients. Cider and perry – pear cider – were common in certain parts of England in the 16th century. However in the 17th century cider making reached a peak. Wine was still the drink of the wealthy as it had to be imported. Wine was still imported from France and Germany but an increasing amount was imported from Spain and Portugal. Sweet wine was still imported from the Eastern Mediterranean. In the 16th century wine was often flavoured with spices. In 16th century England sherry, which was known as sack was also a popular drink. The origins of brandy are obscure but it was a popular drink by the 16th century.

A common misapprehension is that at Tudor feasts people threw bones on the floor for the dogs! In fact, they put bones in a dish called a voiding dish and it was considered very bad manners to allow a dog into a room when you were eating.