

S U C A S A ' S  
**Su** Cuisine

BY CATHY ROBBINS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIE DEAN



Clockwise from top left: Ingredients for a medieval feast, salmon tart, spices, and dried fruit tart and spiced wine

**Easier than they sound** and better than you might imagine, recipes from **King Richard II's kitchen** cook up a striking diversity of tastes, textures, and colors.

**A**nita Obermeier's reputation preceded her arrival at the University New Mexico last fall. Yes, she had a doctorate in medieval English literature. But the buzz at a reception welcoming new professors was about the medieval meal she had prepared for her students, colleagues, and visitors at her last two jobs, at UCLA and Arizona State. (The dean of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies had even asked Obermeier to cook for the center's opening reception.)

When would she cook for New Mexicans? That question was on scholars' and students' lips. Obermeier had barely settled into her new job when she sent out invitations. With cutting and slicing help from colleagues and students, she would cook for 40 or so guests. Her husband, Dave Buchholz, would watch their toddler Isabella and lend a hand on cooking day. She followed her usual procedure: Decide on the menu, make a plan that includes a half day of shopping and a full day for advance preparations, and finally, assign tasks to helpers.

The menu was daunting:

- Pumpkin Shrimp Soup
- Brie Tarts
- Faux Venison Stew
- Saffron Rice
- Salmon and Fruit Pie
- Mushroom and Leek Ragout
- Salad, Bread, and Herbed Butter
- Dried and Fresh Fruit
- Lenten Pie
- Pears in Sandalwood Sauce
- Ypocras (spiced wine)
- California Merlot and Chardonnay
- Sparkling Crisp Cider
- (Knudsen and Martinelli)

Though in ye olden days the king's or prince's kitchen would have employed an entire staff to prepare such a menu, Obermeier was sanguine, relaxed. She explained that virtually all the ingredients are available in supermarkets or specialty stores, and most of the dishes are similar to modern food (she would not, for instance, be serving a whole roast ox).

In fact, the dishes have some of the feel of the food she cooked and ate when she was growing up on her family's farm outside Munich. As a young girl, Obermeier was responsible for the Sunday meal, and some traditions had

not changed since medieval times. Vegetables and herbs came right out of the family's large garden, and the nearby forest was full of mushrooms and berries for picking. What appeared on the table depended on what was in season, and many ingredients were made from scratch. (Obermeier still makes her own herb vinegars.) Also, she is familiar with some medieval foods—stews, for instance—because they survive in German home cooking. A medieval recipe for cheesecake with elder flowers baked inside is not an oddity, because batter-fried elder flowers are still eaten in Germany.

The trick, says Obermeier, is to decode the language in the recipes. "Even if you find a recipe, it might not make a lot of sense," she says. In addition, you must be ready to use trial and error to get a dish from a manuscript to the modern table. Obermeier relies heavily on recipes in her tattered copy of *To the King's Taste*, which was written in 1390 at the request of King Richard II of England and adapted by medieval scholar Lorna Sass. The original recipe for Lenten tart says, "Take boiled calver salmon, codling or haddock and beat them small." That translates to "Take salmon, cod, haddock, or a mixture, and cut them into 1 1/2 inch pieces." The word "calver" may mean pickled or salted fish. Sass tried using pickled salmon and didn't like the results, so she just used fresh.

Although many ingredients are similar, preparation is very different. Without refrigeration, medieval cooks preserved meat with salt. Before cooking on the spit or in a stew, meat was boiled in wine or vinegar to draw out the salt. Also, the seasons—nature's cycles as well as the liturgical calendar—had great influence on what cooks prepared. Seafood was used more at Lent than at other times of the year, so a fruit pie became an entrée, when it was topped with chunks of fresh salmon.

Medieval food was "surprisingly fragrant and pungent," Obermeier says. Spices—very strong spices—were prized and expensive, and many, including peppercorns, were also valued for their digestive and other curative benefits. They came into Europe from Alexandria, Egypt, primarily through the Venetian spice trade with Arabs who kept their sources secret. Ginger was ubiquitous, although saffron was so expensive that it was used only occasionally. Cubeb—a berry that tastes like a cross between allspice and pepper—came from what is today Indonesia, and it is still rare, although Obermeier found some in Arizona. Because medieval people liked to mix sweet and sour tastes, vinegar and honey were also prized. Sugar, which was available from the Orient, was rare. To find unusual spices, Obermeier suggests haunting gourmet and specialty shops—she mentioned Ta-Lin, the Middle East Bakery, and India Kitchen in Albuquerque.

With their meals, medieval diners drank wines—which came mainly from Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain—ale, and juices. Like spices, wines were strong, so honey, herbs, or spices were added to cut the harshness. The fermentation process was not well known, and wine had to be consumed before it turned to vinegar, usually by summer, when medieval people turned to drinking ale. Ypocras was one of the more popular medieval blends of wine, fruit, and spices—a kind of mulled wine. The drink, which is served lukewarm, was named for Hippocrates, and apothecaries commonly prescribed it for ailments.

Medieval cooks considered themselves to be artists, Obermeier says. They dyed food—saffron was the color of royalty—and they shaped meat dishes. One recipe calls for a sculpture made of layers of dyed lard. Clearly, the dishes in contemporary cookbooks were for royalty and the rich. An extraordinary feast that



**Medieval scholar and chef Anita Obermeier**

Richard served in 1387 included 14 oxen, 50 swans, 210 geese, 100 dozen pigeons, 120 gallons of milk, 12 bushels of apples, and 11,000 eggs!

Finding out what commoners ate is more difficult, because they did not leave cookbooks. The account books of monasteries, however, suggest that ordinary people ate mostly grains and vegetables and little meat. One of the ingredients that separated the rich from the hoi poloi was flour. The rich consumed white, highly refined flour while commoners ate coarser grained, dark flour, which today we consider better, more healthful.

On cooking day, as Obermeier rotated pots around the burners of her conventional stove, she mused about cooking on a wood-burning stove back in Germany. It had no burners, simply a flat iron slab about four feet by six feet, and she could position pots anywhere. On this day she taped all the recipes for the meal on the refrigerator door, which

became a central reference point for Obermeier's assistants. By early afternoon, the kitchen was saturated with spicy scents. "The help is getting restless, hungry," someone called out.

As the guests plunged into the fragrant dishes that Obermeier had prepared, the diversity of tastes, textures, and colors was striking. Contrary to popular perceptions of the Middle Ages, trade was extensive and people traveled, on pilgrimages, for instance. "Every year, the trip to Rome was made," says Obermeier. The word she uses to describe medieval culture—and its cuisine—is "hybridity." Obermeier's guests ate with gusto, savoring each dish. Medieval people would have understood their pleasure, because for medieval Europeans, food went beyond mere sustenance. Food was good for you, curative—beets were known to cleanse the body, for instance. As Obermeier puts it, "You didn't eat purposelessly."

## RECIPES

Among the medieval cookbooks on Obermeier's shelf are *To the King's Taste*, which was written in 1390 at the request

of King Richard II of England, adapted for modern cooking by Lorna J. Sass, and published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and St. Martin's Press in 1975. This book is out of print, but used copies are available. Obermeier also recommends *From Saint Hildegard's Kitchen: Foods of Health, Foods of Joy*, by Jany Fournier-Rosset, Liguori Publications, 2001. Several medieval cookbooks are available at Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico.

### Lenten Tart

**6–8 servings**

**Two pie pastries, the top a bit larger than the bottom**

**2 T. butter**

**2 pears and 2 apples, peeled, cored, and thinly sliced**

**1 ½ lbs. salmon, cod, or haddock (or a mixture), cut into 1½-inch chunks, lightly salted and sprinkled with 2 T. lemon juice**

**3 T. damson or red currant jelly**

**1 T. milk to brush on the top pie crust**

*Combine in a bowl:*

**1 c. good white wine**

**2 T. lemon juice**

**2 T. brown sugar**

**5 cubebs,\* finely crushed**

**⅛ t. cloves**

**⅛ t. nutmeg**

**¼ t. cinnamon**

**½ c. raisins**

**10 prunes, minced**

**6 dried figs, minced**

**\*This Indonesian spice, a blend of black peppercorns and allspice, is available at Asian food stores.**

*Bake the pastry bottom for 10 minutes, then set it aside to cool. Melt butter in a large heavy skillet and toss the pear and apple slices in it until they are lightly coated. Add the combined ingredients to the mixture in the skillet. Cover and simmer for about 15 minutes until the fresh fruit is soft but firm. Check the seasoning and drain off the liquid.*

*Paint jelly on the pastry bottom. Combine the fish chunks with the fruit mixture and pour into the crust. Cover the pie with the pastry lid, seal the edges, and paint the lid with milk.*

*Bake at 375 degrees for 30–40 minutes or until the crust is golden.*

*You can also make this as a single-crust pie. Leave off the top pie crust, arrange most of the fish on the top, and bake for 15–20 minutes or until the fish flakes.*

### Faux Venison Stew

**4–6 servings**

**3 T. bacon fat**

**1 medium onion, minced**

**2 lbs. boneless chicken cut into**

**1 ½-inch cubes**

**¼ c. flour**

**¼ c. bread crumbs (optional)**

*Combine and blend these ingredients in a bowl:*

- 1 1/2 c. boiling water or beef stock**
- 1 1/2 c. red wine**
- 1 t. finely minced fresh ginger or powdered ginger**
- 1 T. or more vinegar**
- 1/2 c. currants**
- salt**

*Melt bacon fat in a large saucepan or stew pot until it is crisp. Sauté the onion in the desired amount of fat until it is transparent then set aside.*

*Dredge the chicken pieces in flour, then brown them in a skillet in batches, combining each batch with some of the onion. Transfer to the stew pot and pour the combined ingredients over the chicken and onions.*

*Cover and simmer the stew for about 2 hours until the meat is tender. Add bread crumbs to thicken if desired. Add more wine if desired.*

### **Fruit Slices Fried for Lent**

- 8 servings**
- 1 10-inch uncooked pie pastry**
- 3 T. butter**
- 2 1/2 c. peeled, cored, thinly sliced apples**
- 2 1/2 c. peeled, cored, thinly sliced pears**
- 1 c. mixed dried fruit: raisins, pitted prunes, halved dates**
- 1/2 c. almond milk**
- 1/2 t. red sandalwood powder**
- 1/4 t. cinnamon**
- 1/4 t. powdered cloves**
- 1/4 t. mace**
- 1/2 t. crushed aniseed**
- Pinch nutmeg**
- 1 1/3 t. salt**

*Bake the pastry at 425 degrees for 10 minutes.*

*Melt butter in a heavy skillet, toss the apple and pear slices in the butter, and fry them for about 5 minutes. Stir in the dried fruit.*

*Blend almond milk with sandalwood,*



### **Faux venison stew**

*then stir it into the fruit mixture with the remaining ingredients. Turn the mixture into the pastry. Bake at 350 degrees for about 35 minutes, or until the fruit is soft.*

### **Ypocras**

- 4 servings**
- 1 bottle burgundy**
- 1/4 c. sugar**
- 4 sticks cinnamon, broken into pieces**
- 3 thin slices peeled ginger**
- 1 t. whole cloves**
- 5 cardamom pods, coarsely crushed**
- 1/8 t. grains of paradise, finely ground**
- A few pieces of fresh orange or lemon peel**

*Combine the ingredients in a pan. Bring them to a boil then simmer for about 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. If you wish, strain the liquid to remove the whole ingredients. Serve warm.*

*Cathy Robbins writes for Su Casa, High Country News, Crosswinds Weekly, and The New York Times.*