

Dindon is Served

“But that's not what you guys cook is it?” an SCA curious friend remarked, “Turkeys, that's Renn Faire food isn't it?” Not wishing to quibble over the fact that the SCA encompasses the Renaissance itself, I agreed, all too hastily. Many of my kitchen friendly associates, like myself, have tended to regard the turkey as really something post period, conjuring up as it does a lot of Miles Standish and John Alden images that belong to some other recreation group. Like tomatoes and potatoes, the turkey lingers in our minds just out of reach, but in truth, all three were known to cooks in period. What really surprises one is that the turkey alone rose to prominence.

Had I but known at the time, I could have assured my friend that the turkey was indeed part of our period's diet, at least the diet of some high living people. The first person to write about the turkey was Bernardino de Sahagun in 1529. He described the meat of the hen as being fat and savory, and it was not long before turkey made its way to the tables of Spanish royalty. Not so for many other foodstuffs from the New World, which would languish in neglect for considerable time, for reasons we shall discuss elsewhere.

In 1528, Princess Jeanne d'Albret in France was raising turkey hens as pets. They appear never to have made it to the dinner table- on leaving them when changing residence, she left funds for their care, and had their eggs sent to a nearby convent. Not quite so sentimental on the topic, Catherine de Medici (she who ate too many artichokes) had 66 of them served at a feast in 1549. The French first nicknamed the bird “Jesuit”, but its ordinary name was *dindon*, a corrupted contraction of *coq d'Inde*, which later gave rise to the derogatory term *dindonne*, indicating one who is excessively stupid.

One voice of dietary dissent came from Charles Estienne, who complained “For they may be rightly termed coffers to cast oates into, a devouring gulfe of meate, and wherein there is no other pleasure to be taken... It is very true that his flesh is fine and delicate, but without taste and of hard digestion...And this is the cause why men use to powder them, lard them much, and season them with spices. There is much more pleasure and goodness is the flesh of a peacock.”

In England, the turkey is mentioned in sumptuary laws as early as 1541, and they are mentioned as being served at Christmas feasts in 1557. Our own term for the bird is of murky origin, but turkey-cock appears connected to some association with Turkish merchants. Indeed, all over Europe people seemed confused as to the origin and nature of their new favorite bird for roasting, and seemed to think it somehow related to the Guinea fowl. This bird came from Africa, and had been reintroduced to Europe by the Portuguese- it had once been a delicacy among the Romans

The Belgians also loved the new bird- a banquet in that same year featured the turkey roasted and served cold, boiled with oysters, and baked into a pasty. In Genoa they were to be found in the poultry shops most frequently at Christmas time.

The closer they are to the wild state, the more the turkey resembles the bird it would supplant as the hallmark of a feast, that is, the peacock- although that resemblance is a

bit sketchy at best. Its undeniably savory flesh (despite Charles Estienne's heated objections) brought it a remarkable triumph indeed. Peacocks had graced the tables of the nobles for a very long time. The Greeks were crazy about them, and the Romans, aping the Greeks in many matters of taste put them on their dinner menus as well. Few indeed were honest as the poet Horace was on the subject, who complained that people were readily duped into paying much more for a peacock than any other pullet, when one could not eat the feathers that made the bird so attractive, and hideously expensive. Yet it was so, and such fashion went on for a very long time.

It is not clear where the idea arose, but St. Augustine and his contemporaries had the odd idea that the flesh of peacocks were not subject of rotting. He made a test of this by setting aside a piece of the meat, and indeed, it seemed not to spoil- however, the test was made in Carthage, and meat dries out more readily than rots in the dry North African air. A later dietary writer would remark that “it will keep well for a month after it is cooked- take off the mold, and you will find it white, good, and pleasant underneath...”

Charlemagne issued express orders that peacocks should be at his table wherever he progressed through his lands, no doubt casting a distinctly Roman aspect and prestige on his own reign.

All this noble patronage, however, could not change the toughness of the fowl's meat, nor make its dry flesh more palatable. Platina admits to their giving a “gross and moderate nourishment, and they increase melancholy.” This in itself is not enough to dissuade people from a dish, but tough and dry meat is a bitter pill to swallow when the meat is so expensive, even if someone else is footing the bill. To this end, it was often considered desirable to stuff the bird with pork or chicken. The point of the peacock was however, all about display, and after a time it seems, people simply abandoned the idea of consuming the peacock and went after the stuffing. Most telling on this point is a brief discussion in *Boke of Keruyngge*, the author gives various sauces and accompaniments to items of food- the peacock has none.

Of course they would admire the gilding on the bird (one absolutely must have it in gold foil, please), but also its manner of presentation, for a great deal of art went into removing and restoring the (obviously uncooked) skin. This represents a bit of a health problem that makes admiring the bird without actually eating it a real advancement in dining pleasure. But there was even more than the beautiful feathers to feast one's eyes on, clever cooks would insert rods into the legs of the bird to make it appear lifelike, and the best presentations featured a bit of camphor inserted into the birds mouth and lit before it was brought to the table, it would then appear to have sparks flying from its mouth and eyes. Worth every penny.

In this sense, this shift in the preferred bird for the table marks a decided transition in cookery. By the end of period, the practice of subtleties, using foodstuffs to appear something they are not is a practice drawing to a close; the emphasis then becomes on transforming the dining entertainment into an allegorical experience, some of which are so strained in nature that many of us would readily welcome the return of a sparks flying

from a bird's head at the table.

The turkey had much more to commend itself to one's palate, and in the end, such is what brought an end to the long run of the peacock as the centerpiece of the noble table. To some right thinking dietary writers, this must be something of a travesty, for if one is, as they believed, what they ate, then how could the nobility sustain itself on a bird so markedly stupid? (This argument cannot be applied to the wild turkey, which is quite capable of looking after itself, thank you.) Give up the noble, intractable peacock for the turkey, just because of *how it tastes?* From here it is but a hop, skip, and a jump to the end of nobility itself, to universal suffrage, to socialized medicine. How *dindonne* can one get?

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