

Eat, Drink, & Be Merry

Food in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

The cultivation, preparation, and consumption of food formed the framework for daily labor and leisure in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It is not surprising to find activities centered around this subject abounding in the pages of manuscripts. Calendars in books contain lively depictions of the monthly chores necessary to produce sustenance. These images and others offer glimpses into the kitchens and hearths of the medieval home, revealing cooking techniques, kitchen tools, and popular dishes. Feasting scenes display both grand and modest tables set with edibles, as well as carefully arranged diners of different social classes, sometimes consuming to the point of gluttony and drunkenness. Integral to all aspects of life, food played a central role in Christian devotional practices such as the Eucharist—the consecration of bread and wine at the Mass. It also featured in biblical stories and saintly miracles, where it nourished both the body and the soul. While not as plentiful and varied as it is today, food in the Middle Ages and Renaissance nonetheless occupied people's thoughts and filled the engaging tales and illustrations in illuminated manuscripts.

The pages of manuscripts are made of parchment (specially prepared animal skin) painted with tempera. Because these materials are sensitive to light, this exhibition is presented at low light levels.

A related exhibition is on view at the Getty Research Institute—*The Edible Monument: The Art of Food for Festivals* (October 13, 2015–March 13, 2016).



Nature's Yearly *Banquet*

Many medieval manuscripts used in Christian liturgy and prayer begin with a calendar listing the holy days celebrated throughout the year. The images in these calendars often depict terrestrial and astrological time. Earthly time is represented by scenes commonly known as the labors of the months—the agricultural tasks, animal husbandry, and other daily activities corresponding to each month. These labors vary slightly depending on when and where the manuscript was made. Most of the calendar scenes shown here revolve around wheat—the foundation of the medieval European diet.

For more information on calendars, see the video nearby.



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Preparation and *Consumption*

After the harvest and the hunt, raw foods were prepared for consumption and then shared at meals and banquets, both simple and lavish. Most meals in the images shown here appear modest and spare, but contemporary accounts reveal that medieval feasts often involved spectacle and the theatrical presentation of dishes. For example, court artists could be called upon to add final visual flourishes—such as gilding on edibles—that would have impressed and amazed guests. Some illustrated texts outline ideas about the curative powers of particular foods and issue warnings against those that could cause gastric distress or imbalance to the bodily humors. Other manuscripts emphasize the morals surrounding eating, especially the perils of consuming to excess and the depravity of the glutton.



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Food for the *Soul*

Food not only structured daily life in the Middle Ages and Renaissance but also underpinned numerous stories recorded in Hebrew and Christian writings. Eating and drinking are mentioned often—in the origins of humanity with Adam and Eve, in the miracles performed by Christ and the saints, and in the religious practices of medieval Christians, both lay and monastic. The sustenance cited or depicted in illuminated accounts is typically limited to bread, fish, and wine, reflecting the simple diet of biblical times as well as Christian fasting, modesty, and piety. The texts and images present food as spiritual nourishment, inviting readers and viewers to consider the deeper meaning of what they harvested, prepared, and consumed.



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This material was published in 2015 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry: Food in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, October 13, 2015–January 3, 2016, at the Getty Center.

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