The Tudors

Learning Objective:
To find out what the Tudors ate and which foods were available in Tudor Britain.

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Do you think you would have been able to eat your favourite meal in Tudor times? Why or why not?

Think, pair, share your ideas.

Lots of the foods we eat would not have been available to the Tudors. Today, we eat lots of foods that come from faraway countries, such as bananas and pineapples. These foods were more difficult to transport than they are today as they had no planes or motorised boats. Besides, the Tudors didn't know that these foods existed because countries like America and the West Indies were only just being discovered.

The Tudors also had no way of keeping their foods cool as fridges and freezers had not yet been invented. This meant that everything they ate had to be fresh, although they did preserve foods with salt and sugar.

What foods do you store in the fridge or freezer that the Tudors wouldn't have had?



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What foods do you think the Tudors might have eaten?



Most Tudors had to rely on foods they could grow, rear or hunt for themselves. One of the main parts of the Tudor diet was bread. Poor Tudors ate a dark bread called Carter's bread made from a mixture of rye and wheat. Rich Tudors ate manchet bread which was made with fine white flour. In Tudor times, the whiter the bread, the more expensive it was.



Meals were often served on big slabs of bread called 'trenchers'.



Manchet bread



Carter's bread

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Meat also formed a large part of the Tudor diet, but more for rich Tudors than poor Tudors. Rich Tudors ate almost any animal that walked or flew! They ate many of the meats we eat regularly today, such as lamb, beef, venison, pork and chicken but they also enjoyed hedgehog, crane, heron, partridge, swan, pigeon, rabbit, boar, sparrow, dove, goat and badger. The Tudors did not waste any part of the animal and ate not only the flesh but also the tongue, liver, kidneys, feet and even brain of the animal.

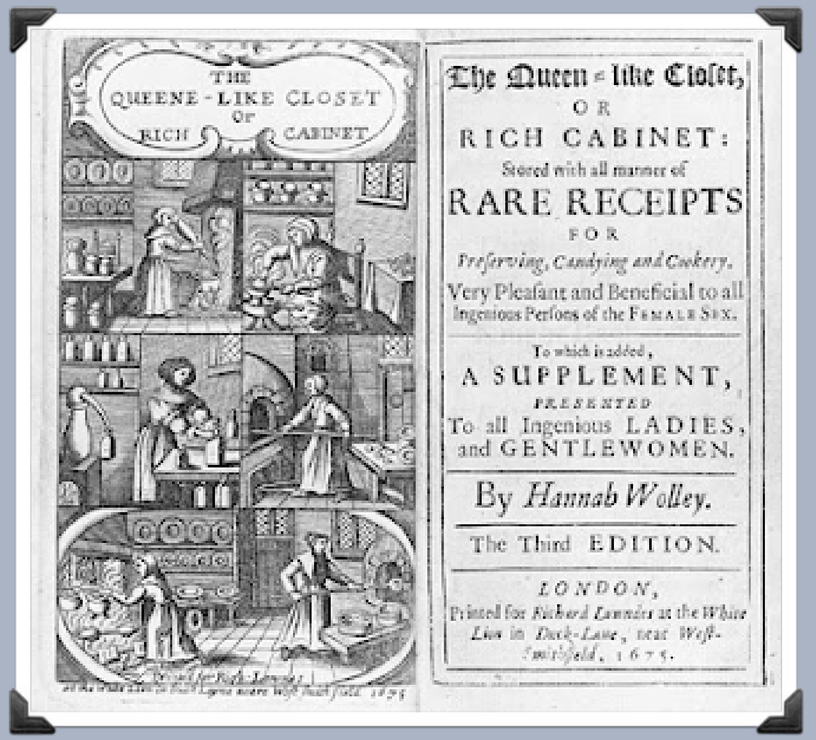


The Tudors did not have ovens. All their cooking was done over a fire. For roasting, they had a long stick called a spit. The whole animal would be placed on the spit and then roasted over the fire.

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Sugar was very expensive in Tudor times and it was only the very rich who could afford it. Tudors loved sweet things and would create many sweet dishes to show off to their guests when they had a dinner party. Marchpane was one of the most impressive desserts and had a marzipan base with sugar fruits on the top.

We know about Tudor cooking from the recipe books that were written at the time. This picture shows the cover of a recipe book by Hannah Woolley. This book had a recipe for marchpane, although these recipes give no weights, measures or cooking times!



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Rich Tudors did eat vegetables but not very often. It was thought that vegetables were more suited to poor people. Poor Tudors grew lots of vegetables in their gardens, such as onions, garlic, cabbage, turnips, carrots and parsnips. Vegetables were not eaten to accompany meat like they are today but they would have been put into stews and pottage. Pottage was like a soup which was made of stock, meat (if it was available) and vegetables, and then thickened with oats.



Poorer Tudors had fewer meats to choose from than the rich, but would keep chickens to eat and would be able to buy beef, pork and lamb at the market. They also ate what they could catch, including rabbit, crow and pigeon.

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Fruits, such as apples, pears, strawberries, plums and damsons, were widely available, although it was thought that eating them raw was bad for you. Fruits were added to meat dishes or cooked before eating. Rich Tudors had fruits crystallised with sugar if they could afford it. Fruits, such as oranges and lemons, had to be imported from other countries and so were expensive. Only the rich ate

As well as fruits and vegetables, the Tudors ate flowers such as primroses and lavender. Herbs were also important, as well as spices from abroad, such as cinnamon and cloves.



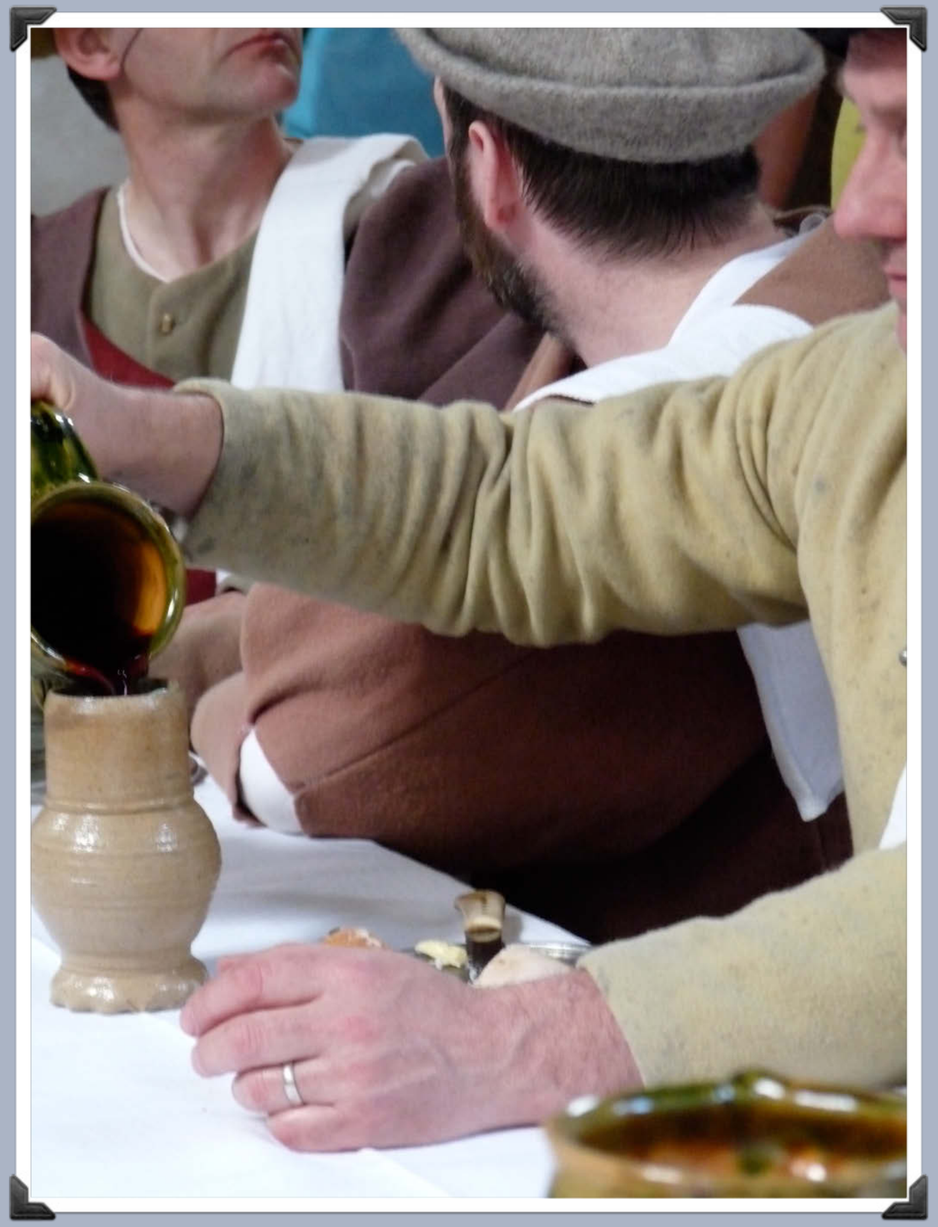
This picture shows a re-enactment of Tudor servants preparing a feast for their masters.

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It was against the law to eat meat on Fridays in Tudor times. This was not only a religious tradition but also a good way to conserve meat stocks, especially during times when there wasn't much fresh meat. It also meant that fishermen would be kept busy and would have more chance to experience life at sea. This was important as during war time it was the fishermen who became the navy and went to fight at sea.

No one drank water in Tudor times as the water was so polluted. The most common drink was ale - they even drank it for breakfast! Very rich people could afford wine. Tea and coffee was so rare that it was only used as medicine.



Rich Tudors used banquets to show off to their friends and try to out-do each other with the expensive foods they could get hold of. As well as showing the expensive foods they could afford, they would try and make the food exciting and entertaining.

During a banquet for Queen Elizabeth, twenty four live blackbirds were put inside an empty pie crust so that when the lid came off the birds would fly out! They also did the same with frogs and other small animals.



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The Tudors loved exploring and during this period, lots of new lands were discovered which meant that new foods were being discovered too. During the reign of Elizabeth I, foods like potatoes, corn, tomatoes and turkey had come to England. However, these items were expensive as they were so difficult to get hold of. All these new luxury foods were introduced to Britain during the Tudor period:



tomato



corn



turkey



potatoes



vanilla



pumpkin

cashew nuts





peppers

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Wow! What a lot of information about Tudor food! Are you ready to go and find out some more on your own?

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Plenary:



What do you think you would have liked most about Tudor food?

Which Tudor foods would you like to try?

Which foods would you not like to try?

What do you think is the biggest difference between modern food and Tudor food?

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