

Have your plate and eat it too

by Sabine Eiche

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Years ago, after a delicious pub lunch in London, a friend declared that I was a good trencherman (in those days the suffix man was used for both sexes). I was baffled, associating the word with the trenches of World War I. He explained he was referring to my hearty appetite. But I still failed to see what trencher had to do with eating.

In fact, I didn't grasp the connection until I learned something about medieval dining. And trencher, I discovered, was only part of the "trench" story.

In medieval times, the daily routine at royal and aristocratic courts consisted of rituals, and those directly involving the lord – such as dining – were extremely elaborate. The lord's table was on a raised platform at one end of the room and was therefore known as the high table. Guests were seated at a lower level, along one or two tables set perpendicular to the high table. The salt, a costly substance, was placed on the high table in front of the lord. He therefore sat "above the salt," while his guests sat "below the salt," sayings we still use to indicate rank.

Tableware as we know it was unheard of in the Middle Ages. Even cutlery was restricted. There were spoons for soups and sauces and a few knives to share among the guests. Forks, popular in Italy, were considered unnecessary in England since fingers worked just as well.

Servants carried the food into the dining hall on platters, and everyone heaped their portion not on a plate but on a trencher, flat bread that had been cut (trenched) in half horizontally, leaving a thick crust on the bottom. Those words

– trencher, trencherman, trench – came into English by way of the Old French “trenchier,” to cut, which is derived from the Latin “truncare.” Trenchers were eaten at the end of the meal, or given as leftovers to the servants, or passed on to the poor.

Meals, which could comprise a dozen or more courses, usually lasted for hours. The tedium of sitting for so long was alleviated by entertainment, provided not only by musicians and dancers, but also by the people who served at table. One of the most important of these was the man who carved the meat. In Italian he was known as the “trinciante,” a word deriving from the same Latin verb, “truncare,” and thus related to trencher. The English called him the carver, a Middle English word rooted in the Old English “ceorfan,” to cut.

To imagine him like the modern paterfamilias, carving roast turkey at Thanksgiving or Christmas, couldn’t be further off the mark. The “trinciante” was an accomplished artist whose handling of the knife had to be a spectacle. When he carved roast turkey, he speared the whole bird, held it high in the air, and with grace and dexterity sliced off parts, making them fall on to the platter in a neat arrangement.

Perhaps we’ve lost the historic art of carving meat, but if the modern food industry made edible containers for take-outs, we could easily revive the medieval, environmentally-friendly custom of eating our trenchers, thus all becoming good trenchermen and trencherwomen.