

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 133:  
BREAKING BREAD WITH COMPANIONS**

**Presented by Kevin W. Stroud**

## EPISODE 133: BREAKING BREAD WITH COMPANIONS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 133: Breaking Bread with Companions. In this episode, we’re going to continue our look at food in the Middle Ages, and the way that food-related terms shaped the English language. Whereas last time, we looked at terms associated with the preparation of food, this time we’re going to look at what happened when that meal was actually served. So we’ll focus on meal time – and the way people actually ate. We’ll also examine the very important role of bread in the Middle Ages – both in the way it was consumed and the words it contributed to the English language. As you can tell, this is definitely not a low-carb episode. So pull up a chair and sit down – and enjoy this feast of mealtime etymology.

Before we begin though, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at [Patreon.com/historyofenglish](https://Patreon.com/historyofenglish). Also, if you’re a twitter user, I’m on twitter at [englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod).

Now last time, we looked at the oldest surviving cookbook composed in English. The book is called the *Forme of Cury*, and it was compiled by the cooks working in the kitchen of the English king Richard II. That discussion gave us the opportunity to look at a variety of common ingredients used in medieval cooking. But in some respects, it is just as interesting to consider the ingredients that were not available at the time. I mentioned in the episode that cooks didn’t have access to tomatoes because tomatoes were native to Central and South America, and Europeans hadn’t discovered the New World yet. For the same reasons, European cooks didn’t have access to potatoes either. They also didn’t have yellow corn – what the native Americans called maize. And they didn’t have chilies or red, green or yellow peppers. They also didn’t have the cocoa bean yet, so no chocolate. [*SOURCE: The Art of Cookery, Scully, p.69*] They did have access to carrots, but the carrots at that time were a wild purple variety that were virtually inedible. The modern orange carrot didn’t exist yet. [*SOURCE: the Time Travelers Guide to Medieval England, Ian Mortimer, p. 168*] So the medieval diet was a lot more limited because people simply didn’t have access to many of the ingredients that are common today.

As we saw last time, the diet was also limited because the large number of peasants didn’t have regular access to meat like beef, mutton and venison. They did have access to pork and chicken, but they still didn’t eat those foods on a daily basis. In fact, the average peasant diet relied heavily on grains and vegetables. Grains were used to make beer and ale, and they were used in soups and porridges, but they were mainly used to make bread. And bread was really a staple of the English diet for centuries. It was relatively easy to make, and it could be made and eaten throughout the year, even when other foods were not available. And as we’ll see in this episode, people didn’t just eat bread, they ate with bread using it as a utensil. And they ate on bread using it as a kind of plate. Bread was all over the dining table, and our language still reflects the importance of bread in the Middle Ages.

I noted in earlier episodes that the words *lord* and *lady* are derived from a word for bread. The Old English word for bread was *hlaf*, which became the word *loaf*. And the male head of the household was sometimes known as the ‘loaf guardian’ or ‘loaf warden.’ In Old English, that term was *hlaf-weard*, which was contracted to *hlaford*, and then became the word *lord* meaning the master of the estate. *Lady* has a similar construction. It was originally the ‘loaf maiden’ – the *hlaf-dige* – which was contracted over time to *lady*. And these are just small examples of how words related to bread permeate the English language.

In fact, there is even a connection between bread and our very basic word *food*. The English word *food* and the Latin word for bread both come from the same Indo-European root word. That original root word was *\*pa* which meant ‘to feed or protect.’ Under the series of sound changes known as Grimm’s Law, the Indo-European ‘p’ sound became an ‘f’ sound in the Germanic languages. So the word *\*pa* eventually evolved into the English word *food*. But within Latin, the word *\*pa* evolved into *panis* meaning ‘bread.’ From there, the word passed into the various Romance languages. So the Spanish word *pan* and the French word *pain* both mean bread, and both words are therefore distant cousins of the English word *food*. And that connection helps to illustrate how fundamental bread was as a basic food source for much of European history.

And you might remember from an earlier episode that a person with whom you shared your bread was a *companion* – combining the Latin prefix *com-* meaning ‘with’ and that word *panis* meaning ‘bread.’ So the word *companion* literally meant ‘with bread,’ or more specifically, ‘the person with whom you shared bread.’ Several companions together were a *company* using the same construction. So if you work for a company that uses the word *company* in its name, that word literally means ‘the people who share bread with each other.’ And if that company pays you a good salary, I guess that makes you a ‘bread winner.’

And if you get together with some friends or companions and have meal together, we might say that you are ‘breaking bread’ together – another bread-related term, and a term that appeared for the first time around the current point in our overall story in the late 1300s.

So ‘to break bread’ is to have a meal, which you might do with your companions or ‘bread sharers.’ And in the Middle Ages, you might have shared that meal with the ‘loaf guardian’ or *lord* or with the ‘loaf maiden’ or *lady*.

So I hope you can start to see a theme emerging here. Traditionally, bread was a major part of every meal, and food terms related to bread permeate the English language.

Of course, bread was made from grains, specifically from grains that had been crushed or ground into meal or flour. The people of England had access to a variety of grains that could be used like barley, rye, oats and millet, but the grain that produced the best bread was wheat. It could be ground into a fine white flour. In fact, the words *wheat* and *white* are cognate. Both are Old English words, and *wheat* ultimately means the white grain – or the grain that produces white flour.

Since wheat was so highly regarded, it was in high demand, and therefore it tended to be the most expensive grain. So peasants tended to rely on a lower quality bread made from those other grains. [PLEASURES AND PASTIMES IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND, Compton Reeves, p. 148+]

Whichever grain was used, it had to be crushed into a powder before it could be made into dough and then baked as bread. That grain powder was traditionally called *meal* in Old English. But in the 1300s, English borrowed the word *flour* from French. *Flour* tended to refer to the finest or best type of meal. So today, *flour* generally refers to ground wheat, whereas *meal* refers to other grains like cornmeal or oatmeal.

Of course, to grind those grains they had to be taken to the *mill*, which is based on the same root as *meal* meaning crushed grains. The process of crushing and grinding and pulverizing those grains ultimately produced the modern phrase ‘through the mill’ meaning a difficult experience. If your boss puts you ‘through the mill,’ you’ve had a tough day. That phrase first appeared in the 1800s, but it is related to this basic process of turning grain into flour, which was then used to make bread.

So as you might imagine, mills were very busy places in the Middle Ages. Sometimes, people would line up to have their grains processed. And this actually appears to be the context for the first recorded version of the phrase ‘first come, first served.’ In the *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer used the phrase “Whoso first cometh to the mill, first grint.” It meant, ‘Whoever comes to the mill first, grinds first.’ It became a common phrase over the course of the following centuries, and Chaucer’s use of the phrase is the first recorded use in the English language. Many scholars think this sense was later extended to the much more generic phrase ‘first come, first served.’

So at the mill, grain was turned into flour or meal. And you may be wondering if the ‘meal’ made from grains is the same word that we use for the food that we eat – as in ‘mealtime.’ Well, no. Despite the temptation to assume that they are related, they actually come from different roots. But meal was made into bread, and bread was an important part of every meal.

Of course, the grinding of the grains into flour or meal was only the first step in making bread. The flour then had to be made into dough and baked. It could be baked in an *oven*, which is actually an Old English word. The modern pronunciation is pretty close to the original pronunciation. Old English also had the word *kiln* to describe a place where things were baked or dried. That word still exists, but over time, it has become mostly restricted to the types of ovens used in pottery or ceramics or brick-making. But Anglo-Saxon kilns were also used for baking bread.

In the 1200s, English also borrowed the word *furnace* from French and Latin, and that became another common word for an oven or fireplace where bread was baked. And in the 1600s, English borrowed yet another Latin term for a fireplace or oven. That was the word *focus* – F-O-C-U-S.

Today, you might focus or concentrate on something, or you might lose focus. We don't really associate the word *focus* with fireplaces anymore, but that's actually what the word originally meant. The fireplace or focus was often the center of activity in the room. In the colder months, it provided heat, and people would gather around it for warmth. And throughout the year, the fire was used to heat or cook food. So there was often a steady stream of people going back and forth to the fire. Again, it tended to be the center of activity. We might say that it was the 'focal point' of the room. And that's how the word *focus* evolved from its original sense as a fireplace or hearth to a more general sense as a center of activity or attention.

Well, cooks also used the hearth or focus to bake bread. They could put the bread in the ashes or over the ashes to bake the dough. And that little bit of etymology helps to explain the name of a popular type of Italian bread called focaccia bread. *Focaccia* is just an Italian variant of the word *focus* meaning a fireplace. And it specifically referred to a type of bread baked the ashes in the hearth or fireplace.

Now in medieval England, many peasants didn't have the luxury of a nice oven or furnace to bake their breads. They had to take their raw dough to the local baker, and the baker would bake the bread for them. So bakers were not just retailers selling their own bread. They were also the actual bakers for many of the people who lived in the town or village.

So bakers and millers had a lot of things in common. They both played an essential role in converting grains into bread. The miller would grind the grain into flour, and the baker would bake the dough into bread. Each was usually paid by keeping a portion of the product for themselves. And millers and bakers had one other thing in common. They both had reputation for cheating their customers.

I've talked about the bad reputation that millers had over the prior few episodes, but the reputation of bakers wasn't much better. They often sold loaves of bread that were much lighter and smaller than they were supposed to be. You might remember from an earlier episode that this was such a problem that Henry III has issued a law back in the mid-1200s called the Assize of Bread and Ale. The law fixed the weight of the loaves that were sold by bakers. If the loaves weighed less than the required amount, the baker could be fined or flogged or imprisoned. So bakers started to add a little extra bread to each order to make sure that they didn't violate the law. If someone bought several loaves, the baker would often throw in an extra loaf just in case the loaves were a little underweight. And that led to the term 'baker's dozen' meaning a dozen plus one.

Whether a family baked their own bread or they took it to the local baker, either way the bread ended up at the dinner table – or the supper table – or the lunch table. And that raises another issue. What did people call those various meals that were eaten throughout the day?

Now at first glance, that may seem like a simple question. But it's not. In fact, even today, English speakers don't agree on those names. Some people eat 'lunch' in the middle of the day and 'dinner' in the evening. Others eat 'dinner' in the middle of the day, and 'supper' in the

evening. And some English speakers eat ‘lunch’ at mid-day and ‘supper’ in the evening, reserving the word *dinner* for a formal meal eaten on special occasions.

These terms tend to vary by region. For example, in the United States, the word *supper* is most common in parts of the upper Midwest, but it’s also found in pockets throughout the country, especially in rural areas. So why is the midday meal called *lunch* in some places and *dinner* in other places? And why is the evening meal called *dinner* by some people and *supper* by others? Well, as you might have guessed, it has to do with the history of the language and the history of mealtime. And it also has a connection to bread. So let me explain.

In order to make sense out of these terms, we really need to go back to the Anglo-Saxon period. During that early period, people would often eat three meals a day, but they weren’t at the same times that most people eat today. The Anglo-Saxons would get the day started with a very light meal or snack which was called the *morgenmete* – literally the ‘morning meat,’ but it meant the ‘morning meal.’ You might remember from an earlier episode that the word *meat* originally meant a meal – even a meal where no meat was served.

The next major meal of the day was tied to the set of Church prayers called the *nones*. Now I’ve also talked about this word before. You might remember that the Church has a series of prayers that were conducted at certain times throughout the day, and medieval society was loosely structured around the timing of those prayers. The nones prayers were held at the ninth hour of the day, and in fact, the Latin word *nones* and the English word *nine* are cognate. The word *nones* literally meant the ninth hour of sunlight which was in the middle of the afternoon – around 3 o’clock p.m. today. The word *nones* is also the original version of our modern word *noon*, but remember that the word didn’t mean mid-day or 12 o’clock like today. It was actually later in the afternoon.

The nones prayers were very important because it was the time of the day when monks tended take a break from their work. And it was also the time when they tended to eat their primary meal of the day. And this same idea extended throughout the rest of Anglo-Saxon society. So this mid-afternoon meal was the major meal of the day, and it was called the *nonmete* – literally the ‘noon meat’ or the ‘noon meal.’ But again, *noon* meant the middle of the afternoon. Then the Anglo-Saxons would have a third meal late in the day. It tended to be a very light meal or snack, and it was called the *æfenmete* – literally the ‘evening meat’ or ‘evening meal.’ So that was the typical Anglo-Saxon routine.

But then, you might remember that the nones prayers were moved up a few hours in the 1100s and 1200s. And that’s how the word *noon* came to mean midday or 12 o’clock. It was because the nones prayers were moved up to around that time. And when those prayers were moved up, the main meal eaten at the time was also moved up. So the primary meal of the day moved up from mid-afternoon to mid-day in the 1100s and 1200s during the early Norman period in England. [SOURCE: Fast and Feast, Henschel, p. 20-21]

Now that move was important to the daily routine because it meant that people were eating their primary meal much earlier in the day. So it became common for people to wait until that meal before eating anything. So the early morning meal largely disappeared and was actually frowned upon by society. To eat a meal early in the morning was considered to be indulgent or gluttonous. Unless you were sick or elderly, you tended to wait until the noon meal, which was now literally the noon meal held around midday. So in the language of the day, there was a morning fast until the noon meal.

Now around the same time that the major meal of the day was moved up to the middle of the day, English speakers adopted the French words *dine* and *dinner*. *Dine* meant to eat the primary meal of the day – a meal that typically had several courses. And *dinner* was the term for that specific meal. And both of those words appeared in English for the first time in the late 1200s. So by the 1300s, people ‘dined’ at ‘dinner,’ which was that large meal served at noon in the middle of the day. [SOURCE: the Time Travelers Guide to Medieval England, Ian Mortimer, p. 168-9]

Now given that people were eating that primary meal a little earlier in the day, there was a need for another meal later in the day after the work day was done. This later meal took place in the late afternoon or early evening. And this is where the story takes us back to bread because that last meal of the day usually consisted of a soup or broth that was eaten with pieces of bread. The bread was dipped into the broth and eaten. This type of meal was very traditional, and Old English had a word for it. It was called the *sop* – S-O-P. It comes from the same root as the word *sop* because the bread sopped up the juice in the bowl. It’s also related to the word *sip* because many people sipped the broth directly from the bowl. French also borrowed a version of that same Germanic word, presumably from the Franks, and in French, it produced the word *soup* which was a broth or liquid that was often eaten with bread. And that Germanic root also produced another word in French – the word *supper*. The *supper* was the meal that was eaten at the end of the day, and it usually consisted of sops or soups. And that word *supper* first appeared in English in the early 1300s. So the Old English *sop* or French *soup* was eaten at *supper* with bread that *sopped* up the juice and liquid that was *sipped* from the bowl. That’s the connection between those words. And that etymology helps to explain the meaning behind the word *supper* and the nature of supper in the Middle Ages. It was a relatively light meal consisting of soup and bread eaten late in the day.

So at the current point in our overall story of English in the late 1300s, people ate little or nothing in the morning, then they ate a large meal called *dinner* around midday, and then they ate a light meal called *supper* late in the day.

But all of that was starting to change around the current point in our overall story of English. First of all, there was that social prohibition against eating in the morning, but a lot of workers were starting to eat a small snack or meal in the morning – to give them energy until the larger meal around midday. This type of morning snack often consisted of a piece of bread dipped in watered-down wine. [SOURCE: the Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages, Scully, p. 119+.]

This early morning snack didn't have a formal name yet, but in the early 1400s, people began to refer to that snack as a 'break in the morning fast.' So it was literally a little break from the period of not eating in the morning. And by the mid-1400s, the phrase had evolved into a brand-new word for that meal – the '*break-fast*,' or as we know it today – *breakfast*. So *breakfast* is a native word coined in the 1400s.

Now by that point, near the end of the Middle Ages, people were eating that small 'breakfast' in the morning, a large 'dinner' at midday, and a small 'supper' in the evening. But in the 1500s and 1600s, that large midday meal called *dinner* started to move around again. During that period, people started to eat it later and later in the day, and over time, it gradually moved to the end of the work day. It isn't entirely clear why that happened. It may have had to do with the fact that the daily routine was no longer tied to the traditional Church prayers. So the noon meal was not as important as it had once been. Another factor may have been the reluctance of workers to eat a large meal in the middle of the day. That tended to interrupt the flow of the day, and it might have been difficult to go back to work after eating such a large meal. It may have been easier to eat a quick smaller meal around midday, and then finish off the day with a large meal at the end.

At any rate, during the early modern period, that primary meal called *dinner* was gradually moved to the end of the workday. And that left that smaller meal around midday. In the late 1500s, the midday meal started to be referred to as *lunch*. The origin of this word isn't entirely clear, but *lunch* originally referred to a piece or lump of food. Some of the early references mention a lunch of bacon or a lunch of pork, but the term was usually applied to bread. People would eat a lunch of bread. So one theory is that the word *lunch* was derived from the word *lump*. At any rate, the word *lunch* appeared as a new word for this smaller midday meal in the 1500s.

So by the time we reach the 1800s and 1900s, we have this altogether new ordering of the daily meals. A morning 'breakfast,' a midday 'lunch' and an evening 'dinner.' And today, some people continue to use that terminology. But others use that older terminology – a midday 'dinner' and an evening 'supper.' And that's why there is still that variation in Modern English.

So as we can see, mealtimes have changed quite a bit over the centuries – as have the names of the meals. But one thing that has not really changed is the fact that people gather around a dinner table when its time to eat. So let's take a closer look at what usually happened at the dinner table in the Middle Ages.

First of all, let's talk about the dinner table – the actual table. Unlike today, dinner tables were not permanent fixtures in the household. They tended to be temporary structures assembled immediately prior to the meal and taken down as soon as the meal was over. Remember that medieval houses tended to have one large common area, so there wasn't a designated dining room. And even in large manor houses, the meal was usually served in a large room that was also used for entertainment. So again, the tables were assembled for the meal and taken down afterwards.



The tables usually consisted of a board or plank that was held up by trestles or braces. So the trestles were brought into the dining area and set up, and then the board was placed across the top. And that helps to explain the words that were used for a table.

The common Old English word for a table was a *beod*, but around the time of the Norman Conquest, English started using the word *board* for a table. Of course, the original sense of the word *board* was a plank or a flat piece of wood. That's how it was used in Old English, but since a table was made with a board on trestles, the word *board* became synonymous with a table, and it was common in the Middle English period for people to refer to a dining table as a board.

And around the current point in our story in the late 1300s, the sense of the word *board* was extended even further to the food that was actually served at the table. That extended sense of the word *board* as food is first found in the Canterbury Tales. And that's how we got terms like 'room and board' or a 'boarding house.' So if you are paying for room and board, you are paying for both lodging and meals, and that would make you a *boarder*. And a place that provides food and lodging would be a 'boarding house.' And a school that provides such things would be a 'boarding school.'

Of course, when people gathered around the table – or board – they didn't just eat. They also carried on conversations with each other. They discussed issues, and sometimes they even solved problems. And that led to the sense of the word *board* as a group of people who discuss issues and deal with problems like a Board of Directors, or Board of Governors, or a school board.

So all of those terms are derived from the board or plank that was used to make a table in medieval houses. By the way, the word *table* has essentially the same history. *Table* is a Latin word, and it also originally meant a board or plank. It was one of those Latin words borrowed very early on by the Germanic tribes back on the continent, so the word is actually found throughout the Germanic languages. Within Old English, it still had the sense of a board or plank, but in early Middle English, the sense was extended to the furniture constructed with the board. So the words *table* and *board* mirrored each other. They both experienced the same shift in meaning from plank to furniture.

But English didn't really need both words to refer to that piece of furniture. So by the current point in our story in the late 1300s, people were starting to settle on the word *table*, and the word *board* was on its way out in the sense of furniture. However, that older use of the word *board* still survives in a few words and phrases. For example, we sometimes call a side table a *sideboard*. And we have the phrase 'above board' meaning honest. It literally means 'above the table' where everything is out in the open so everyone can see what's going on. But notice what happens when we suggest that someone is acting dishonestly. In that case, we might say that they are doing something 'under the table.' So 'above board' indicates honestly, but 'under the table' indicates dishonestly. Each of those contrasting phrases uses different words for the piece of furniture.

That older sense of the word *board* as a table also survives in another word, although it is somewhat disguised by the pronunciation. That is the word *cupboard*, which is literally the ‘cup board’ as the spelling indicates. A ‘cup board’ was a ‘cup table’ – a small table used to display cups, saucers, and other tableware used during the meal. It was a common piece of furniture in manor houses and large estates where the dining experience was more formal. The ‘cup board’ was essentially a side table placed against the wall, and it was the place where the pitchers and empty cups were placed during the meal. The server would retrieve the pitcher and cups from the table as needed. Over time, the ‘cup board’ became more of a display piece where the lord of the manor displayed his finest pieces of tableware, and that led to the modern sense of the word *cupboard*.

By the way, the word *cupboard* appeared for the first time in English around the current point in our overall story in the late 1300s. It was a native English construction combining the words *cup* and *board*. French had a separate term for that type of side table. They called it a *buffet*. That word was eventually borrowed into English in the modern period where it came to refer to the various food items that were sometimes placed on the side table. People could just go the side table and serve themselves and return to the main table to eat. That gave us the modern sense of the word *buffet*.

So all of that means that terms like *room and board*, *boarder*, *above board*, *cupboard*, and *buffet* are all derived from words for dinner tables.

Now I’ve talked about sideboards or side tables that were used in the Middle Ages, but there was one other type of side table that was common in elegant dining rooms. It was the table where food was tested. In many noble households, it was common to have a food taster whose job was to check the food as it came into the dining room from the kitchen. There were actually a couple of fancy names for that job. One term was an *assayer* and the other was a *sewer* – unrelated to the modern word *sewer*. Both of those terms were borrowed from French in the late 1300s around the current point in our overall story. The sewer or assayer’s job was to taste the food to make sure that it was OK to eat. In a time when it was hard to preserve food, there was always the possibility that the food had spoiled or gone bad. And in some cases, there was a fear or poisoning or sabotage. So the sewer or assayer tasted everything at a separate side table to make sure the food was edible. If he gave his OK, the food went on to the main table. So the taster’s blessing and approval instilled confidence that the meal was safe to eat. We might say that it gave the meal *credence* using another French loanword from the late 1300s. And in fact, when the word *credence* was first borrowed into English, it was often used to refer to this process of tasting food to check its quality. And the word *credence* also explains the name given to the side table where the food was tasted. That table was actually called the *credence* – or (/cray-DONCE/) in French – and English adopted that sense of the word as well. But in the modern era, English opted for the Italian version of that name – *credenza*. And the word *credenza* came to mean a type of cupboard or sideboard used for storage and display. So *credence* and *credenza* are really two variations of the same word related to the process of tasting food in the Middle Ages.

By the way, just to be clear about the timing on those words, *credence* first appeared in English in the late 1300s around the current point in our overall story, but *credenza* wasn't borrowed until the 1800s.

Now I've talked a fair amount about dinner tables and sideboards. And I should also mention that in a manor house or any other formal setting, the dinner table was almost always covered with a tablecloth at mealtime. It was simply called a *cloth* in Old English, but French called it a *nappe*, and that word popped up in a few English documents in the late 1300s and early 1400s.

The word *nappe* is much more common in Modern English though a derivative of the word – the word *napkin*. I mentioned this in an earlier episode, but *napkin* literally meant a small cloth – and that word appeared in English for the first time in the late 1300s. And the appearance of that word points to another interesting development in medieval dining, and that development was an emphasis on proper table manners while eating.

In earlier centuries, it had been common for diners to simply wipe their hands or mouth on the table cloth itself. But by the late 1300s, people were expected to keep the table cloth clean by using a separate napkin for cleaning and wiping up messes.

This was one of a long list of rules that applied to diners who were eating in formal settings. To a certain extent, these rules were associated with the rise of chivalry and courtliness over the prior couple of centuries. The knights and nobility were expected to adhere to certain rules of behavior, especially when they were at court. And that included proper behavior at the dining table. Those rules were taught to young aspiring knights and the children of the nobility from an early age. And over time, those rules extended to other parts of the society as well.

We got a glimpse of this development in *Sir Gawain and Green Knight*. When Gawain joined the dinner guests at the Christmas castle, they were excited to see him because he came from King Arthur's court, and therefore he was expected to display the finest manners at the table. The poet wrote that the guests said to each other, "Now schal we semlych se sleȝteȝ of þeweȝ" – literally 'Now shall we seemly see the slights of thews,' but it meant 'Now shall we see the most refined manners.' *Thews* was an old word for manners. So as a member of the royal court, Gawain was expected to display the finest table manners, and that was a sight to behold for the gathered guests.

As I noted, these types of manners were taught to anyone who might be expected to attend a formal dinner or who might be expected to work in a household where such dinners were served. These rules were also written down so they could be studied and learned. Throughout the 1200s and 1300s, etiquette books started to be produced throughout Europe mainly for young people. For the first time since the fall of the Western Roman Empire, table manners were a big deal again. And one of the earliest such manuals composed in English appeared in the mid-1400s. It was called "The Boke of Curtasye" – or in Modern English, 'The Book of Courtesy.' (c.1460) It was really an extended poem, and it contained specific guidelines for the proper way to eat at the dinner table.

For example, with respect to the table cloth, the poem instructed the diners not to wipe their hands on the cloth. Here's the passage – first in Modern English, then in the original Middle English.

Let no grease or browning on thy fingers  
defoul the cloth set before thee.

Loke no browynge on þy fyngur þore  
Defoule þe clothe þe be-fore. (ll. 75-76)

It later adds:

Also eschew without strife  
To foul the board cloth with the knife

Also eschewe, with-ouen stryfe,  
To foule þe borde clothe with þi knyfe (ll. 109-110)

So you weren't supposed to wipe your fingers or your knife on the table cloth. But what about your mouth? Well, the poem covers that too. It says, 'Do not with the board cloth thy teeth wipe' – "Ne with þo borde clothe þi tethe þou wype." (l.115) So don't wipe your teeth on the table cloth.

Of course, table cloths were only one concern. These manuals covered all aspects of proper dining behavior. For example, the Book of Courtesy instructs diners not to spit at the table (ll. 85-86), or argue with the other dinner guests (l.54) or make faces while others are speaking (l.55). It also offers the age old advice to not speak while your mouth is full. (ll.67-68).

And returning to our theme of bread, the book provides the following instructions:

Let never your cheeks be made too great  
With morsels of bread that thou shall eat;  
Men will say that you look like an ape;  
that bread and flesh in your cheeks do bake.

Let neuer þy cheke be Made to grete  
With morselle of brede þat þou shalle ete;  
An apys mow men sayne he makes,  
þat brede and flesshe in hys cheke bakes (ll. 57-60)

So don't cram your mouth full of bread and look like an ape. In other words, be on your very best behavior.

Now, sitting down at the table in the late 1300s, you would find a variety of tableware. You would find cups and bowls and pots. You might also find items with brand new French names like *bottle* and *goblet* – both of those words having appeared for the first time in the late 1300s. You might hear a large cooking vessel referred to as a *pot*, which was a word used in both Old English and French. In fact, the word *pot* is found in various forms throughout the languages of Western Europe, including Germanic, Romance and Celtic languages. Despite its commonality – or perhaps because of it – scholars still aren't entirely sure where the word originated.

Even though Old English had the word *pot*, the more common Old English word was *croc*, which became the modern word *crock*. Of course, today we sometimes combine those two words if you cook in a 'crock pot,' which is a type of slow cooker. An early trade name for that type of *pot* was the "Simmer Crock," but in the early 1970s, the manufacturer coined the name "Crock Pot" for the device. But again, the name *crock* goes back to this Old English word for a pot.

Of course, pots were often a type of *pottery* made by *potters*, and for the same reason, crocks were a type of *crockery* made by *crockers*. All of those terms were somewhat synonymous at one time. And the occupations of *potter* and *crocker* both survive as surnames. And one of the most famous Crockers today is a fictional cook – Betty Crocker. Her name is used for a variety of products sold around the world, especially mixes for cakes, pancakes, cupcakes, and other bread products. So as you can see, everything connects back to bread. It's sorta like the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game, except instead of bacon we're using bread. All roads lead back to bread.

And speaking of bread and tableware, believe it or not, bread was also used as tableware. It was very common throughout the Middle Ages for people to take a thick slice of hard bread and use it as a plate or bowl. Those bread plates were called *trenchers*. Again, that was a French loanword from the 1300s, and the word could theoretically refer to any type of plate. But in the late 1300s, it was specifically applied to bread plates.

The use of bread in this way is another illustration of the very important role that bread played in the medieval dining experience. It wasn't just a food. It was a very versatile product. It could also be used as a makeshift napkin if you needed to wipe your fingers or mouth. And it could be as a pot holder if you needed to pick up or move a hot pot. [SOURCE: *Fast and Feast*, Henisch, p. 160] And as I noted, it could be used as a plate or a bowl.

Of course, bread that was used as trenchers or plates tended to be older bread that was hard, and it was usually cut into very thick slices. Over the course of the meal, the bread would soak up the juices from the food that was placed on it. That would soften the bread and make it edible. Peasants might actually eat the bread as part of the meal, but in upper class dining rooms, the dirty bread plates were usually thrown to the dogs or given away to the poor. [SOURCE: *Fast and Feast*, Henisch, p. 160]

Remember that English book of table manners called the *Book of Courtesy*? Well, it contained specific instructions on the proper way to cut a trencher from a loaf of bread. Again, it was composed as a poem, and here is the passage – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English.

Pare (/pair/) the bread and carve it in two  
Dividing the upper crust from the bottom,  
Then cut the upper portion into four parts,  
And set them together as a whole;  
Then cut the lower portion into three parts,  
And turn it down, learn this from me.  
And lay your trencher before yourself,  
And sit upright for any meal.

Pare þy brede and kerue in two,  
Tho ouer crust þo nether fro;  
In fowre þou kutt þo ouer dole,  
Sett hom to-gedur as hit where hole;  
Sithen kutt þo nether crust in thre,  
And turne hit down, lerne þis at me.  
And lay thy trenchour þe be-fore,  
And sitt vp-ryzht for any sore. (ll. 35-42)

Now you'll note that that passage begins by requiring the bread to be cut across the middle, thereby separating the top portion from the lower portion. And according to many popular etymologies, that upper portion – known as the 'upper crust' – was considered the more desirable part of the loaf, and it was typically given to the lord of the manor or other leading noble at the dining table. And supposedly, that is the origin of the term 'upper crust' to refer to the upper classes. There are many variations of that etymology, but I should note that a lot of scholars remain unconvinced. It is true that the first recorded use of the phrase 'upper crust' is in exactly that context – the removal of the upper crust from a loaf and the delivery of that crust to the leading noble at the table. That was in the mid-1400s in another book of etiquette similar to the Book of Courtesy. But that was a literal use of the term 'upper crust.' It wasn't used figuratively to refer to the upper classes until the mid-1800s, and even then it was mostly used in American English. So it actually appears to be an Americanism. Again there may be some ultimate connection to the crusts that were served to medieval aristocrats, but that connection is not certain and not universally accepted.

So we've seen that bread was a very versatile food product. It could be eaten. It could be used as a plate. And it could be used as a makeshift napkin or potholder. Well, it could also serve as an eating utensil.

Medieval diners actually had several options when it came to utensils. They had spoons which were used for eating soups and broths. And they had knives which were used for cutting food. But interestingly, they didn't have forks. Forks have a very vague history, but they were not common in medieval dining rooms until the 1400s. Cooks used forks in the kitchens to remove large pieces of meat from a pot, but diners didn't usually eat with a fork at the dining table.

Now going back in time, ancient records make the occasion rare reference to a fork, but they aren't generally found in written descriptions, or household inventories, or among the items mentioned in wills, or even in paintings of people eating at a table. It does appear that table forks were being used in Tuscany in northern Italy in the eleventh century. And one theory holds that forks came into use there as pasta became common around the same time. Presumably, pasta was easier to eat with a fork. [SOURCE: A Cultural History of Food in the Medieval Age, Montanari, p. 162] Again, that's just a theory. All we can really say is that table forks didn't become common among the nobility of England until the 1400s, and they didn't become common among the lower classes until the 1600s and 1700s.

So if people in the late Middle Ages didn't have access to a table fork, how did they eat small morsels of food? Well, they could use their knife, but that was frowned upon at formal dinners. The Book of Courtesy contains the following prohibition: "with mete ne bere þy knyfe to mowthe" (l.113) – literally 'with meat or food do not bear thy knife to thy mouth' – so 'don't eat your food with your knife.' Knives were used for cutting food, not bringing the food to the mouth. So diners had to use something else, and fortunately, most of them had a natural tool which they could use – their fingers.

It was common and fully acceptable to eat with your fingers in the Middle Ages. Once the food was cut, you simply pinched it with your fingers and brought it to your mouth. That's why napkins came into common use – because people got food on their hands while eating. And that also explains why etiquette books at the time put a strong emphasis on clean hands. After all, if everyone was reaching into the pots and plates for the same food, it was important to keep the hands as clean as possible.

Every meal began with the diners washing their hands. And this is further reflected in the Book of Courtesy. That text provides the following instruction. "With hondes vnwasheden take neuer þy mete" (l.343) – literally 'With unwashed hands never take meat (or food).' The book also instructs diners to maintain clean fingernails. (ll.47-8) And it directs them to never pick their nose at the table (ll. 327-328), presumably for the same reason.

So to eat their food, medieval diners used spoons, knives and their fingers, but as I noted earlier, they would also use bread. Among its many uses at the dinner table, bread was also an eating utensil. The diner would cut or pinch off a piece of bread from a loaf, and then he or she would use that piece of bread to sop up the juices in a bowl. That was a very standard way of eating soups and broths, which were a major part of every meal. So in this way, the bread functioned as a type of spoon.

And this is actually how the word *bread* acquired its modern sense in the English language. I noted earlier that the main word for bread in Old English was *loaf*. That was the more general term. The word *bread* merely meant one of those pieces that had been cut off from the main loaf. But over time, the meaning of *bread* expanded to become the more generic term, and the meaning of *loaf* narrowed to the full piece of bread that's baked in the oven.

This process of removing a piece of bread from the loaf and eating it – or eating with it – also explains that phrase ‘to break bread’ which I mentioned earlier in the episode. That phrase was first used in the late 1300s in the Wycliffe Bible. And it specifically referred to the fact that diners would break off a piece of bread from the loaf and eat it – or eat with it. So ‘to break bread’ with someone was to literally break a loaf of bread into smaller pieces. Of course, it became a figurative term for having a meal with that person.

Since the loaf was shared with the other people at the table, there were specific rules of etiquette that applied to the breaking of the loaf – and the eating of the bread. For example, the Book of Courtesy instructs diners to break off what they need with their hands, but not to take a direct bite out of the loaf and return it to the table. Here’s the passage – first in Modern English, then in the original Middle English:

Don’t bite from your bread and lay it back down.  
That is not a courtesy to use in a town or a civilized place;  
But break off as much as you will eat,  
The remnants or leftover portion you should give to the poor.

Byt not on thy brede and lay hit down,  
That is no curteyse to vse in town;  
But breke as myche as þou wylle ete,  
The remelant to pore þou shalle lete. (ll. 49-52)

The book also discourages double-dipping with the bread. So don’t sop your bread in juices, eat from it, and then put it back in the dish to sop up more juice. Just finish that first piece of bread, and when you’re done with it, get another piece. Here’s the passage:

In the dish if thou wet thy bread,  
make sure that thou not be led  
to cast it again the dish into  
thou art unrefined if thou so do.

In þi dysche yf þou wete þy brede,  
Loke þer-of þat nozt be lede  
To cast agayne þy dysche in-to;  
þou art vn-hynde yf þou do so. (ll. 77-80)

So as we’ve seen, medieval diners didn’t just eat bread. They also ate with bread. It was both a food in itself, and a tool to use when eating other foods. And this use of bread as an eating utensil also helps to explain two common meanings of the word *toast*. Now *toast* is a French word, and it first appeared in English around the current point in our story in the late 1300s. And when it first appeared in English, it had the modern sense of exposing a piece of bread to heat, thereby making it slightly brown and crunchy. So you might eat a piece of crunchy toast. But you might also make a ‘toast’ to someone during a meal by having a drink in their honor. So what does the toast that you eat have to do with the drink that you consume in someone’s honor?



Well, the answer has to do with the fact that people often dipped bread in wine or ale and then ate it. This was an era when there was a lot of poor quality wine and ale, and a lot of people thought that dipping bread into it actually drew out the bad flavors, so bread made the wine or ale taste better. Again, that was probably just one of those things that people said, and a lot of people believed it, even if it didn't really work. But it fostered this notion that toast or bread actually improved the flavor of those beverages. They tasted better with bread. And in the 1600s, it became common for people to have a drink in honor of the lady of the house or the most prominent lady attending the dinner. It was said that having that drink in her honor would also improve the flavor of the wine or ale that was being served. So in that way, she was just like the toast that was dipped into the drink. They both made the drink taste better. And that connection between bread and honorary drinks led to the modern sense of the word *toast* as the act of having a drink in someone's honor. But it all began with pieces of bread that were broken off and dipped into wine or ale.

The fact that medieval diners often broke off a piece of bread for various purposes also accounts for another common word in English – the word *bribe*. *Bribe* is a French word that appeared for the first time in English in the Canterbury Tales. So it was another brand new word in English around the current point in our overall story in the late 1300s. And this might come as a bit of a surprise to you, but the word *bribe* originally meant a piece of bread. It could also mean a piece of some other type of food, but it was usually used in reference to bread. So how did a bribe go from a piece of bread to an illegal payment? Well, in France, small pieces of bread were often given to beggars to satisfy them and to get them to go away, and that appears to be how the word came to be associated with a financial transaction – the giving of something of value in exchange for something else. At the time English borrowed the word in the late 1300s, it had already acquired the sense as something extorted or stolen. And from there, the word *bribe* came to refer to an illegal payment made to someone to get that person to do something or not to do something. But the word began as a term for a piece of bread given to or extorted by beggars.

Now some foods were actually served with pieces of bread that had been cut into strips ahead of time. Again, these bread fingers were used as utensils by dipping them into a soup or broth and then eating them. That was also the way that custard was sometimes served. Custard was made with beaten eggs and milk or cream that were mixed together. It was often sweetened, and served in a bowl to be eaten with bread fingers. The custard could also be placed in a pie shell and baked. In fact, that was more of the original sense of the word *custard* when it first appeared in English. It first appeared as the French word *crustade* in that early English cookbook – the *Forme of Cury*.

A little pie made with custard was sometimes called a *tart* using another French word that entered English around the current point in our overall story. Originally custards and tarts could be made with meat, as well as fruit. But over time, the terms became associated with sweet treats. And I mention that because it points to the way that people were starting to conclude a formal meal – with a sweet treat at the end. It was commonly believed in the Middle Ages that the best way to aid the digestion of a large meal was to end it with a bit of sugar and spice. That was the origin of what we know today as *dessert*, even though the word *dessert* wasn't borrowed from French until the 1600s. At this earlier point, it was just the final course of the meal.

The mixture of sugar and spice sometimes took the form of a spiced wine sweetened with sugar or honey. It was called *hippocras* – a term that was first recorded in the Canterbury Tales. Other options included fruit served in sugar or honey, or a tart made with fruit or custard. [SOURCE: The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages, Terence Scully, p. 135-6]

There was also a French dish called *pain perdu*. That was a type of French toast that literally meant ‘lost bread.’ The bread was sliced and then dipped in a beaten egg and fried in butter. It was usually served with a sprinkle of sugar on top. Many cooks probably served it because it was a good way use up old or stale bread. The firmness of old bread was actually ideal for that type of dish. That fancy French name *pain perdu* has largely disappeared from English, and today, we would probably just call it ‘French toast.’

Another item that might be served at the end of the meal was a wafer. This wasn’t bread in the traditional sense of a baked loaf. It was actually made from a thin batter comprised of flour, eggs, cream and sugar. So unlike a thick custard, this was a thin batter that was placed in a special wafer-iron consisting of two thin plates that held the batter in place while it was cooking. It produced a relatively thin cracker or biscuit, often with a criss-cross pattern on it. The word *wafer* appeared for the first time in Piers Plowman in the late 1300s. It was borrowed from French, but it has Germanic roots. In fact, *wafer* is derived from the same Germanic root that produced the Dutch word *waffle*.

Now these candied fruits and tarts and custards and wafers point to an increased interest in sweet foods in the late Middle Ages. In prior centuries, northern Europeans had limited access to sweeteners. They generally used honey because access to sugar was limited. Sugar had to be imported from the Near East and South Asia. That meant that it was expensive. And that was still the situation at the current point in our overall story in the late 1300s. Upper class kitchens might have access to sugar, but lower class cooks didn’t tend to use it very much at all. But within a few decades – by the middle of the 1400s – all of that had started to change. Sugar started to be grown in parts of Spain and Portugal, and that increased the supply that was available to Europeans. That also meant that the price of sugar went down. So recipes that had previously called for honey now recommended the use of sugar.

That new supply of sugar satisfied the sweet tooth of many northern Europeans, and in fact, the term ‘sweet tooth’ appeared in the English language around this same time. If you had a ‘sweet tooth,’ it meant that you had a desire for sweet foods. The term was recorded for the first time in the writings of Chaucer’s close friend and colleague John Gower. And it confirms that many people in the late 1300s did in fact have a sweet tooth, and sugar increasingly satisfied that craving.

Sugar also changed the nature of breads because the increased availability of sugar meant that it could be added to bread dough. And that meant that sweetened breads and pastries became more and more common over the next few centuries. This development also helps to shed some light on the complicated and inconsistent meanings of words like *cake*, *cookie*, *cracker* and *biscuit*.

These words have a variety of meanings, depending on the particular food item you're talking about and depending on which side of the Atlantic you happen to be standing on. So let me conclude this episode by trying to explain how those terms developed and evolved.

Again, up until the current point in our story in the late 1300s, most bread products were unsweetened. The word *bread* was used in the sense of a loaf of bread which was unsweetened and also leavened so that it rose while it baked. English also had the word *cake* which had been borrowed from the Vikings. The word *cake* referred to a specific type of bread. It was unsweetened like regular bread, and it was also leavened like regular bread. It just happened to be smaller and flatter than regular bread, and it tended to be round. A *cake* was also turned over while it was cooking, so it was baked on both sides and was therefore harder than a regular loaf of bread. But again, there wasn't really all that much difference between bread and cake.

English also had the word *biscuit* which was different from the other breads in that it was unleavened. So it didn't really rise or expand while it was baking. It was therefore a dense and hard piece of bread. And again, just like the other breads, it wasn't usually sweetened at this point either.

Now the word *biscuit* was borrowed from Latin and French in the early 1300s, and if we look a little closer at that word, we can start to understand how biscuits came about in the first place. The word actually has its origin in ancient Rome. The Romans needed a way to preserve bread for long periods of time – especially on long journeys. Bread would become moldy and stale after a few days, but Roman bakers realized that if you took bread and put it back into the oven for a while, it would dry out. It would become hard and crunchy, but it would also last for a very long time without going bad. Since this type of bread was essentially baked twice, that's what the Romans called it. They combined the Latin word *bi* meaning 'two' with the word *coctus* meaning 'cooked' from the same root as the word *cook*. So this type of bread was described as *bicoctus* – literally twice-cooked or twice-baked. And *bicoctus* later evolved into the French word *biscuit*. It also evolved into the Italian word *biscotto*. And if you're familiar with Italian *biscotti* bread, you can get a sense of what the original biscuits looked like. *Biscuit* and *biscotti* are two variations of that same Latin root word meaning 'twice-baked.'

By the time the word *biscuit* was being used in English in the late 1300s, it still referred to a crisp dry type of bread, but it was usually a thin hard wafer that wasn't leavened. So it didn't rise when it was baked.

So again, English speakers had loaves of 'bread' and smaller and harder 'cakes,' both of which were leavened. And they had thin and crispy 'biscuits,' which weren't leavened. And all of those bread items were usually served without sweeteners. But in the 1400s and 1500s, bakers started to add sugar to cakes and biscuits. So cakes started to become sweeter than regular loaves of bread, and that was a distinction that grew greater over time. Meanwhile biscuits could be either sweetened or unsweetened.

Now within British English, the word *biscuit* hasn't changed very much since then. It still refers to bread-based products that are thin and crispy, and they can either be sweetened or unsweetened. But that's not what the word typically means in American English. In North America, we would tend to call those items either crackers or cookies. The word *biscuit* refers to something quite different here. So what happened within American English to cause those changes? Well, believe it or not, the short answer is Dutch – specifically, the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam which later became the colony of New York.

After the British took over, Dutch continued to be spoken alongside English for a while. And Dutch had coined a term for a small cake. That word was *koekje* – the original version of our modern word *cookie*. Again, it literally meant a 'small cake' in Dutch, and it was derived from the same Germanic root as the Norse word *cake*. In North America, that word *koekje* was a very broad term. It was used to refer to both small leavened cakes and thin crunchy wafers. So the word encompassed what the English called *biscuits*. And initially, it appears that the Dutch word was preferred over the word *biscuit*.

But eventually, American colonists wanted to distinguish the small leavened cakes which were softer from the unleavened wafers which were hard and thin and crispy. Since those thin wafers or biscuits cracked when they were broken in half or eaten, they were called *crackers*. That term was in place by the mid-1700s, and it encompassed much of what had previously been known as biscuits. And the softer leavened cakes continued to be called by the Dutch word *koekje* or *cookie*. And that's why English 'biscuits' are called *crackers* and *cookies* in much of North America today.

Now when early American English adopted the words *cookie* and *cracker*, it didn't really need the word *biscuit* anymore. Again, much of that original meaning was now covered by the word *cracker*. So that allowed the meaning of the word *biscuit* to shift to other types of bread. And in the early 1800s, Noah Webster noted that American biscuits were 'fermented,' which meant that they were leavened, and were therefore softer and fluffier than the traditional British biscuit. [SOURCE: Listening to America, Stuart Berg Flexner, p. 74-5.] And that implies that the word *biscuit* was already being used in the modern American sense when Noah Webster was alive. At first, those American biscuits were more commonly known as 'baking-soda biscuits' or simply 'soda biscuits' to distinguish them from the traditional hard biscuits, but there was no reason to maintain that distinction once American English stopped using the word *biscuit* in the original sense of the word. So over time, those fluffy 'soda biscuits' just became known as *biscuits*. And that's how the various meanings of *biscuit* became distinct on each side of the Atlantic.

Now before I conclude, I should note that the English dialects of Scotland also had the word *cookie*, but it had a completely different meaning there. It meant a plain bun, and the word apparently originated there independently of the Dutch word. So the word *cookie* in Scotland has an altogether different history and a different meaning.

So with that brief look at early desserts, we've reached the end of our meal, and we can conclude our look at mealtime in the Middle Ages.

As we've seen, bread has been a major part of our diet and our language since the time of the Anglo-Saxons. The modern focus on low-carb diets may reduce the overall amount of bread that we eat, but it's not likely to change the number of bread-related terms in the language. The presence of those terms throughout the language points the importance of bread throughout history and the important role that bread played in shaping the English language.

Next time, we'll turn our attention back to our overall historical narrative, and we'll explore the political events that we're taking place as our story enters the 1400s. We'll examine the forced abdication of the king, and the rise of a new political dynasty. We'll also look at the emergence of a standardized form of English known as the Chancery Standard. That was actually the first major step toward a standard form of English – a development that was accelerated with the arrival of the printing press a short time later. So next time, we'll set the stage for some very important developments in the history of the language.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.