NEWS RELEASE

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Food for thought from Medieval France

When we think of food and good humor these days, we think of a brand name ice cream product.

In 14th and 15th Century France, however, good and bad humors were ascribed to food, and balancing those humors - to achieve a humor precisely suited to the human temperament - became the basis of French cuisine.

In their new book, *Early French Cookery,* published by The University of Michigan Press, Terence and Eleanor Scully present not just more than 100 recipes for dishes from the Middle Ages that travel well to the 20th Century, but also reveal why the French ate what they ate 20 generations ago, how they prepared it, how they dined, and how economics and the social structure of the day affected the table.

There are plenty of myths about Middle Ages cookery that the Scullys (he is a just-retired professor of French language and literature at Wilfrid Laurier University; she is an avid cook and occasional lecturer at the Stratford Chef School) dispel in *Early French Cookery*.

"It wasn't the Dark Ages," says Eleanor. "The University of Paris was well established at this time and there were people who had the money to buy things," including the wares of travelling peddlers, who sold such things as cooked pies, roast meats, peeled carrots and dough starter.

A diversity of foodstuffs was important in bringing balance to meals. Greek and Arabic humoral theory taught Medieval physicians that all things were constituted of a delicate balance of four qualities: warmth, cold, moisture, and dryness. In a healthy state, the theory held, human beings possessed a nature that was moderately warm and moist.

Therefore, anything a human ate that was not moderately warm and moist was apt to upset his or her temperament through bad humors such as choler (warm and dry), melancholia (cold and dry), phlegm (cold and moist) or an excessively sanguine disposition (too warm and too moist). To resist these bad humors, corrective action needed to be taken, either through cooking or through appropriate condiments, particularly herbs and spices.

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"It's very New Age," jokes Eleanor, an avid cook who has prepared hundreds of Medieval dishes and prepared Medieval banquets for her husband's students. "It's certainly not the nutrition I learned at the University of Toronto."

And no matter what you may have been told in school, spices were *not* used excessively in the Middle Ages, nor were they used to disguise the taste of food that was on the verge of rotting, adds Terence.

Spices, after all, were costly. If the leg of lamb had turned, it was much cheaper to throw it out and buy more than to douse it with spices.

"There is also a myth that banquets were rowdy and people threw bones across the room," adds Eleanor. In fact, banquets were quite formal in the Middle Ages, with strict protocol dictating who sat above or below the salt, and who received the upper crust. A polite diner would not take the biggest or best pieces of meat, and would wipe the grease off his or her upper lip to avoid leaving oil slicks on the wine - an important consideration since one goblet served two guests.

The French of the Middle Ages ate many things, including wild game, fresh and salted fish, chickens and geese, cheese and eggs. There was, of course, no refrigeration, and food was prepared over open fires without the benefit of thermometers or timers.

"And I don't think the Medieval housewife could have done without almonds," says Eleanor, which show up in one form or another in many of the old recipes. "Almonds were probably one of the predominant tastes in Medieval cooking."

Pine nuts were also used extensively, and the most popular spice of the time was a West African product called grains of paradise, which has a gingery/musty taste.

When you think of contemporary French cooking you think of vegetables, and while vegetables do not figure prominently in Middle Ages recipe books, "you have to assume" they were an important part of the diet then, too, says Eleanor. "There are all kinds of references to vegetable gardens and how to maintain a good basic household garden" in the surviving literature, she says.

Early French Cookery, which draws on original sources and original recipes, presented with modern adaptations and combined with history, has been received enthusiastically in Canada, the United States and Europe. "It's hitting a wide variety of people," says Eleanor, and a second printing is under consideration.

With more than 7,000 centuries-old European recipes in Terence's database, it is possible that other cookery books will follow. "The Catalan and Portuguese recipes look really interesting," says Eleanor.