

PLANNING THE MENU

Baroness Wulfwyn aet Hamtune, OL, OP

I have my own definition for what a Feast Steward's job really is: You're the one in charge of providing a balanced, flavorful, and pleasant dining experience for the people who have paid for the privilege. You aren't presenting an Art/Sci project (from experience, I know this is what some people think, but don't fall into that trap). Good food, in good quantity, is the goal. And you have to do a 3-5 course meal on a McDonald's budget. You CAN do it. This class is designed specifically for first-time feast stewards, but even experienced cooks could learn a thing or two.

What to cook; that is the question. Just how do you pick your dishes and lay out your courses so they make sense within the whole, yet offer different flavors throughout the meal? As with the event plan, there are many factors involved in making this decision. Here are the basics:

Decide how "period" you wish the feast to be. Do you HAVE to go totally period? The simple answer is "No." The SCA has blundered along for half a century with and without completely period feasts. It all depends on your comfort level.

Take a few moments to ask yourself some questions, and don't ask anyone else for the answers. Your friends will tell you that you can do anything, but this is an internal Q&A session.

Have you successfully created period dishes in the past?

Did they taste good?

Were you happy with how they turned out?

Does the very thought of period food make you cringe and run screaming into the night?

It's okay if your answer is "no" to some of these. The goal is to come to grips without external input. Know thyself, and half the battle's won.

Once you have figured this out, you can start picking dishes. If you have a time period and geographic limit, start there, keeping in mind the other factors involved (time of year, activities scheduled, kitchen facilities, etc.). Just for argument's sake, let's say the event is a late 15th century pas de armes, with tons

of fighting, a ladies' gallery, and all the High Middle Ages hoopla a body could stand, and its February. You've decided you're comfortable with a lot of period dishes, but this is the first time you've ever been Feast Steward on your own.

European tournaments being what they were, the availability of period recipes for this type of event is actually pretty enormous. Knights from all over the Known World traveled extensively, with their retinues, including cooks, who picked up recipes everywhere they went. So, are you limited to Menagier or Chiquart? No. You don't have to limit yourself to one source for your recipes. You have many sources, and you are not as limited by geographical boundaries as you might think. French recipes, especially from the eastern border, are heavily influenced by German recipes (shared markets and agricultural processes); English recipes were basically French recipes in shorthand (French cooks took over with the Normans, but with English sub-cooks); Spanish recipes were sprinkled liberally with African and Italian influences (remember the Moors), and so forth.

Feel free to pick and choose what you want on your menu from the bounty that is the late 15th century recipe corpus. I use the Chinese menu method, one from Book A, another from Book B, and a third from another source altogether. It's okay to do this. It's how you accomplish a balanced, flavorful feast that's good to eat from the opener to dessert.

THE COURSES

Speaking of the opener, let's talk about that very first course. If you're outdoors in June, you might try a cold soup (Roman), or a simple antipasti platter (Italian), or a fruit plate (again, Roman and/or Mediterranean). If it's December, go for that hot soup. One thing medieval people ate gallons of was soup. They called it pottage, and there were so many different kinds it's a veritable cornucopia of possibilities. This is a good course to limit to vegetarian recipes. If you're serving animal proteins in later courses, don't start with animal proteins in your opener.

A note about bread, butter, and cheese: Please don't go there. Putting a loaf of bread and some butter and/or cheese on the table before feast is the best way to have lots of wasteful leftovers of subsequent courses. Bread fills the gut and gluten slows you down, so by the time the meat courses arrive, your feasters have full bellies and are yawning, so just don't do it. If a course REALLY needs a bread accompaniment, by all means choose good, toothy bread, but limit the portion size and number of portions per table. If there are 6 people at a table, you send 6 2-ounce portions of bread, and make sure the servers PICK UP whatever is left when they clear the course. People will eat bread unconsciously, and if there's bread on the table, they will eat it all, and ask for more, and then your fabulous courses, on which you spent most of your feast budget won't get eaten or appreciated, which is a crying shame.

A note about salad: Mother Nature's little broom should not be served as an opener. If you've ever eaten in Europe, you know the salad, if it's not already the main course, doesn't get served until right before dessert. Don't start your feast with a salad. It's VERY 21st century modern eating, and not medieval AT ALL.

On to the second course. This should include an animal protein, preferably something fairly light and inexpensive, such as chicken. In your meat courses, avoid side dishes containing starches. Go real easy on the rice, frumenty, and other grain-based starchy foods, for the same reasons you shouldn't put bread on the table. Stick to vegetable side dishes that are made so the vegans and vegetarians can actually eat the (vegetable fats, not butter; vegetable broth, not chicken, etc.) and make them plentiful.

The third course should contain your most expensive protein, usually beef, or something exotic, or a really good fish. Yes, you can serve fish, but you had better

be very good at choosing and cooking fish in quantity. This is the course you will ruin if you're not good at it. If you are stewing, and you think you need to give them bread to sop up the gravy, use the same portion size as with the opener. Keep it to 2 ounces per person, and make sure your stew is thick enough not to need a whole lot of bread to clean the plate. Stew should be thick; don't make it a watery pottage. Make a small pot of meatless for the vegetarians.

You can have a fourth course of meat, if you wish, or you can place a salad course in this position. You will want to reduce the size of the portions if you do a fourth course. I'll talk about portion control in a bit.

And now for dessert. There are many ways to approach dessert at a feast. If you've got peeps who will bake for you, a dessert board can take that load off your shoulders. Cheese & fruit platters work, but are usually expensive. Puddings are my favorite desserts, because they can be made up well in advance and be brought to room temperature before serving.

PORTION CONTROL

If you don't have it, you are in trouble before you cook the first dish. Here are my basic "guidelines" for portion-controlling a feast:

Course 1: 4 oz. soup w/2 oz. bread OR 2-3 oz. of any other food

Course 2: 4 oz. meat protein, 3 oz. vegetables OR 2 oz. grain-based starch (if you must)

Course 3: 3 oz. meat protein, 2 oz. vegetables

Course 4 (and 5 and 6, if you must): 1 oz. salad OR 2 oz. meat protein, 2 oz. vegetables

Dessert: 2 oz. pudding or other mass quantity food OR 3 oz. total cheese, fruit, nuts

If you add up all the "portions" for all the dishes you plan to serve at the feast, you will discover that, if a feaster eats every portion sent out to him, they will consume somewhere around 1-2 POUNDS of food. That's A LOT of calories! When you think of your feast in this fashion, it becomes very clear that portion control is the single most important part of staying under budget.

How to figure it out: Make a batch (a batch is the as written, not expanded version) of your recipe. The directions may say "makes 4 servings" or something along those lines. Weigh it (now is a good time to purchase an accurate food scale, especially if you plan to do this again). Divide the weight by the portion size you have chosen to serve. NOW how many servings does one batch make? That recipe for 4 probably serves twice that many people in a feast setting.

How do you accomplish portion control with our normal family-style feast service? During your recipe tests, weigh out 1 portion. Pick the serving vessel and utensil that best fits that portion times 6 or 8 (the most common head count per table). Enter those notes in your plating plan. On feast day, you simply weigh out however many portions are going to each table, and put them in your planned serving vessel. The people at the table are responsible for divvying up the individual portions, and in most cases, will do the right thing.

Second helpings: Unless your Host demands it, don't do it. Your expediter OR Server Captain (it's up to you to recruit someone to do this) scrapes out the leftover food from the serving vessels into an individual container for that purpose (I use hotel pans, if the site has them, or disposable foil steam table pans if they don't). Your servers and kitchen help food can be taken from here, unless you have planned their food in advance and kept it back in the kitchen. Use good judgement. If someone at the feast can't eat the next course, and would like more of this one, by all means help them out. You want the feasters happy and well-fed. But don't make a general issuance of "seconds" if you don't have to.

Entremets, Subtleties and Weird Food:

An entremet is an intermission, a palate cleanser. You can utilize entremets between courses if you wish. Make sure it is light and refreshing, and can be prepared well in advance of your feast. It's easy to forget about it in the crunch hours.

A subtlety (spelling variations abound) is illusion food. They can be very simple, or extremely elaborate. They might be completely edible, or only partially edible. They are often time-consuming and can be ridiculously expensive, but if you have room in your feast budget (or are willing to eat the expense out of your own pocket), they are great fun to present. Many feast stewards bring in someone to do this for them. If you know someone who's really good at it, invite them to play with you. If you intend to serve the subtlety, please remember to present it 2 courses before you serve it, to allow for portioning and service prep.

Weird food is anything we do not normally eat in the 21st century. Please do not make entire courses out of weird food (haggis; offal; dormouse; etc.). If you've found a recipe you really like and would like to showcase it at your feast, by all means, give it a go. Add it to an existing course, and serve it in 1-2 ounce portions. Most feasters will actually try the dish when presented in this way.

Variety is the spice of life: When presenting a feast, one thing you really want to keep in mind during your planning stages is variety. Use different spice profiles, textures, colors and cooking methods, varying all of that from course to course so your feasters will not become bored. When a course goes to the tables, it should not resemble the course they just ate. If you serve a brown soup in course 1,

make sure course 2 is a different color (not dark brown to light brown), and it shouldn't be soupy. If course 2 is broiled fish, the next course should not be broiled. If course 3 is crispy, course 4 should be softer. If everything you serve is brown goo, you're not doing your job.

Under the guise of seasoning, many medieval foods use wine, or vinegar, or almond milk, a lot. Use these flavor profiles ONCE in a feast. If every course tastes like wine, or vinegar, or almond milk, you're not doing your job.

Just because most medieval vegetables were cooked into mushy oblivion doesn't mean you have to follow suit (this is part of being able to adjust medieval recipes to serve the modern palate). Use fresh vegetables (canned green beans are horrid; don't do it). Prep and cook just until done. Make sure they can be warmed up successfully. Don't use animal products in the cooking of them.

This takes thought and planning. You must look at every component of every dish and source with an eye to keeping feasters interested in "what's next?". Your reputation as a cook can be made or broken right here.

Food allergies, special diets, and "ooh, ick!": There are more feasters who fall into this category in the 21st century than ever before. I would be willing to bet that at least 70% of everyone who buys feast is on a diet, has gone vegetarian, has some kind of disease that is controlled or worsened by their diet, or simply hates something on the menu. What to do? What you do is help them out as much as possible.

Gluten-free can be easily addressed by not relying on bread to fill the feasters' bellies. People who need to avoid hard wheat can avoid the bread with the soup. It's the hidden wheat that gets them. You can solve this dilemma by changing from AP flour to rice flour or cornstarch (yes, I know, not period, but neither is a gluten-free diet) when making anything "breaded" or "thickened". Rice flour is gluten-free, fries up crispy, and has no real flavor.

Vegetarian/vegan can be easily addressed as well. Unless you're making a meat pottage, don't use meat stocks. Use vegetable broth instead. You can do this for sauces, too. Unless a dish absolutely **MUST** have butter in it to work (a lot of late period pastries come to mind), just use olive or other vegetable oils.

Diabetes is rampant in our modern society, so it makes sense that our little microcosm has a lot of it, too. Please don't hide the sugar (including honey). The

flip side of this is do not use artificial sweeteners at all, unless you're making something special for your hosts, at their request. They make people sick.

Once you have published your ingredients list, **CHANGE NOTHING**. On feast day, don't play presto-changeo with ingredients. Make your recipes with the ingredients you've published. And if you absolutely can't, make sure the Hall Steward announces the change before the food hits the tables.

Problem children: There's always one. They bought feast. They didn't read what was on the menu. They didn't peruse the published ingredients list. They can't eat anything. And they will waylay you in the crunch hours, with a bitchy attitude, often with support from a child or significant other or even a peer. Been there, experienced that. It still happens. Find someone in your kitchen to take them through the menu and ingredients list. If they can't make some sort of meal from the selections therein, suggest that they sell their feast token. You can't fix this. No matter how much you want to try, you cannot **FIX** stupid. My only advice is to not let them get to you. Have a drink and forget about it.