

## A MEDIEVAL MEAL WITH ST FRANCIS AND CLARE

When St Francis was staying in Assisi, he often visited St Clare and consoled her with holy advice. And as she had a very great desire to eat a meal<sup>1</sup> with him once, she asked him several times to give her this consolation. But St Francis always refused to grant her that favour.

So it happened that his companions, perceiving St Clare's desire, said to St Francis: "Father, it seems to us that this strictness is not according to divine charity - that you do not grant this request of Sister Clare, a virgin so holy and dear to God, in such a little thing as eating with you, especially considering that she gave up the riches and pomp of the world as a result of your preaching. So you should not only let her eat a meal with you once, but if she were to ask an even greater favour of you should grant it to her your little spiritual plant."

St Francis answered: "So you think I should grant this wish of hers?" and the brothers said: "Yes, Father, for she deserves this favour and consolation." Then St Francis replied: "Since it seems so to you, I agree. But in order to give her greater pleasure, I want this meal to be at St Mary of the Angels, for she has been cloistered at San Damiano for a long time and she will enjoy seeing once more for a while the Place of St Mary where she was shorn and made a spouse of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we will eat there together, in the name of the Lord."

Therefore he set a day when St Clare would go out of the monastery with one sister companion, escorted also by his companions.

And she came to St Mary of the Angels. And first she reverently and humbly greeted the Blessed Virgin Mary before her altar where she had been shorn and received the veil. And then they devoutly showed her around the Place until it was mealtime. Meanwhile St Francis had the table prepared on the bare ground, as was his custom. And when it came time to eat, St Francis and St Clare sat down together and one of his companions with St Clare's companion, and all the other brothers were grouped around that humble table.

But at the first course St Francis began to speak about God in such a sweet and holy and profound and divine and marvellous way that he himself and St Clare and her companion and all the others who were at that poor little table were rapt in God by the overabundance of divine grace that descended upon them.

And while they were sitting there, in a rapture, with their eyes and hands raised to heaven, it seemed to the men of Assisi and Bettona and the entire district that the Church of St Mary of the Angels and the whole place and the forest which at that time was around the place were all aflame and that an immense fire was burning over all of them. . Consequently the men of Assisi ran down there in great haste to save the place and put out the fire, as they firmly believed that everything was burning up.

But when they reached the place they found that nothing was on fire. Entering the place they found St Francis with St Clare and all the companions sitting around that very humble table, rapt

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<sup>1</sup> The source for the idea of having a medieval meal is the Little Flowers of St Francis Number 15.

in God by contemplation and invested with power from on high. Then they knew for sure that it had been a heavenly and not a material fire that God had miraculously shown them to symbolise the fire of divine love which was burning in the souls of those holy friars and nuns. So they withdrew with great consolation in their hearts and with holy edification.

Later, after a long while, when St Francis and St Clare and the others came back to themselves, they felt so refreshed by spiritual food that they paid little or no attention to the material food. And when that blessed meal was over, St Clare, well accompanied, returned to San Damiano.

The sisters were very glad to see her, for they feared that St Francis might send her to direct some other monastery, as he had sent her holy sister St Agnes to be Abbess of the Monastery of Monticelli in Florence. For at that time St Francis was sending Sisters out to rule other monasteries. And he had once said to St Clare: "Be prepared, in case I have to send you somewhere else." And she had replied like a truly obedient daughter: "Father, I am always ready to go wherever you send me." And so the sisters rejoiced greatly when they had her back. And henceforth St Clare was much consoled in the Lord. To the glory of Christ. Amen.

## FINDING A MENU

At that time, blessed Francis was staying at the hermitage of the brothers of Fonte Colombo, near Rieti for treatment of his eyes.

One day the eye doctor came to visit him and talked with him, as usual for an hour: he was preparing to leave when the saint said to one of his companions: “Go and have a good meal served to our doctor.” His companions answered him: “Father, we blushing admit that our food supply is so low at this moment that we are ashamed to invite him and offer him anything to eat.”

Blessed Francis answered: “Men of little faith, do not make me repeat myself.” The doctor said to blessed Francis and his companions: “Brother, it is precisely because the brothers are so poor that it would be a pleasure to eat with them.”

This doctor was very rich and, although the saint and his companions had often invited him, he never wanted to share a meal with them.

The brothers went and prepared the table and blushing placed on it the little bread and wine they had as well as a few vegetables that they had prepared for themselves.

All sat down at table. Hardly had the meal begun when someone knocked on the door of the hermitage: a brother got up to answer it: it was a woman who was bringing a large basket full of white bread, fish, lobster-pie,<sup>2</sup> some honey, and some grapes that seemed to have been freshly picked.

All this was sent to blessed Francis by the lady of a castle about seven miles from the Hermitage. Whereupon the brothers and the doctor were in great admiration as they pondered the sanctity of the Father.

The doctor said to the brothers: “My Brothers, neither you nor I appreciate as we should the sanctity of this man.”

When St Francis was dying the very wealthy Lady Jacoba de Settesoli, the widow of Graziano Frangipani, arrived from Rome with gifts for Francis including special sweets for him made of almonds.

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<sup>2</sup> “pastillis cammarorum” (crab or lobster) or “mastillis gymarorum” (prawns). Most probably a fresh water yabbies.

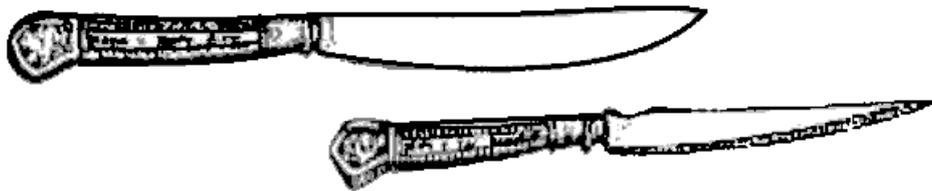
# The Menu

*(From the stories )*

Wine & Water  
Vegetables  
*(what the brothers already had)*

Basket of Bread  
Fish  
Lobster-Pie  
Honey  
Grapes  
*(what was sent to them)*

Almond Sweets  
*(brought by Lady Jacoba de Settesoli)*



## **MEDIEVAL TABLE MANNERS**

In Great Houses and Castles setting the tables and serving required a detailed knowledge of a rather fanciful etiquette. Also in Medieval times where you sat at table indicated clearly your status in society.

Table manners were carefully described in etiquette books for young people. This was necessary because many at dinner were from peasant or farming backgrounds and had no idea of courteous living.

The student was told to have clean fingernails since he was also told, not to dip his fingers too deeply in any shared dish of food and not to leave finger marks on the table. He must not drink from a shared cup with his mouth full lest he should soil it, nor should he drink his soup noisily. He should not pick his teeth with a knife, blow on his food to cool it, or wipe his mouth on the tablecloth. He should clean the spoon properly and not leave it in the dish.

Pointed knives were used to lift food to the mouth, as there were no forks in those days. The idea of the fork took off slowly as men considered it, to be rather effeminate. No doubt, in a serious argument, one could not threaten others with a fork nor dig it into the table to make a point.

The student was told he should not gnaw bones, or tear his meat to bits with his teeth or fingers. He should not scratch his head at the table and there were also specific notes on belching and spitting.

In teaching manners, it is significant that cleanliness and courtesy were considered priorities for both the enjoyment of food and for communal living in general. All this was considered so important that instructions were laboriously written down by hand for generations of lords and ladies to learn off carefully.

## **A COMMENT ON MEDIEVAL COOKING**

Salt was used extensively as a preservative for fish and meats. It was also used as a cooking spice. Mustard and Saffron were home grown. Pepper was imported in large quantities and everyone high and low used a great deal of it. The Crusaders brought sugar back about 1100 AD. It was imported already processed in the form of cones called "Sugar loaves". It was brown or white. However it was extremely expensive and often it was kept under lock and key. Wealthy medieval cooking was pungent with ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, cardamoms, and cloves, and other spices we no longer use. They were popular because they masked or improved the taste, not so much of tainted food, but of the seemingly unending salted, smoked and dried winter foods. Citrus fruits were not readily available. They were not imported into England until 1290. The biggest luxury imported to England was almonds. Almond milk features in dozens of recipes. The poor could not afford it.

## FOODS THAT WERE NOT KNOWN TO MEDIEVAL COOKING

It would seem that Marco Polo brought back **Pasta, Spaghetti, Noodles and Tea** from China. Even then Tea was an ancient drink in China.

With the discovery of the Americas a number of new foods came to Europe. Sir Walter Raleigh not only brought Tobacco to England in 1596 but also **Potatoes**. From America came **Tomatoes**, which were first called “Love Apples” and **Corn on the cob** - the staple food of the American Indians. However Corn was not so readily accepted to the European table as it was seen as food for farm animals. Ultimately the Italians would make Polenta with it. **Pineapple** came from Brazil. So European cooking owes a bow at least to Christopher Columbus.

**Oranges, lemons and Bananas** came from Tropical Asia. However oranges and lemons were available in Medieval Europe having been brought by the Moors to Spain. The Moors brought **Egg Plant** from Africa. **Coffee** and **Coco** were not known in Medieval Europe. When Coffee arrived in Venice about 1600 the local clergy condemned it calling it a “bitter invention of the devil”. The controversy became so great that Pope Clement VIII was asked to intervene. He decided to taste the beverage for himself before making a decision, and found the drink so satisfying that he gave papal approval.

Spices especially **Nutmeg** and **Cloves** came from the “Spice Islands” of Indonesia. **Cloves** were extremely expensive. It was said that one could buy land or a house with cloves, because it also had a medicinal purpose especially for toothache. The Arabs totally controlled the spice trade and with taxes levied on it as it came across land the prices were very high. This is one of the reasons why Christopher Columbus set out in 1492 and discovered the New World. He was looking for a back door to the Spice Islands and the wealth that would bring, but that discovery would have to wait until 1522.

On 6<sup>th</sup> September 1522, the *Victoria*, the last ship, of a fleet of five ships and 260 men, of Ferdinand Magellan’s circumnavigation of the world, sailed into a Spanish port. Natives in the Philippines had killed Magellan, but on board the *Victoria* 17 sailors and three captives remained barely alive. Suffering terribly from scurvy they refused to land in any other port and made it home to Spain. The *Victoria*’s return would have been the glorious end of a completely disastrous adventure except for two things.

First, these 17 sailors were the first people to sail around the world. They claimed a huge part of the globe for Spain and their chronicler, an Italian, lived to publish his diary of all that they had seen, experienced and suffered.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the ship’s holds were filled with **cloves** from the “Spice Islands.” The **cargo of cloves** was so valuable that it made the whole trip a financial success., despite the loss of men and ships.

Oddly enough, Arab sailors knew that Oranges, saved men from the dreaded scurvy, but the “western world” was utterly ignorant and believed that scurvy was caught much like the common cold from too much fresh air aboard ships.

Even in 1770 Capt. Cook saved his men from scurvy, not because he understood its cause, but because he took on fresh food wherever he could.

Only in 1932 did we discover that scurvy is caused by a lack of vitamin C found mainly in fresh vegetables and citrus fruits and only very recently have we discovered that some aboriginal children have shown signs of having pre-scurvy illnesses because of inadequate diet. The history of scurvy is a very sad story of learning something and then forgetting about it.

## **St Clare Rules for Fasting**

The Sisters are to fast at all times.  
On Christmas, however,  
no matter what day it happens to fall,  
they may eat twice.  
The younger sister,  
those who are weak,  
and those who are serving  
outside the monastery  
may be dispensed mercifully  
as the Abbess sees fit.  
But in a time of evident necessity  
the sisters are not bound  
to corporal fasting.

Rule of St Clare Ch III: 7-10

## PREPARATION OF THE FOOD

The Essential Menu is from Franciscan Sources. The meal is not a medieval banquet. It is meant to be a simple Franciscan meal. However, additional suggestions have been made for those wishing a little more variety.

Wine, Vegetables, Basket of Bread, Fish, Lobster-Pie, Honey, Grapes, Almond Sweets

*Additional suggestions:*

Olives, Cheese, Cold meats, Olive Oil

***(Preparation for 60 people)***

### **Wine**

Red & White Win in bottles preferably, however if cask wine is served it would be better served in stoppered bottles or jugs. Beer and Mead are also possible choices. At least 4 casks (16 bottles)

### **Vegetables**

Turnips, boiled and perhaps with a little cinnamon; Cabbage, boiled or made into sauerkraut; Beans & Peas either as green or as lentils;

### **Bread**

Some Large interesting loaves with bread board & Knives (let them cut it themselves. Also some buns and sticks are good. A load of bread in a basket could be a centrepiece on the table

### **Pies**

The pies can be large pies or finger size pies. The idea of a fish pie is a bit daunting, but it can be quite a surprise. It might be useful to use both a plain and sweet pastry. Fish/prawns/smoke salmon could all be fillings. A few cooked yabbies on the pies might be interesting.

### **Honey**

Remove the labels from the bottles and put it on the table in saucers with a spoon. People will eat bread and honey.

### **Grapes**

You will need about 5 kg each of white and black grapes. They will need to be washed and cut into small bunches and put in bowls on the table.

### **Olive Oil**

Small bowls of olive oil with some or garlic and herbs or simply Balsamic Vinegar to allow people to dip pieces of bread in. Should be placed around the table. (used instead of butter which was only for women and kids, men did not use butter)

## Almond Bread

There are many types of almond bread and biscuits in the regions of Italy. So it is possible that many varieties can be made or bought. Also since almonds were in great supply bowls of almond nuts could also be placed on the table both still in the shell and shelled.

## Creating a Medieval Ambience

**ADVERTISING:** Needs to be out early even 6 weeks ahead. Posters need a medieval theme.

**INVITATIONS & TICKETS:** Invitations or Tickets need to have a medieval picture and be possibly on parchment type paper. (Invitations or Tickets are needed so that numbers can be catered for and not just a general invitation to the whole parish.

These need to go out as soon as possible at least 4 weeks before so that people can ring back or email back their acceptance. Tickets could be sold.

**RAISING MONEY:** A Raffle could be run at the meal to compensate for costs. If the raffle is donated then you are well ahead. Even people who do not come to the dinner might be willing to buy tickets.

Invitations need to be RSVP possibly phoned through if nothing else.

- Franciscan Federation Members
- SFO
- Parish
- Invited Guests

## FOCUS OF ATTENTION

Since it is a Franciscan Medieval Meal, as many friars as possible should be invited to attend in habits. It might be possible to have a statue or a picture of the saints decorated with flowers with some medieval symbols around them.

1. **MASTER OF CEREMONIES:** There is need for a Master of Ceremonies who can officially begin the meal by introducing speakers to the people. He may need a small bell to get attention.
  - a. *The MC welcomes people to the medieval meal reminding everyone that it is a simple religious meal Then the MC briefly outlines what is to happen for the evening. **One Reading** from the source for the inspiration and later on towards the end of the meal a **Spiritual Talk**.*
  - b. *MC introduces the Reader of the story of the Meal that Francis & Clare had together in the woods.*
  - c. *MC at the end of the reading asks a priest to say Grace and invites people to eat and meet as many people as they can during the evening.*

- d. *MC makes any minor announcements or introduces those who wish to speak. MC makes introduction if there is Music (Medieval) to be played in the background or as entertainment.*
  - e. *If there is a natural lull in proceedings the MC might get someone to speak about Medieval table manners or at least to remind people to take home the booklets so as to read the information there at their leisure.*
  - f. *The MC also introduces the speaker who will give the talk.*
  - g. *The MC also concludes the evening.*
2. TABLES: Because of the number of people the tables should be bare and lengthwise in the center of the hall. At the beginning the only light in the room should be – candles on the table.<sup>3</sup> *(Atmosphere should be sparse rather than lavish, as it is a Franciscan Medieval meal not a banquet in the great hall. The emphasis is to be on having a fraternal evening together not on the setting. For this reason people should be actively encouraged to meet and talk with each other especially the friars and other religious.*
  3. CHAIRS: The Chairs would be best placed in small groups away from the tables where the food will be placed.
  4. FOOD ON THE TABLES: At the beginning all food should be on the tables. The loaves of bread with cutting boards and bread knives and wine in bottles and water. *(If you cannot get enough glasses you may have to use plastic cups. (Dreadful thought)*
  5. THE FLOW OF THE MEAL: Let people take food from the table and settle down in talking groups to have their meal.
  6. THE TALK: The Talk is given towards the end of the meal before sweets are brought in. *(If the celebration is about Francis then the theme should be about him. If the celebration is about St Clare then the theme should be about her or on another occasion it could be about both or Franciscan Life.)*
  7. MC: When the talk is over the MC thanks the speaker or asks someone else to do so. The MC then asks for the lights to be turned on and Tea & coffee and almond to be served.

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<sup>3</sup> There could be many candles together to make enough light and candles could be placed around the room.