



Master Paul of Lochse, 15th Century Altarpiece, St. James Church, Levoca, Hungary

## A Christmas Feast on the Camino

The celebration of Christmas in Medieval Europe and especially in Spain was very different from the celebrations we now consider “old fashioned.” A large fraction of our modern festival, even as it is currently celebrated in Spain, has its origins in Protestant northern Europe, and much of it dates from after the Reformation. Indeed, many elements of the current celebration had origins in the late 19th century.<sup>1</sup> The treatment of Christmas as the year’s major religious celebration is itself a little alien to Roman Catholic southern Europe where Easter, and the season leading up to it, was the primary religious holiday as it still is the focal point of the liturgical year. Some of what is now considered normal for the Christmas season was virtually unknown in rural Spain as late as the 1950s, one example being the Christmas tree. Even today, the entire season has a different rhythm in Spain from the one we take for granted in the United States and Canada. The period between several Saint’s Days in early December and Twelfth Night (Epiphany) in January is considered the holiday season, not just the week between Christmas and New Year’s, and Christmas Day is but one of several important feast days. One of the enjoyable facets of being in Spain for the holiday season is the long period of celebration instead of the frenetic emphasis we in North American place on the single day of Christmas. Epiphany or Three Kings (*la Epifanía—El Día de los Tres Reyes*) on 6 January is especially enjoyable, for it is the day children receive their presents, and the night before there are parades and fireworks.

A full examination of the holiday season in Spain today or as it was celebrated in medieval times would be large subjects themselves, so for now let’s stick to comments on the food of the season in the medieval era. Even if Christmas were but one in a lengthy year end calendar of holy days, and we would hardly recognize some of the dishes they ate, the pilgrims on the Camino and those living near its routes did celebrate Christmas as a fiesta or fête. Then, as now, eating was a big part of the

festivity. Feast, after all, comes from the same linguistic root as festival, fiesta and fête. The Christmas season was a crucial time of year in the middle ages, for the end of autumn's bounty was at hand in an era when food storage was difficult. The near gluttony of the Christmas season was in part a response to the problem of eating food before it went bad! The abundance of the year-end holidays was soon enough followed by the spare and sometimes hungry months leading up to Easter and the return of spring. The diet from Christmas until spring was often a boring one, composed of those things like grain and root vegetables that could be easily stored. Sometimes the supply ran out before the meager first fruits of spring were to be had. Think of the desperation that must have led to the first eating of asparagus or artichokes (nettles), now luxury foodstuffs but originally eaten to break the monotony, and sometimes the hunger, of the winter diet.

Hunger, on occasion resulting in famine, was common in the medieval era. Rare was the peasant who had not known hunger at some time in his or her life, and even the aristocracy suffered hunger pangs in particularly bad seasons and years. Abundant food and drink were thus the very essences of a celebration, be it a religious holiday or a community event like a baptism, a marriage or even a funeral (think of the Irish custom of the wake). The year end holidays were no exception, and their celebration demanded food varied in type and abundant in quantity.

The records of medieval cooking and eating, like most other records of the era, give us a view biased toward the tastes and consumption patterns of the educated and wealthy classes. They could afford luxuries like sugar and spices and could import good wine, fine wheat, rice and other foodstuffs over considerable distances. Their preferred menus included those luxuries. The peasantry, and especially those far from coastlines and navigable rivers, ate mostly what was available locally. Fine dishes made with rice, spices, good wine and the like were enjoyed in medieval Spain, but only rarely in rural villages or in the humble hostals, inns and taverns along the Camino. Abundance of food, not exotic foodstuffs, was the core of the medieval Christmas celebration for the people in most of the towns and villages. A whole roast ox or a boar, a goose rotating on a spit, trenchers of bread, a thick soup or stew, perhaps with some wild game, a wheel of cheese, and a barrel of wine, or in some areas cider or beer, were the essential ingredients for a community celebration of the holiday in a rural village or a small town. Such feasts would not be too difficult to reconstruct, except for the logistical problems of spit roasting a goose or a much large boar or ox in a modern kitchen. Simple ingredients were simply cooked with the technology available, open fireplaces and fire-heated ovens.

It is more fun to suggest menus and recipes likely to have been enjoyed by the richer segments of society, by families and communities able to afford spices, sugar and other expensive ingredients. By the late middle ages, fine cooking was evolving at royal courts and in aristocratic, and some monastic, settings. Not all of the religious orders were abstemious when food and drink was concerned, and many of the records of medieval food and cooking come from monasteries. Recipes from the medieval era can on occasion seem quite bizarre to us. Cane sugar was used as a flavoring, and it often startles a reader of recipes when it turns up in a dish like chicken cooked with sugar and cinnamon, still a delicacy in Morocco!

Many of the ingredients we now take for granted were unknown in the medieval era. Preparing to write this posting, I pulled several Spanish cookbooks off my shelves and those of the local public library. Recipes for all of the popular dishes we now associate with Spain have one or another exotic ingredient brought back to Spain after 1492, especially tomatoes, potatoes and peppers. No *caldo Gallego*, it has potatoes; no *arroz con pollo* or *paella* for they both require peppers; no *cocido* for it requires dried beans of American origin and so forth. With one minor exception (vanilla as an optional flavoring for *arroz con leche*), all of the ingredients required for dishes on the menu presented here are ones that could have been obtained in Medieval Spain and France, and the dishes are similar to ones described in medieval sources. The recipes themselves are based on modern sources since we, fortunately, do not have to depend on communal ovens, fireplaces and the like to cook our food.

With all of those comments and caveats, I have, with a little help from various cookbook authors, put together a Christmas menu celebrating the Camino in the medieval era. As a whole the list is not typical of a meal that would have been served in any single place or region. Instead it is a set of dishes enjoyed at luxurious holiday meals in various regions the Camino passes through. The region of origin is noted on the menu. Finally, the order of serving in the medieval era was radically different from that we now take for granted. That is too broad a topic to cover here, so I have arranged the menu in something like the order in which a meal is normally served in Europe and North America today.<sup>2</sup>

If it is to be a true feast, music is essential, and you really should hire a vocal trio along with an instrumental ensemble including at least a cornemuse or a dudelsack, a crumhorn, a dulcian and a sackbut!

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1. Marling, Karal Ann. 2000. *Christmas: Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2. In a separate essay I have included a menu for a medieval feast for the Camino and a few recipes if you want to replicate a medieval Christmas feast.

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