

# Out of the frying pan into the friar

Monasteries have always grown their own food, writes Andrew Jotischky in this extract from *A Hermit's Cookbook*



© BONHAMS LONDON UK/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

Eating habits: *The Monk's Repast* (oil on canvas) by Walter Dendy Sadler (1854-1923)

principle of equality within the community, since it was obviously impossible to ensure that all monks were eating the same food in the same amounts unless the food was served and eaten in community.

The best place to observe correct conduct in the refectory is in the constitutional decrees passed by the Cistercians, which were designed to ensure that Benedict's Rule was followed to the letter. In the earliest set of decrees, passed in 1134, no speaking was allowed in the refectory. Instead, monks were supposed to use sign language to make their needs known. Only if a monk could not make himself understood was he allowed to utter a single word, such as "bread" or "water". The punishment for violating this rule was to be deprived of wine, or of the cooked dishes for that meal.

The last stage of the journey of monastic food was from the table to the almoner's gate. Benedict's Rule specified that leftover unneaten food was to be

distributed to the poor who came to the monastery gates. Hospitality to the poor, to be distinguished from the feeding of guests, was one of the chief social duties of monasteries in both Eastern and Western traditions. The initial principle of doling out unneaten food to the poor, however, developed into something subtly different. Rather than giving out what was left over, monasteries began to make special doles to the poor. At Cluny in the 12th century, 12 three-pound loaves of bread were distributed at the almoner's door daily to the paupers of the town.

The custom of serving surplus food inevitably also led to the preparation of food that was never intended for monks to eat. Samson, of Bury St Edmunds, used to exploit this loophole regularly. Although he never ate meat himself, Samson always insisted on having at least one meat dish served at his table, so that he could have good food to give to the poor. He wanted to ensure that those who came to the abbey for alms might sometimes be given food that they can hardly ever have hoped to taste.

The complexities of providing the daily nutritional needs of a large community that was, in principle, self-sufficient meant inevitably that monasteries developed institutionally in ways that took them far from the ideals of the early monks. Laconic entries in English monastic chronicles, such as the record of a thief's breaking into the abbot of Dunstable's pig-byre and killing 14 pigs in 1245, take us into a world in which monasteries were large landowning corporations. By around 1200, most large monasteries were going con-

*This is an edited extract from A Hermit's Cookbook: Monks, food and fasting in the Middle Ages by Andrew Jotischky (Continuum, £17.99 (CT bookshop £16.20); 978-0-8264-2393-1).*

Food production was one of the things about monasticism that the reformers of the 11th and 12th centuries most wanted to change.

The Cistercians were particularly concerned about manual labour. The result was that they insisted on direct farming of their lands, rather than leasing out their landed property to tenant farmers. It did not mean, however, that the monks themselves did all the farming.

Although early Cistercians were mocked for "smelling of the fields", they were probably no more able to provide food directly from their own hands than any of the monasteries whose failings they criticised. Instead the Cistercians used lay brothers, known as "conversi", to do much of the farming for them.

GARDENS and gardening were a vital part of the economy of Western Europe by the later Middle Ages. English documentary records and archaeological evidence indicate that besides the well-managed gardens of great aristocratic households and monasteries, even peasant houses in many villages had gardens for growing vegetables. The allotment culture evidently has a long and distinguished history.

At Norwich Cathedral priory, the gardener was one of the obedient-aries (monks appointed to an official

responsibility within the monastery).

He had charge of several garden plots dotted around the monastic complex, wedged between the larder, cookhouse, pounding-mill, malt-house, wheat granary, and slaughter-house in the outer courtyard. In addition, he was responsible for the use of meadows, a cherry orchard, a pear and apple orchard, and several stands of trees.

The plants grown at Norwich were mostly for food, although there were also some cash crops, such as madder, fessels, and hemp. We can reconstruct what must have been grown from the receipts recorded for the sale of surplus vegetables and

**'The notion that garlic is a recent Mediterranean import is a myth,'**

You need about 250g each of minced or finely chopped pork and chicken. Put the meat in a large bowl, and add a few strands of saffron which have been soaked for 15 minutes in a thimbleful of warm water. Mix in a teaspoon each of salt and ground cloves, and half each of allspice and paprika. Add two

beaten eggs, and fresh breadcrumb crumbs from two large slices of white bread. Finally, mix in two tablespoons of ground almonds. All the ingredients should be shaped into a large ball. If you can get hold of a pig's stomach (the website sausage-casings.co.uk is a good place to start), fill it with the mixture. If

not, wrap a muslin cloth tightly round the ball, and tie up the loose ends with string. Immerse your encased ball into boiling water, and cook it for about 15 minutes. When it is cooked through (test with a skewer), remove from the water, carefully unwrap, and leave to cool. Separate the yolks of three eggs, beat the yolks together, and brush over the meatball. Put in a medium oven for four to five minutes until golden brown.

EARLY monasticism went hand in hand with growing food. The Rule of Pachomius, who founded monasteries in Egypt in the fourth century, mentions both an orchard for cultivating fruit and palm trees, and a vegetable garden.

In *Sayings of the Fathers*, Gelasius's monastery at Nicopolis was left a plot of land as a bequest from a solitary monk — presumably the plot he had himself tended to grow his own food, and which included a small olive grove. Even Anthony asked for a hoe, an axe, and some grain so that he could provide for himself.

The larger the community, however, the more complex its domestic economy becomes. Monasteries were intended to be self-sufficient institutions in practical affairs as well as spiritual; indeed, they had to be so in order to retain the least possible dependence on society. This effectively meant that monasteries had to be working farms, with agricultural land to produce food, and a labour force to work the land.

Although almost all monastic founders regarded some manual labour as spiritually necessary, it was probably not possible for monasteries, once they reached a certain size, to rely entirely on their own monks for such work.

There may thus have been a distinction between what was expected of monks in the way of manual labour. Cluny, which farmed out most of its lands indirectly to tenants, preserved the custom of "ritualised" labour in the kitchen garden well into the 12th century.

BETWEEN Pentecost and November, as long as it was not a feast day, the monks might be required to weed the rows of beans and peas. The ritual quality of the occasion was emphasised by the psalm-singing that preceded it, and the special drink of wine flavoured with honey and absinthe which followed.

This light work fulfilled the Rule's demand for manual labour while not taking up too much of the monks' time. This provides another reason why relatively little of the food-growing and food-production was done by monks: notoriously at Cluny and its dependants, but probably also at many other large and well-endowed monasteries, the liturgy had grown to the point where it was simply impossible to spare sufficient time for the monks to engage in regular work.

By the 12th century, large monasteries organised food production through "granges" — farms at some distance from the abbey itself.

## To make Turk's head