

Subtleties

Subtleties can add greatly to the ambience of a feast. The possibilities of subtlety creation are endless. They can be made of virtually any material, edible, non-edible, or a combination of the two. They can be fashioned to tie into the theme of the event, serve as heraldic representations for the hosting group or individuals or anything else within the scope of your imagination. Consider how the subtlety will be presented. Insure proper lighting and good lines of sight. It is a shame to spend hours working on a piece only to have it placed in a dark corner where no one will see it. Modern safety precautions are also very important. Always use food safe materials and safe food handling practices. Be sure to warn feasters about any hidden non-edible structural components and any potential allergens.

Some Common Terms

Subtleties (sotleties, etc, there are many different spellings):

- Not necessarily edible, but can be made of any food or non-edible substance
- Generally presented between courses at large banquets and meant to impress!
- Can be figurative representations of almost anything, animals, individuals or events.
- Can be theatrical e.g. live tableaux, music & dance, mock combats, etc.

Illusion Foods or Warners

- A food disguised as another food e.g. “eggs in lent” almond paste piped into hollowed out eggshells
- Always partially or completely edible

Entremets

- Literally means: between courses
- Meaning varies depending on time and location; in Italy, it refers to the live entertainment between courses, in 15th C France, the term covers both culinary and theatrical entertainment.
- Occasionally consisted of illusion foods e.g. the Coqz Heaumez in “The Viandier of Taillevent”
- May simply be a palate cleanser

Endoring

- Can refer to gilding with gold leaf
- Can also refer to brushing with a flour paste containing egg yolks and/or saffron. For example, Le Menagier's recipe for Boar's Head describes endoring one half of the head with the yolk, flour, saffron mixture and the other half with the whites, parsley, flour mixture making the finished product half green and half gold. It then says to have the painters apply gold leaf. Occasionally this referred to the paste itself, regardless of color.

Marzipan

- A modeling paste made from almonds and sugar commonly used to fashion small items such as fruits in both earlier and later periods (this technique is still used today for cake

decorating, etc). Marchpan is also the name for a decorative base made of marzipan on which elaborate sugar paste figures could be set.

Trionfi di tavola

“Triumphs of the table”: as defined in John Florio’s Italian dictionary of 1611: the sweet sculptural components (sugar paste) of Renaissance and Baroque Italian banquets. They often echoed classical Roman artistry, themes and architectural components. These showpieces were often not meant to be eaten, and were therefore sometimes painted with limner’s colors.

Sugar Plate

-Boiled sugar syrup, poured into molds (made of plaster of paris or clay) to create edible statues or made into small candies. This technique of Arabic origin was in use by at least the 13th C in Europe.

Sugar Paste

-A fine modeling paste made of powdered sugar mixed with gum tragacanth, lemon juice and rosewater. This became the modeling material of choice towards the end of the medieval period and into the Renaissance.

Period Examples

-Colored or Decorated Foods

The earliest examples involve coloring foods. Gold is one of the most popular color choices, whether obtained by use of saffron or eggs, or by gilding with actual gold leaf. Various colors could be obtained from edible substances. Some cooks even utilized limner’s colors. Modern food colors are an acceptable substitute. Parti-colored dishes were very popular, often being created out of a white base such as almond or rice dishes. “A dish of Particular Colors” in Sabina Welser’s Cookbook involves roasting hens on a spit, but basting each one of them with a different colored flour paste. 15th Century “Tourtes Parmeriennes” (meat pies) were usually gilded or silver leafed as well as decorated with miniature banners of all the Lords present at the banquet. The decoration of foods could also take the form of miniature “models”. An Ordinance of Pottage contains a recipe for little hats of meat/marrow/dried fruit stuffing enclosed in a pastry shaped to look like little hats. Miniature hedgehogs could be made of molded meat studded with almonds (as described in 14th C. Forme of Curye and in much later cookbooks like The English Housewife 1615), or made with thickened almond milk, as illustrated in the Ambras Recipe Collection. Unlike illusion foods, these examples are not tricking the diner into believing they are something else, but entertaining them with their whimsy and ingenuity of decoration.

-Animals Made to Seem Living:

There are countless accounts and recipes for redressing roasted peacocks and other large birds in their own feathers. Most directions instruct the cook to insert a wire in the neck and tail, so that these can be posed in a life-like way. They were also often made to “spit” fire by the use of cloth soaked in camphor placed in the mouth and lit just before the presentation. Various period recipes involve suspending whole cooked fish in aspic, so

that they appear to be swimming. Whole roasted larger animals could also be made to seem alive by the use of wires through their legs to hold them upright, and coating with paste or other ingenious devices to simulate skin or fur.

-Disguised Foods or “Warners” (one food masquerading as another)

One food could be molded and tinted into the shape and color of another. Eggshells could be emptied out and refilled with almond cream (the center tinted yellow to simulate an egg yolk), as outlined in The Harleian MS. Cheese could be duplicated with the milt and roe of tench, pike or carp. Substitutes for butter and ricotta were created from almonds according to the author of The Neopolitan Collection. Le Menagier contains a recipe to make beef taste like stag or venison (or bear). Ground meat and bean pastes were an immensely popular modeling material. De Fait de Cuisine instructs making hedgehogs, apples, Spanish pots, molded figures such as hares, brachets, deer, boars, the hunters with their horns, partridge, crayfish, dolphins, peas and beans, all made of molded meat and endored,. Other period references to this practice include “Poume d’orange” (oranges) in Two Anglo-Norman Cullinary Collections, “Farsur to make pomme dorryse (golden apples) and othere thynges” in The Forme of Cury and “Pear Puddings” from The Closet of Sir Kenelm Digby Opened (these are pear shaped meatballs made of ground chicken).

-Trickery (foods with an element of surprise)

The Epulario MS gives instructions for baking an empty pie shell (temporarily filled with flour to hold it’s shape), carefully cutting a hole in the bottom and inserting small birds, which will fly out when the pie is cut into, astounding all the guests. The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus provides instructions to make a cooked chicken appear to dance with the use of quicksilver. Quicksilver, along with sulphur, is also used to make a chicken “sing when it is dead and roasted” by placing it in the neck and tying both ends in Le Vivendier. Magia Naturalis and Cuoco Napoletano have recipes for “A Young Pigeon With His Bones Pulled Out” achieved by soaking the bird in a strong vinegar solution to dissolve the bones while leaving the flesh intact. A similar effect could be achieved by carefully removing the outer skin of a chicken and refilling it with a sausage stuffing mixture as in the recipe for “Farced Chicken” in Le Menagier. The art of culinary subterfuge could also be used to dissuade unwanted dinner guests. Magia Naturalis suggests using cut up harp strings and dried powdered cooked hare’s blood to strew on cooked meats. The powdered blood will melt and look fresh, while the harp strings will move from the heat, resembling live maggots. Battered and fried strung dried fruit creates an extremely accurate representation of entrails in the “Trayne Roast” recipe from the Harleian Manuscript. Worms could be created from strained peas (Welser).

-Sugar Work

Marzipan is was in use in France by the 13th C. Made from finely ground almonds or pistachios and sugar bound together with egg white, it is somewhat coarse for very fine work. Although finer modeling materials had become available, marzipan still remained in use for the rest of the medieval period. One late 16th C Spanish recipe from Libro del Arte de Cozina calls for pressing marzipan into a mold taken from a peach pit and hiding an almond inside to simulate the kernel. Banquetting Stufe references the 16th C use of

marzipan in England to make “collops of bacon” by alternating white and red layers, then cutting it into crossways strips to simulate streaky bacon. A Closet for Ladies and Gentelwomen 1611 suggests modeling “conceits of march-pane stuffe, some like pyes, birds, baskets, and such like & some print with moulds. Marzipan remains in use to the present day a favorite modeling material for miniature fruits to adorn cakes, etc, so there are various modern how-to books available to reference modeling techniques.

The Manuscripto Anonimo from the 13th c. describes how to make a castle and all its furnishings from poured sugar plate. 14th C. recipes call for sugar to be boiled together with water to a ‘correct height’ and poured into dampened molds to create hollow sugar sculptures. An Ottoman festival held in Istanbul in 1582 commissioned “sukker nakkasrli” to make several hundred poured sugar plate statues, including giraffes, elephants, lions fountains and castles. Some were so large four people were required to carry them. Sir Hugh Plat’s Delightes for Ladies describes the making of poured sugar molds out of plaster of paris (known as “burnt alabaster”, terracotta (subsequently kiln-fired), porous stone or wood. They could also be made of sulfur, lead or pewter. One such 16th C mold (made of baked clay), of St Catherine of Siena was found at the Old Bailey in London. Since the final product remains semi-transparent and often retains a grainy surface, it is hard to decorate except for the application of gold and silver leaf, but they were also often painted with culinary food dyes. It was also difficult to successfully create very complex molds with fine detail or to join different pieces together.

Sugar Paste can be modeled by hand, pressed into molds, or rolled thin and cut into shapes. The earliest reference to sugar paste is in Curye on Inglysch 15th C, but most references occur from the late 16th and the 17th centuries. The first written recipe is from The Secrets of the Reverend Maister Alexis of Piedmont c. 1562. It calls for finely ground sugar to be mixed with gum tragacanth (often referred to as ‘gum dragon’ in period), lemon juice and rosewater, producing a very malleable substance capable of achieving very fine detail work. Later period objects fashioned out of sugar paste included playing cards, walnuts, eggs, cinnamon sticks, even plates and goblets! Used as actual plates for the banquet (dessert) course in England, they could be elaborately hand painted (sometimes including popular verses) and gilded. A dinner given by Gaston IV, Comte de Foix at Tours in 1477 in honor of an embassy from the King of Hungary provided this impressive finale to the feast – “a heraldic menagerie sculpted in sugar: lions, stags, monkeys, and various other birds and beasts, each holding in it’s paw or beak the arms of the Hungarian king.” Cardinal Wolsey served a sugar plate chessboard as a gift to the French visitors at his banquet, in addition to several other culinary marvels: “there were castles with images in the same; Paul’s Church and steeple...as well counterfeited as the painter should have painted it upon a cloth or wall. There were beasts, birds, fowls of diverse kinds, and personages, most lively made and counterfeit in dishes; some fighting (as it were) with swords, some vaulting and leaping, some dancing with ladies.” These sugar paste figures were often served on “marchepanes”. These could be large and elaborately decorated, as evidenced by surviving molds.

“Trionfi di tavola” - or “triumphs of the table” were considered essential for every Italian funeral, festival, procession, wedding, state visit or banquet. They could depict

mythological themes like the phoenix or Apollo and Daphne or other hunting scenes, like sugar dogs pointing at the game the guests are about to eat, or sugar hunters throwing nets over it. Large architectural tableaux could also be constructed. Sculptors sometimes called in their friends from the foundry to cast images in jelly, ice or sugar. At the wedding feast of Henry IV and Maria de Medici, a life sized sugar sculpture was constructed by Pietro Tacca to take the place of the absent bridegroom. Trionfi were considered showpieces and kept separate from the sweetmeats meant for consumption. Often they contained gum arabic, turpentine, and very unhealthy coloring agents like white lead and cinnabar. A sugar sculpture not meant to be eaten could even be painted with oil colors. Although trionfi are simply defined as the sweet sculptural components of Renaissance and Baroque Italian banquets, these were major undertakings by important artists that also encompassed many more aspects, such as supervision of fireworks and other non culinary forms of entertainment. One of these renowned artists, Buontalenti, constructed a table for the wedding feast of Maria de Medici And Henry IV that moved across the room by itself, where it transformed itself into two fountains. In the empty space the table had vacated, a sideboard gradually rose up out of the floor, laden with sugar paste sculptural trionfi as well as sugar plate drinking cups, plates and napkins, all in the form of a winter landscape. Afterwards, the lights were dimmed, and two clouds slowly moved in from either side, opening directly over the guests. Inside were the goddesses Juno and Minerva, who had come in their jeweled golden chariots to “grace this superhuman banquet of the gods”. A theatrical argument was then staged over whose presence was more appropriate, ending with a blessing of the union and a projection of a huge rainbow across the hall. After the queen and her ladies returned to their table, it also transformed with the use of “peraktoi” (vertically turning frames used for scene changes on the stage) first into mirrors to reflect the paintings on the ceiling, then into a sugar garden complete with fruits and singing birds.

-Non-edible Subtleties

Practically all materials were employed in subtlety construction, from wax, wood and plaster to fabric and paper. Contemporary accounts describe some of these items in great detail. They are more reminiscent of the work of a modern sets and props coordinator than that of a medieval cook! Anne Boleyn’s coronation feast in 1533 featured subtleties and ships made of wax. An example from a dinner given by Gaston IV, Comte de Foix at Tours in 1477 in honor of an embassy from the King of Hungary: “A man attired in embroidered crimson satin appeared astride a similarly caparisoned horse. In his hands he carried a model garden made of wax which was filed with roses and a variety of other flowers, and set it before the ladies.

A 1435 feast subtlety for King Rene of Anjou consisted of two large tables on each of which stood a hawthorn tree covered in gold and silver flowers, the greenery enriched with gold tinsel and adorned with the heraldic arms of France and of the other guests. Eighteen smaller trees bore the ducal arms. This décor framed the entry of an entremet involving a peacock surrounded by ten golden lions, each holding a banner bearing the arms of the ducal lands.

Le Viandier de Taillevent provides instruction for creating the Swan Knight in his right: have 12 pieces of light wood, with the 4 uprights stronger than the others. Assemble everything and nail it very strongly. Have some lead sheets 3 feet in length and as much in width (you will need at least 2 or 3 sheets of lead). Make it in the shape of a little chest about a foot deep that can hold two or 3 buckets of water. Make a little skiff of glued parchment in which will be put the image of the Swan Knight. You need the likeness of a little swan made of glued parchment covered with fine vair or white down. You need a little chain resembling gold hung from the swan's neck and attached to the skiff within the lead box. For the box attach 4 wheels to 4 [inverted] chevrons attached here and there. You need some linen dyed like waves of water. Nail it to the top of the box so that one does not see the men who will be underneath.

-Theatrical Presentations

Later period banquets could have exclusively theatrical breaks between courses. Sometimes the theatrics were employed in conjunction with the serving of the food, although at other times these productions functioned more like pageant plays than the extraordinarily creative culinary subtleties that preceded them. Large elaborate sets and multitudes of actors could be used in their execution.

The Coronation feast of the queen of Pedro of Aragon 1399 featured quite an array of entertainment: Each course was prefaced by a little drama – men-at-arms killing a dragon, musicians on a rock bearing a wounded lion, actors imprisoned in a fully fledged ship flanked by sirens singing advanced to the table and disgorged the fish course. At supper a horse disguised as an elephant with a castle on its back ambled in. Cupid, attired in peacock's feathers emerged from the castle to shoot red and white roses at the diners. At another feast a huge pie was wheeled in and a man dressed as an eagle leapt out flapping his wings and releasing a flock of white doves.

Renaissance Carnival hell-banquets were served in classical settings of a black-draped Hades, with devils offering food on fire-shovels and screaming wretches providing off-stage sound effects. Containers made to look like toads, scorpions, spiders and lizards contained delicious foods. At Lorenzo Strozzi's black banquet of 1519 in Rome, the Venetian ambassador Marino Sanuto describes edible table decorations shaped like skulls and containing roast pheasant, a centerpiece of "bones" containing sausage, and desserts featuring "bones of the dead" made out of marzipan.

Online Resources:

Gode Cookery Illusion Foods
Recipes for subtleties (including translations)
<http://www.godecookery.com/illusion/illusion.html>

Gode Cookery Incredible Foods Sotelties and Entremets
<http://www.godecookery.com/incrd/incrd.htm>

"Warners" article by Honour Horne-Jaruk (Alisaunde, Demoiselle de Bregeuf)
<http://www.floriegium.org/files/FOOD/Warners-art.html>

Illusion Dishes article by Cindy Renfrow
<http://members.aol.com/renfrowcm/illusion.html>

Ivan Day's decorated food history website
<http://www.historicfood.com/portal.htm>

Subtleties from The Viandier of Taillevent
<http://www.telusplanet.net/public/prescotj/data/viandier/viandier465.html>

Paper given at the 5th Annual Indiana University Symposium on Medieval Studies describing the Feast of the Pheasant (a banquet held at Lille in 1454 at the Court of Phillip the Good, Duke of Burgundy)
<http://www.byu.edu/~hurlbut/perform/hurlbut.html>

Feast of Illusions in 2 Courses made by Mistress Sincgiefu
<http://www.florilegium.org/files/FEASTS/ill-fd-feast-art.html>

Illusion feast for Bardic Madness in Castel Rouge
<http://www.florilegium.org/files/FEASTS/Valentines-Fst-art.html>

SCA Subtleties e-mail list
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SCA_Subtleties/

Some Useful Books for Subtleties Research

All the King's Cooks by Peter Brears c. 1999 Souvenir Press Ltd.

Banqueting Stuffe C. Anne Wilson c. 1991 Edinburgh University Press

Charlemagne's Tablecloth by Nichola Fletcher c. 2004 Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Feast: a History of Grand Eating by Roy Strong c. 2002 Oman Productions Ltd.

Medieval Food and Drink, Acta, vol. XXI "And Thus You Have a Lordly Dish" Fancy and Showpiece Cookery in an Augsburg Patrician Kitchen c. Marianne Hansen 1995.

Royal Sugar Sculpture: 600 Years of Splendour by Ivan Day c. 2002 The Bowes Museum