

Monk's Food – Teacher's Resources

St. Bernard, the founder of the Cistercian mother-abbey of Clairvaux, wrote to his nephew Robert, who had left the order, "*Wine and white bread, honeyed wine and rich foods cater to the body, not the soul. The body, but not the soul is fattened by frying pans*". In the early days of Fountains Abbey, the monk's attitude was not much different; the ideal Cistercian diet was sparse, a reaction to what they saw as the extravagance and gluttony of other orders. The *Rule of St. Benedict* – the monk's code of practice – set out the rule that the monks should eat only once a day, although in the longer days of summer two meals were served. In the early years, the monks' diet was vegetarian, with meat forbidden to everyone but the sick, although fish was eaten on special occasions and became a major part of the diet by the thirteenth century. Each monk was allocated a pound of bread per day, along with several pints of ale or wine. Meals were taken in the refectories – separate ones for each group of monks. The "lay-brothers" (labourer-monks) had to eat in silence, although the "choir" monks listened to readings whilst they ate. Both groups of monks used sign-language to communicate at meals.

So, what exactly *did* the monks at Fountains eat? Throughout the Abbey's history the monks grew, farmed or caught almost all of their own food. Fountains Mill provided the facilities needed to grind grain and make bread, and the monks had their own bakery. There were many different kinds of bread, with the best, white, bread reserved only for the abbot and his guests. The more important monks ate a coarse, brown bread (their meals may have been served on thick slices of this, known as "trenchers", or in wooden bowls) whilst the rest of the monks ate bread made from wheat and rye mixed.

Along with bread, home-grown vegetables and fruit formed the largest part of the monk's menu, even after the incorporation of fish into the Cistercian diet. The monks would never have seen many of the foods we take for granted today - such as tomatoes, potatoes, sweetcorn, cocoa and peanuts, which were not to be had until the discovery of the Americas. Wheat, barley, oats, onions, leeks, turnips, peas and cabbage are native to Britain, as are apples, pears and many berries including raspberries and elderberries. Mushrooms, parsnips, garlic, radishes, grapes and fennel had been grown in Britain since Roman times and were probably also cultivated by the monks. It was the gardener-monk's duty to provide enough vegetables per day to make two cauldrons of thick vegetable soup, known as "pottage".

The monk's herb garden also provided all of the herbs needed to season their meals, although "luxury" seasonings such as pepper and cumin were discouraged.

Cheese was popular with the monks, who at first made it from sheep's milk. Later, as Fountains grew richer and realised the profit to be had in dairy farming, cheese was made from the milk of the many cows kept by the Abbey. It is likely that the cheese eaten by the monks was similar to modern Wensleydale cheese. As early as 1170, the monks of Fountains Abbey had fishing rights in Malham Tarn, as well as in the rivers Ure and Ouse. Contrary to the intentions of the vegetarian founder monks, fish quickly came to be a staple of the monastic diet. Although the cool, damp Yorkshire climate made growing certain fruit and vegetables difficult, there was plenty of fish to be had. Bream, perch, pike and eel were probably the most commonly-caught. Each major Cistercian monastery had a "Magister Piscium", a senior lay-brother responsibly for all of the monastery's fisheries.

By the fifteenth century, the Abbey's commitment to a vegetarian diet had ended altogether, and meat was eaten three times a week, on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, except in Lent, Advent and other times of fasting. However, it was not permitted to be eaten in the refectory and had to be consumed in the misericord – the meat dining-room near to the infirmary. Mutton, pork, venison and beef would have been eaten – these bones have been excavated from the former site of the misericord.



Monks at dinner.