

The Art of Feasting

Some thoughts on planning, preparation and logistics

CONTEXT OF THIS ARTICLE:	2
PLANNING	3
Working with your steward	3
Themed Feasts	4
Brief	6
Menu	6
Budget	8
Special dietary requirements	11
PREPARATION	13
The Trial Run	13
Research and Redaction	14
The cooking / serving plan	14
LOGISTICS	15
Some thoughts on "best practice"	15
Timing	16
Serving	17
Atmosphere	18
Menus	19
Publishing recipes	19
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE "PSYCHOLOGY" AND "PHILOSOPHY" OF FEASTING	20
Food Choices	20
Cooks reputation	21
The morning after syndrome	21
The empty plate and full stomach	22
Sweets for the sweet	22
What do people want?	22
Some good ideas and nice touches	23

A successful medieval or renaissance feast is more than cooking good food; in fact, food is often a minor consideration for many attending. For people new to, or interested in, creating, organising and / or cooking a feast, the sheer amount of work and detail can be disconcerting, and it is hard to know where to start.

The purpose of this article is to assist those who want to try holding a feast, and those who want to improve the feasts they do hold, by considering some of the many of the details and options available, and share ideas and tips about what has worked and lessons we have learned. In addition, creating a feast, especially for the cook, is a huge undertaking and I hope that some of the ideas in this article can assist in making that task simpler.

Context of this article:

The context of this article is feasts as we do, and hope to practice, within the Barony of Southron Gaard, Lochac (formerly Caid), Society for Creative Anachronism. These comments may be equally useful in the context of other similar living history groups, or it may be that in a very different context, many of the comments below may not be directly useful or relevant; however, I hope you find something of value that may be used within whatever context you are working.

Within the SCA, all events are participatory for all people attending (who may include those at their first event through to those who are "part of the furniture"). Feasts are not performance pieces, neither are they productions for a modern audience, neither are they fund-raising events nor services for the public. Every person – from cooks, to servers, to feasters – plays an active part in the experience, there is no passive audience.

While we have the expectation of meeting costs, and the hope of making a small profit that we can use to enrich future projects and events, fundraising is generally not the purpose of the event. Indeed, excessive ticket prices (and costs) are generally discouraged as this may limit the ability of many members, especially younger people and families, to participate. In addition, most groups have customary practices (not to mention common practices) that will dictate many things about an event, including acceptable ticket prices for example.

Feasts are popular events hereabouts. We generally cater for vegetarians as a matter of course, and other dietary requirements as the cook is able (notification of such matters in advance is required). Generally, attendees

bring their own feast gear (goblet, plate, bowl, cutlery etc), beverages, candlestick, and often bread; some also bring tablecloths, board games, etc. The feast tends to be the main focus of the event and the eating part usually takes 3-4 hours.

Planning

In planning your feast and considering your choices and options, it may help to read the Psychology and Philosophy section of this article first to give you some idea of the matters to be considered when making such choices.

Working with your steward

The first place I like to start is the setting or event for the feast. The feast meal cannot be totally divorced from the wider context - event, hall, ticket selling, and promotion etc - of the feast. It is, in my opinion, a sufficiently taxing enterprise to create a feast from market to mouth, without having to sell tickets and set the chairs up and clean the hall afterward as well. It is therefore preferable to have someone else who is responsible for the other matters associated with putting on a feast. Find yourself someone else to do that. As is our custom, I shall call this person the steward. The first thing to do in planning a feast is to sit down with your steward and determine the scope of each other's responsibilities and the brief for the feast

The steward should be organising all the aspects of the feast other than the food – finding a venue, booking the venue, budgeting, selling tickets, set up and decorating the hall, finding serving and cleaning-up personnel, opening, closing and cleaning the venue. The cook should be concerned with planning the menu and food budget, arranging kitchen staff, buying and cooking food, and sending it to table. There will be issues that both steward and cook must address together – the menu, the cost, how it is to be served, timing of the event, arranging equipment and so on. It is important that cook and steward can work well together, and that responsibilities are clearly defined, so you don't end up losing your cook because you insisted on serving kidneys, or you suddenly find that the feast can't be served as there are no serving spoons.

As a general rule of thumb, the steward handles the front of house, the cook everything to do with the food and both need to sort out issues that cross this divide; but remember, you are both working together on the feast. Stewards should remember that cooking a feast is a huge, tiring, largely thankless task. If

the cook and steward cannot agree, then best to find another steward or cook, or do the next feast, than ruin the event for everyone.

Themed Feasts

Occasionally there is some resistance to the idea of themed feasts, but by definition – a medieval feast – our feasts have themes anyway. Your group may have a specific time / space location that sets the brief for the feast (e.g. 10th C England). Your group might welcome the idea of exploring food from other time periods and cultures - a delicious educational experience. Either way, the "theme" not only sets a provenance for the food, but can suggest ways in which the whole atmosphere can enhance the culinary experience – the way the seating should be arranged, the number and style of dishes and courses, the serving arrangements, the type of entertainment, decorations, music etc.

Personally I don't enjoy a lack of integrity in a feast – even if the feast is set in "Medieval England", I prefer it to be set in one time and place within that. Food styles and cooking differed widely through time and space, and conglomeration feasts with recipes from a dozen different cookbooks from different time and cultures - with no rationale for such a conglomeration - seem to lack some vital integrity. They also offer little opportunity for enriching the experience – remember that people don't simply come to sample a selection of dishes, they come for the whole ambiance and experience of a period feast. This also allows people to learn something new and experience new tastes and cultures. Researching about new cultures, places and events is both educational and interesting. Ultimately of course, the most important reason for exploring a theme is variety – feasts becoming boring and uninspiring if the same sorts of food, same hall and same entertainment are trotted out again and again.

In the SCA, if we follow a theme, the populace is invited to join that theme (dress in the style, for example) but are certainly not required to do so if they do not wish. It is an excellent excuse for making new clothing of course. You might also like to extend this concept and try "enchanted evenings" or "limited focus events". Certainly within our period, medieval and renaissance people "played" at being Turks or classical Romans etc, so this idea is also consistent with period practice.

Possible Themes

A theme does not necessarily need to be a different culture. If you are looking to experiment, themes can be constructed around various ideas:

- A culture, e.g., Turkish, Russian, Scottish, Jewish etc
- An event e.g. Easter, Christmas, Harvest, 12th Night etc
- A combination of the above e.g. Persian New Year feast, English 14th C Lenten feast
- Colours e.g. I once did a feast that was in the colours of the barony - all food was red, white and/or gold
- Other ideas: e.g. pie feast (each course features pies in addition to side dishes), a feast or dinner at a hunters lodge feast (game features on the menu)

A theme can be used to influence:

- Decorations (e.g. use silk hangings for a Middle Eastern feast)
- Seating (e.g. at a Middle Eastern feast you would sit on the floor)
- Serving or presentation of the meal (e.g. a meal set in a tavern could be "sold" and served by tavern staff:
- Entertainment (e.g. sagas and riddles for a Viking feast, English country dances at an Elizabethan occasion)
- Foods (foods and recipes of that time / culture)
- Activities (e.g. gift-giving to children at the Persian New Year)
- Venue choice (e.g. a Middle Eastern meal served in an Eastern style hall or tent, a 15th C English feast in a neo-gothic hall, a less formal "hunters lodge" meal might be held in a hall decorated with animal heads)
- Colours (use the same colours in the decorations, tablecloths, candles, food etc)
- Use the theme in the advertising, quests, costumes etc

Brief

A brief is an important tool for both the cook and the steward, in order to create the perfect meal and the background to the meal, and to create an harmonious event when everyone and everything works well and details are not overlooked. Who sets the brief will probably depend on who initiated the event, and the subsequent negotiations. In general, a brief would include a general idea of the feast, budget, any theme / setting / style for the feast, basic logistics about the site and staff, and any special activities that may need to be included. For example, a brief may be:

A feast for 50 people, at St Barnabas Hall on Saturday October 20. Ticket cost to be no more than \$12. There will need to be a court (before the food is served) and three pieces of entertainment during the evening (including a 15 minutes play). The theme is "14th Century English" and the context is a Saint's day feast at a country estate of a minor noble.

This brief could give direction to the decorations, food, number and order of the courses, the timing, seating arrangements, food budget, and staffing. A brief is a good starting place for fleshing out the details and ideas into a fully-fledged event plan. It will hopefully avoid later, and last minute, problems, and will create further opportunities to enhance your event.

Menu

Having established the brief, the cook can now work out the menu. If you have a theme, or a setting for the feast, this will give some indication of the type of foods to serve. If not, you'll need to figure out what you want to cook.

Things to consider -

1. *Number of courses:*

The more lavish the feast and the more time and money you have, the more courses you can have.

2. *Number of dishes:*

Probably at least 3 or 4 in each course are a minimum (plus sauces or condiments, bread, cheese etc). Courses with only one dish are, in my opinion, bizarre. You may want to have fewer dishes in a "starter" or "dessert" course, and more in the "main" course (or conversely, if you were doing a Middle Eastern feast, you might like to offer a range of starters and desserts, with the main course being largely rice, bread and lamb).

3. *Appropriate mix of ingredients / dishes:*

You don't want for example, 4 chicken dishes, nor a feast entirely of vegetable or carbohydrate dishes either.

4. *Balanced mix of dishes in each course:*

having got together a list of dishes you would like to cook, you will want to juggle them about in order for each course to strike a balance.

In each courses you'll need to consider a mix of dishes according to the food stuffs and logistics to ensure you have a good balance of:

- Oven- and stove-cooked dishes (depending on the logistics of cooking and heating space in the kitchen you may not have room to put all the dishes in the oven at once for example)
- Pre-prepared and last minutes dishes (so that labour is spread evenly over the feast – its useful to have minimal preparation for the final course, so that the cooks can start clean up or join the feast)
- Cold and hot dishes (heating space again)
- Individual servings (high workload) and bulk dishes (low workload)
- Dishes to be served in different ways – on trays, in bowls, etc (in order to rationalise equipment - you do not want to have dishes requiring, for example, 30 bowls in one course, unless 30 bowls is no problem for you)
- A balanced selection of carbohydrate (rice, pasta, breads, grains etc), protein (meat, fish, cheeses etc), vegetable, and sweet (etc) dishes (while many period feasts give the appearance of being total meat-fests, and carnivores tend to get excited over this idea, in my experience a menu almost wholly dominated by meat dishes will not do good things for modern digestions (or budgets)...))
- A balance of rich and bland food
- Flavour balance – sweet, sour, salty, bland, etc
- Texture balance – soft, crunchy, raw, etc
- Colour, presentation, decoration etc
- Mix of new recipes and old favourites

You can of course choose not to balance out dishes if that works with the particular style of your feast.

I usually take the brief, scout out my sources and make a list of those recipes that I fancy cooking. Then I take that list, and balance out flavours, textures, and logistical considerations, altering dishes or moving dishes to different courses until I'm happy with the menu. I may select several recipe options, for example for several options for the meat dishes, and decide which I will cook when I go shopping (depending on what is cheap, what looks good, etc).

For a typical average "European" feast of the sort we cook here for example, I would probably try to have two meats dishes (each dish prepared differently – roast, stewed, pie, etc), a carbohydrate dish, vegetable dish (probably two), and possibly a sweet in each course. I would add a vegetarian protein dish to this also, possibly just for vegetarians, or for everyone. I tend to put more sweet dishes in the final course, if it is not all sweets, just so it feels like "dessert" and the end of the meal. Typically, unless it was part of the theme, I would probably serve only one dish and almost always no more than 2 dishes in the entire feast made from the same major ingredient (i.e. only one chicken dish, one rice dish, etc) or in the same cooking style (i.e. one or two pies in the feast, one or two stews, as a maximum).

Budget

A budget is critical to running a successful feast. We have never been in the situation of having unlimited funds, and cannot afford to do anything less than cover costs in an event. To cover costs, while allowing for any unexpected overruns, provide sufficient food, hire a good venue and keep costs down for attendees, is a careful juggling act. If any of these costs or income is not so constrained for your circumstances, these comments may not apply. The cook has responsibility for working out a budget for the food that is agreeable to the steward and group, and has responsibility for meeting that budget.

Since the food costs can be far more flexible than the ticket prices, I begin my budget with the tickets not with the food. (For those for whom ticket price is not so imperative, this may not be a useful starting point.) I find this much easier than working from the menu to the ticket price. It may mean that I have to be more flexible with my menu (something that I find is a challenge not a restriction; I can make alterations and take advantages of specials and opportunities right up until the shopping date). I also find it much easier to budget in terms of expenditure units – I buy \$40 worth of chicken, for example, I don't go to the supermarket and ask for \$8 a head worth of food.

In conjunction with the steward, consider first how much the feast will cost. Obviously a grand formal occasion like a Royal Event or Baronial Investiture

would fall at the upper end of the scale, a small meal at a camping event at the lower end. Then multiply that cost by the number of expected attendees. You can calculate this either as a fixed number of seats / tickets offered, by experience as to the number of attendees who normally would be at such an event, or by calculating this over a range of say maximum, minimum and breakeven attendance. Remember to take into consideration any discounts – free tickets, children's prices etc. This is your income. You may have additional income or reserves, such as donations, or a free purse (heaven!).

The steward will calculate the fixed costs – hall hire, equipment hire, decoration, candles, cleaning costs, etc. Make sure to calculate all these into it, and check that every need is considered (finding out you need to hire tables and chairs at the last minute can blow your budget). What is left over from the income after you have deducted the fixed costs can be used for food. Obviously you do not want to use all this money, as overruns are not unknown. Negotiate with the steward a reasonable budget with some room for contingencies, and preferably a small profit.

At this point I bring my menu and budget together. I price out the menu by each ingredient by amount and cost per item, to get a total cost for the food. (See the accompanying document, Feast Budget.) Laying the information out in this way also means I have a ready-made shopping list, a budget I can adjust readily (or that in Excel, adjusts itself), a list of ingredient quantities for the kitchen staff (and more). Working in this way I can usually shop to within less than a \$1 of the projected budget! I do however, like to take advantage of specials. In this way I may allow a specified amount for an ingredient and I can buy up to that amount – for example, as meat is expensive and never goes to waste, I want to buy as much meat as I can for my money. I might, instead of specifying a chicken dish which will cost \$10 a kilo and require 5 kilos, allow say \$50 dollars for the dish, and then shop around until I can find chicken on special at \$5 a kilo. For the same money, I have twice as much. (Just a note – all supermarkets and produce vendors in New Zealand regularly offer goods at discount prices: losses are taken on an item in a bid to attract consumers who will make up for that loss by purchasing other items. Occasionally these can be lower quality products (those near their use-by dates, such as almost overripe fruit), but more normally are the same quality as regularly priced goods (we have strict laws on the sale of low quality produce.) I also always have a number of options for such dishes so that I choose based on availability, price, quality, etc – I might decide to have a roast of red meat in one course, and will buy beef, lamb, mutton or venison depending on what is on special that week. I won't do this for dishes such as cabbage or rice; greater quantities of these

will not necessarily be eaten. Instead I will use any money saved from purchase of discounted goods such as these to buy additional expensive items such as meat or add additional luxury items to the menu.

Ideas for keeping your budget down:

- Supermarket junk mail is your friend! Read it each week for a couple of months before the feast, and see what's on special. There is always a different type of meat on special somewhere, and someone always has cheap cheese and oddly enough, cheap mushrooms. Planning beef and you find lamb is half the price? Change your dish, and for the same money, you can serve twice as much.
- If you are planning an expensive dish – venison, pigeon – accompany it with cheaper dishes (e.g. frumenty (this is a period accompaniment for venison!), rice etc), or use cheaper meats for the other meat dishes in the feast.
- Buy seasonal / specially priced produce.
- Buy from markets, wholesalers, ethnic food stores, contacts, where the prices are lower than supermarkets (compare prices, "wholesalers" are not always cheaper, and also be aware of taking advantage of specials).
- Use your own ingredients where only a little is needed (e.g. don't buy \$2 worth of cinnamon when you only need one teaspoon)
- Invest group money in buying serving and cooking equipment and save on hire costs.
- Store dry goods appropriately for use at the next feast (but be aware that even under the best of conditions these won't keep viable for more than a few months).
- If buying from a wholesaler consider buying "second grade" fruit and vegetables for cooking if appropriate (often the only difference is that second grade don't look as good or are more variable in size, and the quality is no different).
- Know a hunter who can supply game? (Beware of using any beast not slaughtered according to the law).
- Negotiate cheaper costs with a bulk purchase, or a regular supplier.
- Buy only what you need (bulk purchases are often not cheaper).

- Stick to the budget
- Use any savings on the budget to buy more ingredients for expensive dishes (e.g. meats) or provide luxury extras (like cheese, fruit, olives, bread etc)

Calculating quantities

I usually work on a "table" as the base unit for determining quantities to buy and serve. Each "table" (and this can equate literally and/or theoretically to the seating at a feast) is normally 6-8 people. Each "table" equates to the quantity that a family of 5 or 6 people would eat for a normal one-course meal modernly (e.g. what you would serve your family for dinner - one chicken, one bowl of salad) etc. Calculate that by the number of "tables" present. If there are ten tables (i.e. there are 10 x 6 (60) people attending, then 10 chickens would be needed. The "table" unit also has the advantage of being the quantity you would serve to each table during the feast so serving quantities and dishes can be organised per table. This is a very easy and convenient measure, and works well in practice, unless the cook is not familiar with cooking for a "family" size group. Obviously, the fewer courses and dishes, the higher the quantity of food in any one dish you will need to prepare. Modern catering guides are not suitable for most medieval feasts.

Special dietary requirements

Typically, in my area, vegetarians are catered for at most feasts, although they must notify the steward or cook of that requirement. Vegetarianism is sufficiently prevalent today, and not un-period, so to not cater for vegetarians on request would seem churlish. Food allergies should also be considered carefully, as some of these can be fatal. More unusual dietary requirements can really only be catered for where the cook has sufficient skill and experience, and this should be discussed with the cook well in advance. On the other hand, catering for special dietary requirements should not require the cook to pander to othersculinary foibles. If you aren't sure how to cater for such people, then you should discuss their needs further, you should to ask for assistance in this area from a cook experienced in such cooking, or explain to the person that they cannot be catered for (explain well ahead so they can make alternate arrangements, don't wait until they sit down to eat!). By the way, I am a vegetarian, and I do cook meat for others.

Some thoughts on catering for vegetarians:

- You can choose to provide some additional specific vegetarian-only dishes – usually vegetarian protein dishes. Ensure, especially at a potluck, that these are not eaten by meat eaters, with your vegetarians going hungry.
- You can cater a vegetarian feast with meat dishes added – i.e. all dishes (rice, salad vegetables, pies etc) are suitable for vegetarians, with the exception of the meat dishes.
- Ensure you understand what "vegetarianism" is, and the needs of the person in question. Vegetarians do not eat any flesh, including white meat or fish (sometimes those who eat no red meat call themselves vegetarians, but this is inaccurate, confusing and often hazardous for those who take no meat (other terms used include semi- or demi-vegetarians), some are ovo-lacto (eat egg and milk products), others are one or the other, and remember bacon is not a vegetable! Meat products may be found in stock, rennet, cultures, and other hidden places, check labels. Note that vegetarians do eat foods other than vegetables, and that the inclusion of vegetarian protein dishes is important. Most vegetarians are happy to discuss their needs with you. Vegans eat no animal products at all. However please note that there are many variations under these labels and you should not assume that the strict definitions apply. If in doubt, ask the person with the restrictions for more information.
- Get help if you aren't sure how to cater for vegetarians.
- Provide a menu with a list of ingredients in each dish. Ensure servers ask before serving food directly onto people's plates. Assign a separate server to deal with the vegetarian-only dishes (if you include these), and ensure they know who their feasters are.
- Don't be afraid to create vegetarian or "Lenten" versions of meat dishes – vegetarians are somewhat saddened at a diet of plain rice and vegetables and it is not really fair if they pay the same costs and receive a significantly inferior meal.
- Ovo means they eat eggs and egg products and lacto means they eat dairy products.

Some thoughts on allergies:

- Some allergies can be fatal (e.g. peanut allergy is extremely dangerous) and you should take care to ensure that you don't use the offending item in the kitchen, use utensils that have been used for that kind of food previously and ensure everything is very clean. Check that pre-prepared foods do not contain the ingredients even in trace form. Some people have allergies that respond to only trace quantities of the offending ingredient. Even the most careful hygiene will be unlikely to remove such traces. In these cases, where the allergy is severe, catering for such people is too risky. For very severe allergies, the presence of the food in the room can be problematic.
 - A list of ingredients provided on the menu will assist people to decide without fuss what they can and cannot eat. Many people are embarrassed and don't wish to make a fuss by raising the issue.
 - Unless the allergies are very serious, then most people will just avoid foods they can't eat. Ensure there are sufficient options for them.
 - Consult modern catering references for alternative foods that can be substituted.
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Preparation

The Trial Run

Always trial all new dishes before you cook them for a feast. Don't wait till on the day to trial a dish - this is a recipe for disaster. A good idea is to invite the people who will be doing all the hard work – your kitchen staff and / or servers - for a small dinner party at your place prior to the event, in which you trial some or all of the feast dishes. Not only do they get a "reward" for their service, but everyone can give feedback to help the cook, and give suggestions about serving, decorating, flavouring and presentation, and so on. Working together with your staff can be fun, and it can help encourage new cooks to strike out on their own

Research and Redaction

Research: There are a large number of recipes and period resources available, many of them on the internet, or for sale through Amazon etc. It's a good idea to find out about the various books available, so you know how accurate or how useful the material is. Recipe books that include a copy of the original recipe are the most valuable. There is a reasonable variety of material available, including from less "mainstream" cultures, such that it should keep most cooks busy for some years to come. Where there are no surviving cookbooks, it may be possible to reconstruct plausibly period recipes from archaeological evidence of foodstuffs and cooking equipment and methods, and some critical consideration of comparative cooking. Talk to other cooks also – in the SCA we value the sharing and transmission of information, and cooks will be happy to recommend recipes and books.

Redactions: "Redaction" is used to refer to the art of creating a "modern" recipe from a period recipe. Some period recipes give exact quantities or methods, while some often no more than a directive to 'mess together' handfuls of ingredients, and 'cook them till it is enough'. For a modern cook these recipes can be daunting. Some modern editions of period cookbooks provide redactions of the recipes, complete with quantities, temperature and so on. Some of these are good; others are mediocre and yet others are bizarre. Redaction is an art, and you'll need to practice it. You can find references for obscure period cooking terminology, and period measures, and following these, armed with your cooking skills, you can experiment (take careful notes for each version) till you create the perfect dish. It is particularly exciting to serve your own creations at a feast. You will probably not want to try this at your first feast though!

The cooking / serving plan

Create a cooking and serving plan (see accompanying document Cooking and Serving Plan) and serving personnel can work with less direction (from the cook), and the cook can be more organised when the pressure is on and they forget their head. This also gives the cook a list of all the things they need to bring. I like to post this in a very obvious place in the kitchen and servery so as not to be plagued by endless questions from staff.

Remember to include:

- Cooking – pots, utensils, cutlery, equipment, cooking space etc
 - Serving – temperature, serving bowls and trays, serving cutlery, individual portions, assigned responsibilities, special dishes, decoration
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Logistics

If you have done your planning and preparation well, then the feast itself will be a breeze, we hope!

Some thoughts on "best practice"

- Prepare as much as possible of the food and dishes before the event, but not where this compromises the quality of the dishes.
- Ensure that you are familiar with the site before you get there, and you know what to expect (make sure you test the appliances).
- Arrive early to set your kitchen and serving area up, separating serving in and out, food preparations and clean up areas. Post recipes near cooking areas, serving plans near serving area.
- Designate specific dishes to specific kitchen hands, and if possible separate kitchen hands to present / plate / decorate the dishes (make sure they know what they are doing well ahead).
- Lay out ingredients and tools so everything can be easily found (you won't be the only person in your kitchen).
- Ensure that you are familiar with food handling techniques, that food is stored and transported and reheated safely. If not, take a course.
- Ensure you have checked all the equipment before the day, and packed food and equipment according to your list.
- Make sure someone has been designated to help clean up before you begin!

- Ensure you know how to cope with common problems – burnt food, overcooked or undercooked food, bland or over spiced foods, and make sure that you can cover any major failures / disasters. Know where the nearest supermarket is!
- Eat during the day. Take a rest, and drink lots of water (avoid alcohol) and wear comfortable shoes.
- Ensure you have dedicated competent kitchen help, and thank them regularly. Ensure they also eat during the day.

Timing

- Try to be flexible (within reason) with your timing. If there is a court, then there is always the danger of it running over or of it running short. Ensure that if there is more time than expected prior to the feast, people can be comfortable waiting (don't lock them out, or leave them standing around for hours). If there is a delay to the start, know how to delay the meal without overcooking any of the dishes.
- Indicate the time of serving of the first course, and try to keep to that as much as possible, or the "natives will get restless", and that's not a good way to start the feast. Don't serve earlier than advertised.
- Try to serve bulky, filling foods in the first course, in case people are starving. They'll be in a better mood if they aren't hungry for most of the feast.
- I find it works best in a multi-course feast to serve the second course reasonably quickly after the end of the first course, especially if there has been activity during the day beforehand. This will fill them up quickly. Space the other courses out further. Don't take too long to get out the final course, especially if it is later in the evening – those who have young children or who are tired will not appreciate being kept at table.
- Long delays between courses are seldom welcome. An hour is normally too long.
- Provide activities (e.g. board games, dancing) or entertainment to fill the gaps between eating. Don't over entertain though, people will want to get up and move around, talk to others, go outside to cool off etc between courses.

- You may need to provide time between courses for cleaning of serving or cooking equipment and the heating / reheating / cooking of food for the next course. If so, collect equipment and get started on this promptly. Its better to have time in hand than to play catch up.

Serving

Serving a High table:

- Always serve the high table more than sufficient food; they are the last people you want to go hungry.
- It is useful to have designated experienced people to serve the High table – preferably people of rank (this does honour to the host and guests).
- Make sure your servers are attentive, but not too attentive.
- Remember to perform a courtesy to high table when serving.
- Present food to the high table, and ensure that at least these dishes are presented well.
- Consider serving them some special dishes.

Potlucks / Buffet:

- Always invite the Throne and their guests to select first
- Invite those with dietary requirements to go next, before a general free for all approach
- Provide multiple servings of a dish if possible to avoid queues waiting at one point
- Ensure there is a line or circuit to the table so that everyone gets around to all dishes
- Cut anything up that needs it
- Labels are strongly recommended (ingredient lists also)
- Ensure serving utensils are provided

- Provide room for people in long dresses, big skirts, and swords to get around the table - access on all four sides if possible.

General Serving Considerations:

- Train your servers and brief them on the day
- Tabards or similar are nice way to identify servers so that feasters know whom to ask
- Always ensure that servers know what is in dishes or what they are (or can get the information easily)
- Provide menus with ingredient lists, so people can easily identify which foods they wish to eat
- Always ensure the servers know how much they can serve
- Always ensure the servers ask before serving food onto people's plates
- Assign specific servers to take care of the high table, serving the vegetarians or others with special requirements
- Supply hot cloths / oven mitts for serving hot dishes
- Avoid carrying around large pots full of hot liquid that can be slopped on people (e.g. soup). Find safer ways to serve.
- Placing trays / bowls on the table for people to help themselves is the easier way to serve (although its dish intensive and can take more food)
- Always send around the "voider bowl" (bowl to collect scraps) promptly after each course, including the last (or otherwise make sure people can dispose of unwanted scraps from their plate.

Atmosphere

Feasting is a mind game as well as a stomach game. Decorations, ambience, candle light, and entertainment will enrich any feast. Without these even the best food can be unexciting. Link the food to the feast – Middle Eastern food should be served seated on the floor. A little Middle Eastern music goes a long way.

Also, you want people in a mellow mood to eat, so you want them to relax, slow down, and start talking to each other. Do this by decreasing the light, putting on some background music, and having the hosts talk to people.

Tricks for moving people into a medieval mind space include:

- Having only candlelight in the hall, especially important when people arrive
- Soft background period music (not dance music as that gets people's feet tapping, rather than moving them into a relaxed state for eating)
- Having the hall decorated and set up when people arrive
- Hand washing at the beginning of the feast
- Servers in matching tabards
- Fanfare, announcements at the being of the course / feast
- Appropriate entertainments during the feast (don't over do it)

Menus

Publishing the menu ahead of time (in the advertising) is a great way to attract people to the feast. Providing a menu at the feast gives people an outline for the expected courses, so they can plan their evening – how many courses there are, how much to eat, when its time to go for a break, and so on. It's a nice idea to include a reference to the original recipe at this time, and especially important to include a list of ingredients so those with dietary requirements can police their own meal.

Publishing recipes

In the SCA an important part of our re-creating of the Middle Ages is educating the populace. The keeping of "guild" or "family secrets" is frowned upon. After the feast is over it is a nice idea to publish some of the recipe redactions you have done (say, in your newsletter), especially of any particularly favourite or successful dishes. In this way, as you cook more and more, you will have been producing the basis of your own cookbook (you may not, of course, publish other peoples redactions without permission, especially those from published cookbooks).

Some thoughts on the "Psychology" and "Philosophy" of Feasting

For many cooks, a feast is the opportunity to try a whole bunch of new and usual or challenging dishes. For the attendees a feast is a whole period experience, of dressing up, indulging in lots of good food, good company, nice atmosphere, entertainment, enjoying the company of their fellows, meeting new people etc. The two points are some distance apart (imagine if you will what is important to you dining out in a modern restaurant with your friends, and what the chef may think is important). While a cook may find a dish very interesting and challenging, the populace may find it disconcerting. A cook may consider a dish a great deal of work and a work of art, but it gets demolished - unappreciated - by the populace in seconds. It is important for cooks to remember that a feast is not about them, but about the populace, and the feast should be constructed with this in mind. This does not mean that the food needs to be modern and unadventurous, or old hat. If cooks wish to try out esoteric cooking experiences, then Arts and Sciences competitions, or cooks guilds etc are the place for that. People pay and expect a total experience, that's what you should give them. So, that said, in creating a feast, there are many things to consider beyond the food, and there is the "customer" to consider. This section will deal with those matters, and discuss some perhaps more philosophical issues that underpin the choices a cook and steward will make. Remember that eating is not simply in the mouth of the beholder, but is a whole body and mind experience.

Food Choices

Fortunately in our part of the world, there is little if any resistance to period food. In some parts, especially more conservative areas or groups, unfamiliar or exotic foods are not popular. That said, even the most adventurous group is unlikely to be thrilled to be served monkeys brains, chicken feet or such like. Truly bizarre or unusual foods should be limited to the odd dish, which can be skipped without compromising the feast. If you have a large number of children eating, be sure there are foods that they will be able to eat and identify. Mix the bland and the spicy, the exotic and the familiar, and make everyone happy.

In addition there are those who believe that period food does not taste good. Since it is not possible to actually taste food from period we can only speculate on the medieval palate. This issue is the subject of enormous debate, take sides as you will. Certainly it may be that some of the common foods, spices and ways of serving food in the middle ages may be unfamiliar to the "meat and potatoes" brigade who find even pizza a bit adventurous. One thing I think we can be sure of, is that period food does not have to taste bad. Unusual taste is not the same as bad taste. Practice the redaction until you get a good result – don't assume that because you followed the recipe a poor result is the way it was supposed to be. Adjust the flavouring and process, as any medieval cook would have done. If in doubt, people love salty and sweet tastes (although not necessarily in the same dish).

Cooks reputation

Like it or not, probably the biggest draw card to a particular feast is the cook's reputation. Take that as you will. In the very least, ensuring that you do associate your name with your success is a good thing. People will come again if they know they are getting a good meal, just as they patronise good restaurants over and over. Of course, one bad feast and your reputation can suffer, so it's important to not cook too often and become burnt out.

The morning after syndrome

I'm not talking about that icky feeling the morning after the feast that has something to do with imbibing. It is certainly not at all unusual for people to feel bloated, queasy and ill the morning after a feast. It is important to not confuse this with food poisoning, and fingers should not be pointed at the chef. (Food poisoning should of course, never be ruled out, and if in doubt seek medical attention!).

The morning after syndrome is usually just the body's natural reaction to overindulging or overindulging in the wrong kinds of food. It is very easy, over the course of hours that a feast normally takes, to eat far more than usual. In addition, feasts are usually heavy in rich, oily, and sweet foods and people often eat far more protein (especially meat) or fat than normal. It is this upset that is often reflected the next day. Suggested treatment is to lay off harassing the cook, take some antacid and don't overindulge in future!

The empty plate and full stomach

When spaced out over a long period, it's quite possible to eat in one feast, if given the opportunity, several times the amount of food than one would normally eat in a meal. In addition, when confronted with a plate of food, the diner will not psychologically feel satisfied unless that is a plate of food – that is there are more than two dishes on it and there are reasonable servings of each. While in total the quantity of food over the evening may be sufficient, eating it is as much a head game as anything (that said, spread a normal evening meal out over 4 hours, and you'll not feel full at any point).

In like vein, a feast without adequate meat dishes, without some greens dish, without some sort of carbohydrate, etc, will be intellectually unsatisfying to the diners. It can help then to ensure that each course should constitute a plate of food (albeit a small one), and appear like unto a meal in itself. This does mean that the total quantity of food supplied needs to be excessively larger than you would expect for dinner at home, but it will often be the case.

Sweets for the sweet

There is of course the modern expectation of a sweet course at the end of a meal (especially a meal out); this is ingrained in our cultural psyche. A feast that doesn't end with a sweet will feel strangely unfinished, and people may not know that the meal has ended. If you serve a sweet with each course, serve two with the final course.

What do people want?

Helpfully, someone has actually asked. From the feast survey site:
http://www.virtue.to/feast_survey/index.html

(Note that the survey comes from a place where feasts are usually held as one among many activities at an event, instead of as the whole event, and there is usually a revel afterward, and not everyone can be accommodated in the feast because of the cost of the size of the event. Not all the comments will therefore apply.)

- The most important thing that people want is **ambience**
- 4 courses is a good number, with a total of 9-12 dishes, with a short wait (not hours!) between courses
- Food that is period or period in style

- Entertainment should not dominate the event, as dinner conversation is very important
- Assigned servers, not self-service buffet
- Facilities for rubbish, washing of plates etc, so that the feasters can easily tidy up after themselves

Some good ideas and nice touches

- Ask one or two people to prepare a piece of informal entertainment to kick start impromptu performances or singing / dancing etc from the populace
- Organise a few pieces of formal entertainment for during the evening – remember to not provide too much or people will not be able to engage in spontaneous revelry or have time or opportunity to converse with their table fellows
- Ensure that the lights are off or down, and candles are lit, even before people arrive. Nothing defeats creating the right mood as much as arriving to a hall lit with electric lighting and not decorated.
- Have the first course include bulk dishes to fill up the hungry quickly
- If you finish with a buffet, put delicate nibbles and tidbits out, as few should be hungry. The end of the meal is not time for vast quantities of bread and hunks of cheese (unless you haven't fed them!)
- Make an effort with the presentation of food for the high table at least
- Have a high table
- Place a few period board games – e.g. chess, backgammon, Nine Mans Morris etc around the tables
- Provide candles to set the mood and light the hall
- Include some spectacle food and subtleties
- Send some special dishes to the high table, for them to eat, or for them to distribute to the masses.