



Food in Viking times

What did the Vikings eat? And how did they prepare their food? It is, in the very nature of things, difficult to answer these questions, but information from archaeological finds and various accounts can help us to discover something of raw materials and utensils the Vikings had access to. Then it is possible to experiment, gain some experience and make up your own dishes.

Several examples of recipes are given at the end of this section.

Rig's journey

The poem "Rig's journey" concerns the god Heimdal who in the person of Rig visits the human world. He enters the thrall's, farmer's and chieftain's houses and the poem describes their different living conditions. The poem probably originates from around the 10th century; unfortunately the section about the visit to the farmer has been lost.

Rig's journey tells of the thrall's food:

"Edda bore
food to the table
rich in chaff
a bowl of soup
is put on the table."

And of the food at the chieftain's house:

"So took mother
a patterned cloth
of bleached linen
and spread it on the table
she took the white
and pure wheat cake
and placed the fine bread
on the tablecloth.
She brought out the silver
and filled bowls.
Pork tempted
and roast fowl,
there was wine in the jug,
expensive beakers.
There they drank together
until the sun went into the hill."

As the poem foretells, there were great differences between thrall, farmer and chieftain.





Raw materials

The food of an average family would have consisted, in particular, of their own produce from livestock, field and garden and collected berries and plants, together with meat from hunting or fishing. In the table below, you can see which kinds of meat, vegetables, grain, fruits, berries and culinary herbs were known in Viking times.

For a large part of the population everyday food would have been porridge (made from barley or oats), sourdough rye bread with butter, cheese or possible sausage. Hot meals would primarily have been soups and stews with meat, fish and vegetables. These would have been accompanied by milk, berry juice, whey or herbal infusions.

On more special occasions or in the homes of the more wealthy there would possible have been spit-roasted meat (possibly game) and fish, wheat bread would have been baked and beer was drunk. The latter was brewed from barley and flavoured with hops and bog myrtle. Mead, made from fermenting honey was also served and the chieftain perhaps drank wine imported from the Frankish Empire.

Meat and fish	Vegetables, fruits and berries	Grain and dairy products	Culinary herbs
<p><i>Meat from livestock:</i> Cattle, pig, sheep, horse, goat, poultry such as hens and geese and their eggs</p> <p><i>Meat from hunting:</i> In Scandinavia, deer, hare and wild boar were probably luxury foods, whereas seals, whales, wild fowl and reindeer made up a large part of the diet in Northern Scandinavia</p> <p><i>Fish:</i> In coastal areas, the diet was supplemented with fish such as herring, garfish, salmon, cod, flatfish, mussels and oysters. In some places the fish may even have been traded</p>	<p><i>From the garden:</i> Peas, beans, cabbage, onions, garlic and leeks</p> <p><i>Gathered in the forest:</i> Roots, stems and leaves of angelica</p> <p><i>Wild berries:</i> Raspberries, strawberries, bilberries and blackberries</p> <p><i>Fruits:</i> Apples, rosehips, sloes, plums, cherries and elderberries</p>	<p><i>Cereals:</i> Especially barley, rye and oats, but bread wheat was also known</p> <p><i>Collected seeds:</i> There is no sure evidence of eating collected seeds in the Viking Age</p> <p><i>Dairy products:</i> Milk, butter, various cheeses and whey</p>	<p><i>From the garden:</i> Cress, cumin and mustard</p> <p><i>From nature:</i> Bog myrtle, thyme, milfoil, angelica and juniper</p> <p><i>Other:</i> Honey was the only sweetener and was used in food and mead. Salt was imported from the Baltic Countries or was produced by evaporating sea water</p>





Preparation and cooking

Finds of kitchen utensils show us that Viking households had roasting spits, boiling vessels made of wood, leather and clay, pans made of soapstone and iron plate, kneading troughs, sieves, grain querns, butter churns and kneading boards, ladles, bowls, small axes and knives.

Food was roasted or boiled over an open fire, in an oven or warmed using potboilers – stones that were first heated in the fire before being put into water and soups. In this way use could also be made of boiling vessels made of wood and leather, which could not stand direct exposure to fire.

Flour was ground on a rotary quern and for cheese-making use was made of a special board on which the cheese was kneaded. When making softer cheese a closely woven cloth was used to sieve off the whey.

Provisions

In order to ensure enough food for the whole winter, much of the summer's harvest from field and garden was, together with meat, saved for the winter. As refrigerators were unknown, foodstuffs were preserved in several different ways. In summer and autumn, the year's harvest of grain, vegetables, fruit and berries was dried. When the sun shone, the sun's rays could be exploited to this end. Otherwise use was made of the heat from the hearths inside the houses. As early as the Iron Age we know of special buildings for the drying and storage of foodstuffs.

Later in the autumn, when the livestock were slaughtered, the meat was dried, smoked and/or salted. Salting of meat was, however, a difficult and time-consuming form of preservation due to the fact that there were no natural occurrences of salt in Viking lands so that it was necessary to evaporate sea water. The Vikings could, however, have imported salt from the Baltic Countries. Dried fish was also widely eaten and, for example, in Njal's saga mention is made of large quantities of dried fish for winter provisions. Before being used it was necessary to either beat the dried fish so that small flakes were detached and could be chewed, or soaked it in water to soften it, after which it was boiled until tender.

Recipes

The following includes some good advice about cooking over an open fire together with some recipes. These are easy to follow using old-fashioned methods, but which can also be applied in a modern kitchen.

Cooking over an open fire

When cooking over an open fire it is important to make a fire suitable for the food you intend to make. If you want to boil, you need a blazing fire; but if you are going to roast or grill, you need good embers. If you have a big fireplace it is an advantage to make a





fire suitable for boiling at one end from where the embers can be moved along to make a roasting fire at the other.

The Vikings used iron cauldrons, which they hung up on a tripod over the fire. You can make a tripod yourself from three thick branches or sticks lashed together. The pot must be of iron, steel or aluminium without bakelite or plastic handles and should hung up using some hooks and a small chain or piece of rope. The pot can also be placed directly on the fire or be raised up by placing three stones of roughly equal size underneath it so that the pot is well supported and air can also reach the fire. If you want to use pot boilers (heated stones) in your cooking, remember never to use flint stones because these explode and shatter when heated. Roasting spits and the like should be of completely fresh wood, for example hazel. Remember to make the roasting spit thick enough.

Important: Never keep campfire food until the next day, not even in a refrigerator. This is due to the cultivation of soil bacteria, which can cause stomach infections.

Barley porridge (enough for about four people)

3-400 ml coarse barley flour

1 litre water

2 apples

hazelnuts (optional]

a little salt

Bring the water to the boil. Scatter in the barley flour while stirring constantly. Bring the porridge to the boil again and simmer for 5 minutes. The apples (and hazelnuts if desired) are added about 2 minutes before the end. The pot is taken off the fire and placed near the heat for ½-1 hour, after which the porridge is ready. When serving, a knob of butter or honey can be added to the porridge and dried berries can be scattered on top of it.

Nettle soup with meat (enough for about four people)

1-1½ litres of water

½ kg meat (pork, beef, lamb/mutton, chicken or fish)

3 parsnips

2 large onions

about 3 cups of nettle top shoots

herbs

salt (optional)

Place the meat in the cold water, bring it to the boil and simmer for about an hour. Skim off the skum from the top of the liquid. Meanwhile, prepare the onions and parsnips and cut them into small pieces. Wash the nettle shoots thoroughly and chop them coarsely.





Add the vegetables and nettles to the soup after about half an hour together with your chosen herbs. When the meat is tender, take it out and cut it into cubes before returning it to the pot. Season to taste with salt and the soup is ready.

Bean stew (enough for about four people)

400 ml horse beans (N.B. do not eat raw!)

3 large onions

3 large cooking apples

¼ litre soured cream

1 tsp. thyme dried

½ tsp. crushed mustard seeds

1-2 cloves of garlic

a little salt

a little butter

parsley

Rinse the beans and leave them to soak overnight in three times their own volume of water. Discard the soaking water. Cook the beans for about 1-1½ hours in a good quantity of water until they are tender, then pour off the cooking water.

Cut the onions and apples into slices and cubes and sauté them in the butter. Add the herbs and spices together with the soured cream and let the mixture simmer for about 10 minutes. Scatter chopped parsley on top.

Flat bread

Knead coarse wheat flour together with a liquid (whey, water, milk or buttermilk). The dough should stick together but not be too wet. Divide the dough up into small balls, about the size of a golf ball. Press them flat. Bake them on a pan over the fire or on a pre-heated flat stone. The breads should be turned often and are ready when they sound hollow if you tap them with a fingernail. Honey, salt, dried fruit, nuts and the like can be mixed into the dough. The finished bread tastes good with a knob of butter or honey.

Butter

Whip the cream until it is stiff. Continue whipping until the whipped cream separates into butter and buttermilk. Transfer the butter to a cup and press it through with a spoon – this removes the buttermilk. The butter can be kneaded with salt to improve its keeping qualities. If cream from the supermarket is used it is a good idea to let it stand at room temperature for about 12 hours so that it is easier to whip.

A good whisk can be made by lashing 7-8 de-barked willow twigs together.





Buttermilk cheese

Heat the buttermilk to about 40°C – rather more than hand-hot. This causes the buttermilk to separate out into white clumps, the cheese, and a greenish-yellow liquid, the whey. When the buttermilk separates remove the vessel from the heat and sieve off the whey using a loosely woven cloth.

The buttermilk must not be stirred while it is being warmed, but draw a ladle carefully through it once or twice in order to redistribute the heat. The buttermilk cheese can be flavoured with thyme, garlic or mint or it can be mixed with a little cream, after which apple and nuts are added.

Dried apple snacks

Remove the stalk and remains of the flower and cut out the core from the whole apple. Slice the apple into thin rings. These can then either be laid on a wire rack and dried in the oven at a maximum temperature of 50°C for about six hours, or they can be threaded on a piece of string and hung up in a heated room, for example above a wood-burning stove, for about 24 hours.

Large, firm, slightly sour apples are especially good for drying.

Bon Appetite!

