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Marc Meltonville (fourth from left above) may just have the best job in the world. He works and sometimes lives in a palace, wrote his own job spec and spends his days investigating and experimenting with food as what Hampton Court Palace calls a food archaeologist.

The palace's Tudor kitchens have been a major visitor attraction ever since the grace and favour apartments (where Lord Baden-Powell's widow once lived) were cleared away in the 1980s restorations. Fifty-five rooms once made up the complex, each with a purpose in sourcing, storing, preparing, cooking and serving food for a household of 1500. But how the ingredients, the equipment and the people actually functioned is only now becoming more than a matter of surmise.

Brought in from the Chiltern Open Air Museum in 1991 to help with a kitchen re-enactment project, Marc found himself cooking with food historian Peter Brears in the newly reinstated kitchens. The sessions continued as annual events until Brears retired, when Marc and three of his colleagues were offered the option of continuing with an expanded project at Hampton Court Palace. By 2000 the Kitchen Interpretation Unit was up and running and Marc became what he prefers to call an experimental archaeologist and social historian.

Given the resource of the historic kitchens as a laboratory, the team decided that their investigations should embrace any and every aspect of social

history in that space. Because numerous recipes survive from the period, they chose these as their starting point. Tudor recipes, however, bear little resemblance to Nigella's. Written more as an aide memoire to ingredients, they reveal little about quantities, preparation techniques or cooking methods – and they rarely cover what cooks then considered to be obvious.

So beginning with a list of ingredients, the staff begin to investigate how and where the produce was sourced, delivered and stored. Where was the dish prepared and how? What sort of bowl, say, was used – was it local or imported? wide or deep? Did they use spoons or another utensil? What was the dish cooked in and for how long? What sort of fuel was used? What was it supposed to look and taste like? How was it served?

Pottery, wooden and metal kitchenware is commissioned from reproduction specialists to test by using in live experiments. Ideas for what might be needed come from documentary research, art and archaeological remains. Very little has been excavated from the grounds of Hampton Court Palace itself: Marc believes that most debris would have

been carried away, and much of the paraphernalia would have been taken with the monarch on his travels. Excavations from Whitehall, the Inns of Court and the Tower of London have provided the guide for what should be reproduced. Marc asserts, "The objects we use are theoretical constructs that need to be critiqued and tested in the same way that a scholarly paper is evaluated. We mustn't accept just because a pot exists that it was used for the purpose we imagine, and we need to be open to the possibility that what was actually used may not have even survived."

Although initially they felt that wearing period clothing would detract from the research focus of the live experiments, the group realised that their attempt to recreate a Tudor cooking environment was incomplete without an understanding of how kitchen staff moved in and used the clothes they wore. They therefore

TOP: The Kitchen Interpretation Unit team in Tudor clothes.

FAR RIGHT: Recipes are tested using techniques as close to those originally used as possible.

RIGHT: Cooks use a range of reproduction pottery and metal wares in the kitchen laboratory.

researched textiles in the Museums of London and Bath, then had the cloth woven, dyed using 16th century recipes, and tailored using Tudor techniques. They've discovered that the spit turner's left leg wore out faster than his right because of exposure to the fire, that steam from the charcoal-fuelled ovens faded the pot stirrer's right arm, and that food spills react differently with various dyes. Mending their own clothes also helps make the lives of the individuals who once worked in the kitchens more tangible.

The project's great value is in its methodology of employing and interpreting archaeological and historical evidence, then feeding data back into the archaeological record. This is the only project on this scale in Europe, probing *how* food was prepared rather than the end product. In the kitchen lab sessions theories are tested and processes investigated using latest technology and detailed recording to extract as much information as possible. Breakages, for example, are always recorded (and sometimes photographed) for the archive with notes of what the vessel was being used for, how many times it had been used and how it broke. Wear on metal wares is also observed over time. Residues are tested. A new project on relative temperatures measures how pots and pans conduct heat, and the relationship between the temperatures of fireplace and meat, or charcoal fire and stew.

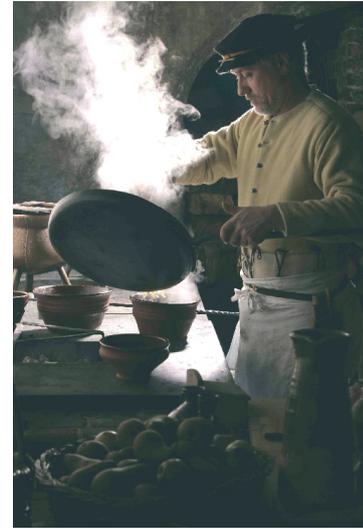
These all-day sessions take place

when the public is about, a factor that Marc acknowledges does compromise the authenticity somewhat. But interaction with visitors has also yielded thought-provoking ideas and questions – what was the predominant colour of cow horn was a recent example.

The kitchen experiments in fact only take place 40 days a year. Most of the team's work is either building up the research basis for the experimental work, analysing and writing up the results, or presenting the work in the UK and abroad.

The team – all male at the moment reflecting the sex bias in Tudor kitchens – has now grown to ten, and the project has a high profile outside the palace due to a heavy schedule of lectures and TV/radio interviews. In December viewers saw them prepare a Christmas goose in the Hampton Court Palace kitchens with arch food experimenter Heston Blumenthal. Museums and researchers deliver a steady stream of requests to assess this process or test that pot, many of which can be accommodated.

But what is the career path of a food archaeologist? Marc is happy to go where the reconstruction process takes him. He's beginning to look at what happens when the food leaves the kitchens in a project on serving with the AE Williams of Birmingham, the last commercial pewterers to hand cast vessels. That could encompass everything from tableware to logistics and personnel requirements to style



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and manners. Always on the lookout for new sources of recipes, the team will also begin this year to work through a 'new' 1502 Tudor cookery book.

Marc warns that not everyone would enjoy his job. Research must be a passion and you need the discipline of any scientific endeavour. As in any big, busy kitchen, the lab work involves heavy, hard work with long hours and extremes of hot and cold. In a Tudor environment, lifting huge cauldrons can wreck your back, turning the spit takes stamina and health and safety is an issue when dealing with lead glazed pots. Then at the end of the day you've got to find time to mend your codpiece. For Marc though, it beats digging a waterlogged cess pit in January. And he gets to eat the final product.

~~ Marc Meltonville was talking to Becky Wallower in the first of our occasional features on less common jobs in archaeology



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The next kitchen lab sessions at Hampton Court Palace are scheduled for:

- 2nd and 3rd February
- 1st and 2nd March
- 21st to 24th March (Easter)
- 5th and 6th April

For further details visit the website: www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace/WhatsOn/