

Just the Kitchen. On Food Preparation in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period

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NOT JUST THE KITCHEN. ON FOOD PREPARATION IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES AND EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Abstract

The paper, based on written sources as well as archaeological findings, points out that food preparation in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period required much more effort and skills. It also required more space and sometimes specialised rooms. The source records mention bakeries as well as cheese making and storage places, breweries and malt houses. These are usually separate buildings, functioning as back-of-house facilities. The former were located separately, most probably because of the fire hazard, and the latter perhaps because of the odours that were generated by the brewing process and the maturation or drying of the cheeses. Thus, instead of the single kitchen room that we are now accustomed to, on many farms, other rooms were used for food preparation and separate buildings that allowed for the production of the food and its preservation and safe storage. We need to take this into account when planning excavation studies of settlement assemblages dating from the time discussed here.


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In several of my previous works, I have discussed issues related to medieval and early modern kitchens, yet the subject remains far from exhausted. I have already highlighted the ambiguity of the term *kuchnia* in Polish, which can refer to a collection of recipes (akin to 'cuisine' in English), a cooking appliance (be it a gas or electric stove), and, of course, the room in which meals are prepared ('kitchen' in English). I have also noted that separate rooms designated for cooking were the exception rather than the rule during the Middle Ages.¹ Such rooms were found in castles and monasteries, i.e., buildings inhabited by considerable groups of people. It is difficult to find traces of their

existence in knight's manors or burgher houses, let alone peasant cottages.² The state of preservation and the indistinct features of house relics uncovered in archaeological excavations often do not allow the function of individual rooms to be reconstructed. The presence of a hearth or even a stove cannot be taken as definitive evidence of a kitchen, as these features might also have been present in other rooms.³

Unfortunately, the word *kuchnia* appears relatively late in written sources from Polish territories and is usually not accompanied by any detailed description. In addition, the word itself does not always refer to a room or a separate building; *kuchnia* is often understood as a type of administrative

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¹ Marciniak-Kajzer 2013, 449-461; Marciniak-Kajzer 2019, 91-205.

² Marciniak-Kajzer 2020, 167-301.

³ Marciniak-Kajzer 2014, 63-74.

KEYWORDS

- late Middle Ages
- Early Modern Period
- kitchen
- food preparation
- household



division within a castle or monastery. This interpretation is supported by records such as the one stating that the burghers of Biecz were obliged to provide ten knives to the royal *kuchnia* each year.⁴ The owners of the village of Kościejów near Skalbierz were required to give five pounds of pepper annually to the monastic *kuchnia*.⁵ Finally, between 1462 and 1468, Jan Zbigniewski is documented as the master of the monastery *kuchnia* in the records of the Miechów convent.⁶ Therefore, when encountering a brief mention of a *kuchnia*, we might expect it to signify more than merely a room where food was prepared.

Here, we need to acknowledge another contemporary reality: we are accustomed to purchasing precisely measured portions of food. On supermarket shelves, we find vegetables, if not already washed, peeled, and even cooked, then at least cleaned and stripped of inedible parts. Meat is sold in convenient portions, and it is increasingly common for children to be unaware of which animal the chop on their plate comes from, or even what the animal looks like. It is hardly surprising to find people who believe milk is produced by factories, a notion partly justified by the extensive processing it undergoes to prolong freshness. In these circumstances, even a small room with running water and a cooking device suffices. However, in the Middle Ages, people did not buy semi-finished products. Almost all food was locally produced in rural areas, and in towns, the food purchased still required significant, labour-intensive processing. Most of the population had to make their own groats from grain, slaughter, skin, butcher animals, and pluck and gut poultry. A small room – usually a separate space in not-so-large buildings – would not be enough for such tasks. Much of this work was likely conducted outdoors, in courtyards or farmyards. Not every type of food was readily available; larger stocks had to be stored, and a significant portion also needed to be preserved. Places had to be found for boxes of grain and barrels of marinated or salted food. Cheeses that were drying or maturing required storage, and beer, the most popular drink, was brewed on-site. This involved preparing malt and brewing in large vats. The latter activities, both cheese storage and beer production, produced distinct, often unpleasant odours.

The answer to how these tasks were managed can be learned from written sources; however, such information only became more plentiful in the 16th century and often lacks precision.

⁴ Sikora 1980, 74.

⁵ Leszczyńska-Skrętowa 1994b, 27.

⁶ Bukowski 2009, 403.

Let us begin with the kitchen itself. When mentioned, it most commonly appears as a separate building, sometimes located at a distance from the main house. For example, a 1491 record informs us that brothers Jan and Andrzej divided the manor in Błażkowa, with Andrzej receiving *a new house with a white room, a kitchen, and a bakery*.⁷ Another document from 1421 notes that Niemierza of Chrzelów (Krzelów) permitted Piotr of Roźnica to fell trees in the local forests for repairs to the new mill, manor house, and kitchen in Roźnica.⁸ Similarly, in the 1536 division of Melsztyn Castle between brothers Jan and Wawrzyniec Spytek Jordan, Jan received *a new tower with a kitchen and an old house*.⁹ Numerous other references of this type can be cited.

Bread was a crucial component of the diet. Bakeries are most frequently mentioned in urban contexts, where they obviously produced goods for sale. However, they are also often highlighted in descriptions of castles and monasteries, and they operated within manors and *folwarks* as well.

In 1530, the Kobylany manor was divided. As a result, Dorota Tarłowa received half of the manor, including: *half the stable with half the chambers, the bakery with half the chambers and buildings, the bathhouse, the malt house, the kitchen*.¹⁰ Thus, the kitchen and the malt house were listed in addition to the bakery. A separate bakery also appears in the aforementioned manor in Błażkowa, as well as in the manor in Bądków, where it was mentioned in 1549.¹¹ Similarly, in Zawady in 1570, there was *a house with a hallway, 4 storage rooms, and a bakery with an earthen stove and a separate chamber*.¹² While more such references could be cited, the primary question arises: why were bakeries located in separate buildings? The pleasant aroma of baking bread certainly was not the reason for moving such buildings away. It seems that fire safety may have been a significant factor. Additionally, the dome oven used for baking bread was relatively large and required ample space. Moreover, the process of kneading the dough in kneading troughs itself required significant space. The dough was then left to rise, and it was believed to require peace and quiet during this stage.

Another significant item on the menu was beer, which required the production of malt as a first

⁷ *nowy dom z białą izbą, kuchnię i piekarnię*, Leszczyńska-Skrętowa 1994a, 130.

⁸ Sikora 1997, 189.

⁹ *nową wieżę z kuchnią i stary dom*, Laberschek 2009, 212.

¹⁰ *połowę stajni z połową komór, piekarni z połową komór i zabudowań, łaźni, słodowni, kuchni*, Kurtyka 1997, 660.

¹¹ Piber-Zbieranowska 2021, 12.

¹² *dom z sienią, 4 komórkami i piekarnią z glinianym piecem i osobną komorą*, Piber-Zbieranowska 2017a, 247.

step. Malt was typically made from barley or wheat grain, but not exclusively. While soaking the grain for germination did not require much space, drying it, which sometimes required heating, did. Following this, the malt needed to be ground. While this was typically done in mills, smaller quantities could be prepared at home, e.g., in groats mortars. The brewing process began only after this preparation in large cauldrons, which necessitated large hearths.¹³ Both the drying and brewing processes emitted unpleasant odours, which likely contributed to the decision to locate malting and brewing facilities away from the main dwelling house.

Malt houses are mentioned in various contexts, including the previously discussed Kobylany manor. In Myślenice, Jan and Spytek Wawrzyniec Jordan were to use half of the malt house and brewery each. Although the building itself was allocated to Jan, each heir was to have his own vat in the brewery.¹⁴ A description of the manor buildings in Bądków from 1549 indicates the presence of a brewery in front of the manor house, along with a structure for storing malts and relevant equipment, though it was noted that 'the vat is not there yet.'¹⁵ Similarly, the manor brewery was mentioned in 1570 in Zawiszyn in Mazovia. Here, a more detailed description is provided: *...along the lane to Królowa Wola, the unrepaired buildings of the brewery stand by the pond, 23 ells long and 14 ells wide; in the brewery, a great room with two chambers, each with a storage room, but with no chimneys, stoves, doors or windows, the whole [covered] with a roof covered with thatch, and the gables covered with laths.*¹⁶ On the other hand, the bakery in the castle in Przyszów was connected with the brewery.¹⁷

Now, let us turn our attention to cheese production. Naturally, on small farms, there was no need for dedicated facilities. However, when larger quantities were produced, various devices were employed to streamline the process.

A description of the Marszkienice *folwark* from 1563 mentions: *a fine wooden house, and*

next to it an old house or a bakery, in it a white room, and a further two chambers without fireplaces, a larder, and under it a milk cellar. Separately, a chamber with a chimney, and in it 'a sernik'. The author of this entry in *Słownik historyczno-geograficzny ziem polskich* added an explanation that *sernik* is 'a device on legs for pressing cheese.'¹⁸ And arguably, this is how the record should be understood in this particular case. However, the term can also have another meaning. Zygmunt Gloger, in his encyclopaedia, explains: *Sernik or lesica – a square building covered with shingles or straw, on a tall pole or four, for drying cheeses and cheese wheels. Rev. Kluk wrote: 'In the sernik, freshly made cheeses are drying.'* *The name lesica came from the walls, sometimes made from hazel [leszczyna] boughs for better ventilation. If the walls were made of logs, they usually had many drilled holes. The sernik was accessed by an attached ladder. The fact that the sernik used to be located at every manor and estate was evidence of a certain development and love of dairy farms.*¹⁹

Such 'a sernik on poles covered with shingles' was described in 1570 in Zawiszyn in Mazovia.²⁰ In the same year, also in Zawady in Mazovia, there was a house with a hall, four storage rooms, and a bakery with a clay oven and a separate chamber, a stable for several horses was next to the bakery, from the hall a passage to the cowshed, next to which is a lockable sernik.²¹ In this case, a separate room was allocated for the cheese, but within the farm building. It was located adjacent to the cowshed, which certainly made it easier to transport the milk. Much more information on the organisation of cheese production can be found in the description of the manor and farm buildings in Bądków. In 1549, it was recorded that: *next to the bakery is a chamber for dairy products and another for milking cows, [next to it] a pen for calves, and a stable with nine horses;*

¹⁸ Wilamowski 2006, 140.

¹⁹ *Sernik albo lesica – budynek kwadratowy pokryty gontami lub słomą, na wysokim słupie albo na czterech, do obuszania serów i gomólek. Ks. Kluk pisze: 'W serniku świeżo robione sery suszą.'* Nazwa *lesica* poszła od ścian robionych niekiedy dla lepszego przewiewu z lasek leszczyny. Jeżeli ściany były z bali, to zwykle z mnóstwem nawierconych dziur. Do sernika wchodziło po przystawianej drabinie. Znajdujący się dawniej przy każdym dworze i dworku sernik dowodził pewnego rozwoju i zamilowania gospodarstw mlecznych, Gloger 1972, IV, 227.

²⁰ *sernik na słupach kryty gontem*, Piber-Zbieranowska 2017b, 250.

²¹ *dom z sienią, 4 komórkami i piekarnią z glinianym piecem i osobną komorą, obok piekarni stajnia na kilka koni, z sieni przejście do obory, przy której jest sernik zamykany na klucz*, Piber-Zbieranowska 2017a, 247.

¹³ Those interested in the details are referred to the book: Szymański 2018.

¹⁴ Laberschek 2016, 206-207.

¹⁵ Piber-Zbieranowska 2021, 12.

¹⁶ *...wzdłuż oplotek do Królowej Woli, nad sadzawką stoją zabudowania browaru nienaprawione, o długości 23 i szerokości 14 lokci; w browarze izba wielka z 2 komnatami, każda z komórką, ale nie ma kominów, pieców, drzwi i okien, całość [przykryta] dachem pokrytym garliną, a szczyty obite dranicami*, Piber-Zbieranowska 2017b, 250.

¹⁷ *dom drewniany niezły, a obok niego stary dom albo piekarnia, w niej biała izba, a dalej 2 komnaty bez kominków, spiżarnia, a pod nią piwnica na mleko. Osobno komnata z kominem, a w niej sernik*, Inwentarz 1567, 22-24, 73-79. More information on the layout of the castle: Marciniak-Kajzer 2005, 109-115.

*behind the bakery is a cheese-making facility otherwise known as a sernik (szernyk).*²²

Other methods of food preservation included drying and smoking, presumably conducted outdoors and requiring specific systems, likely not overly complicated. While traces of smoking pits or drying frames are difficult to find in archaeological layers, they are occasionally discovered. For instance, remnants of a smoking chamber dating to the late 12th or early 13th century were uncovered in Kałdus.²³ Early medieval smoking pits have also been found in Sandomierz.²⁴ An intriguing discovery was made in Piotrawin on the Vistula, where analyses of numerous ichthyological remains revealed evidence of perch, fish from the carp family, and sturgeons being smoked. This discovery is dated to the 13th/14th century,²⁵ as does the smoking chamber from the mound in Stążki.²⁶ I discovered a much more recent smoking chamber, dating back to the 15th century, during excavations at the knight's manor in Leszno near Działdowo, where we uncovered a trace of a wooden barrel with a channel leading to it from the north, probably for supplying smoke.²⁷ On the other hand, a unique needle with both sides ending in an ear was discovered during excavations in the municipal moat in Wrocław, interpreted as a needle for stitching dried fish together.²⁸

Food products could also be smoked or dried in smoky rooms that lacked flues, which was not at all uncommon. There was ample space for hanging various products in kitchens with a wide chimney. In addition, it was possible to regulate the temperature and smoke supply by placing products at different heights. Period engravings depict sausages hanging from a pole positioned above the kitchen hearth.

Smoking food appears to have been a common practice, requiring little organisation, as it is seldom mentioned in source records describing dwellings, or at least I have not found any references to it.

Products that were not consumed immediately and were not dried or smoked also had to be preserved somehow. One method was refrigeration. In the descriptions from the period of interest, popular ice houses, which were detached

²² *obok piekarni jest komora na wyroby mleczne i druga przeznaczona na dojenie krów, [obok] zagroda dla cieląt i stajnia z 9 końmi; za piekarnią jest serownia [miejsce, gdzie wytwarza się sery] inaczej sernik (szernyk), Piber-Zbieranowska 2021, 12.*

²³ Chudziak et al. 2016, 156, 161.

²⁴ Hilczer-Kurnatowska 1988, 506-520.

²⁵ Sułowska 1984, 146-152.

²⁶ Pawłowski 1982, 251-252.

²⁷ Marciniak-Kajzer 2006, 10.

²⁸ Konczewska and Konczewski 2004, 95.

'cellars' sunk into the ground and covered with a layer of earth, are not yet mentioned. At the end of winter, ice broken from nearby bodies of water was brought into them and covered with straw. Although I have not extensively searched the source records, it appears that descriptions of cold stores are rather rare. I have only found one such reference. In a document issued in 1536, regarding the division of the estate between Jan and Wawrzyniec Spytek Jordan, there is a record concerning Melsztyn castle stating that each of the brothers had the right to build a cold store or cellar, but not on both sides of the Dunajec.²⁹

When it comes to chilling food, insulation plays a crucial role. Food needed to be insulated from both the external environment and the melting ice, which could cause products to become wet. The solution was a device that allowed the ice to be placed in the empty space between two containers. This design permitted the addition of ice as it melted, while still granting direct access to the stored products. Such a device was unearthed during excavations in the Old Town of Toruń, specifically in the basement of a building at 19 Rabińska Street, dating back to the 14th century.³⁰ Additionally, several medieval objects identified as cold stores were discovered during excavations in Wrocław.³¹

Many more similar devices might have been in operation, but they may not have been correctly interpreted during archaeological excavations, likely due to their state of preservation. Additionally, food could be stored for a shorter period by lowering it into wells. However, medieval wells were typically not very deep, so the temperature inside was not much lower than the surrounding air.

One remaining issue to discuss is food storage. Grains were typically stored in boxes, logs, or even earthen pits lined with clay, while pickled or salted products were commonly kept in barrels. However, these goods needed to be stored in safe places, protected not so much from thieves but from animals and adverse weather conditions. Chambers or larders were usually used for this purpose. During the period in question, terms such as *sól* and *solek* were used for these storage facilities. As described by Gloger, they were derived from *suć* meaning 'to spill, gather,' and referred to a granary, larder, or chamber. Mączyński's 1564 dictionary translates the Latin *granarium* as: '*sól*, granary, where rye

²⁹ Laberschek 2009, 212.

³⁰ Kola 1989, 103-116; the author also cites similar discoveries, dating back as far as the Late Roman Period, which have not been correctly interpreted.

³¹ Kaletyn 1977, 307; Borkowski 2004, 207-244; Konczewski 2007, 62-63.

was stored.' Similarly, the translator of Crescencius in the 16th century mentions that: 'sóls or larders should be built evenly to store vessels of beer, wine, or oil.' 'Rye should be brought to the sól or larder well-dried.' Klonowicz writes: 'The thief tries to open the sól and chamber.'³² In contrast, *Słownik staropolski* describes *sołek* as a building or part of a building used to store grain and valuable items.³³

Sołek was described in 1449 in a *folwark* near the castle in Międzyrzecz.³⁴ Records from the mid-16th century mention *soleki* in descriptions of manors in the villages of: Mosina,³⁵ Kęszycza,³⁶ and Kościan-Grodztwo.³⁷ However, a thorough reading of historical records suggests that the term may also have a slightly different meaning. For instance, in a description from 1567 of the manor house in Kamieniec, we find a reference to a *sołek* meaning *mlecznik* (milk room).³⁸

An extremely interesting description pertains to the village of Stęszewo. In 1509, it was noted: *the sołek for preparing dairy products (lacticinia) and drying cheeses needs the roof repaired, the granary (horeum) is not there.*³⁹ A dozen or so years later, in 1527, the situation was as follows: *there is a hiding place above the chamber (reservaculum) [sołek] made of iron-wrought wood (ex asseribus ferratis) for grain and cheeses; the granary is small but good, built of oak logs.*⁴⁰ In the description of the *folwark* and manor in Zawiszyn we read: *in front of this house, by the ditch, there is a separately built small sołek on posts for storing meat.*⁴¹

Thus, the rooms used for storing supplies may have varied considerably. They could have been small chambers set apart in a building, separately built large rooms, or pole-supported shelters.

³² *od suć czyli sypać, gromadzić – śpichrz, śpiżarnia, komora. Mączyński w słowniku z roku 1564 wyraz łaciński granarium tłómaczy: 'Sól, śpichlerz, gdzie żyto zsypują. 'Tłómacz Krescencjusza powiada w XVI wieku: 'Soły albo śpiżarnie mają być w równi budowane, w którychby się chowało naczynie piwne, winne albo też olejowe. 'Żyta trzeba dobrze suche do sołu albo do śpiżarni znosić. 'Klonowicz pisze: 'Złodziej stara się odemknąć sołu i komory. ', Gloger 1972, IV, p. 265.*

³³ *Słownik staropolski* 1980, 333.

³⁴ Rutkowska 1993, 155.

³⁵ Jurek 1993, 198.

³⁶ Jurek 1991, 164.

³⁷ Górka-Gońska 1991, 407.

³⁸ Lucinski 1991, 111.

³⁹ *sołek na przygotowywanie nabiału (lacticinia) i suszenie serów potrzebuje naprawy dachu, śpichlerza (horeum) nie ma.*

⁴⁰ *nad izbą jest skrytka (reservaculum) [sołek] z drewna okutego żelazem (ex asseribus ferratis) na zboże i sery; śpichlerz jest mały, ale dobry, postawiony z bali dębowych, Dembiński 2008, 673.*

⁴¹ *przed tym domem nad przepokiem jest osobno zbudowany na słupkach sołek niewielki na mięso, Piber-Zbieranowska 2017b, 248-251.*

One would also expect to find special wine cellars in the most affluent residences. We know that these were frequently found in castle buildings. However, I would like to quote a description that may indicate the use of detached cellars, which were later called ice houses. In 1539, in the already described Myślenice Jordanów, *a new wine cellar and another old one in the great orchard, the repaired wine cellar near the bathhouse* were mentioned.⁴² The cellar in the orchard does not seem to be connected to any building, so it probably served as a larder. It is unfortunate that we do not know how it was built, whether it was a timber dugout or a sunken masonry room.

And finally, we are left with something so obvious that we often overlook it: the need to supply the kitchen with drinkable water. Most dwellings at this time were located close to reservoirs or watercourses, but fetching water from a river or lake and carrying it for a larger farm was quite cumbersome. Water from the manor or castle moat was not suitable for drinking. It was probably most common to use a well dug nearby. Unfortunately, our knowledge of this subject is rather selective. While wells are found in castles and towns in quite large numbers and are often explored, wells discovered during excavations at knight's manors are almost unique. They have only been discovered at a few sites, including Gniazdków (13th/14th century)⁴³ and Nabyszyce (14th century).⁴⁴ Indirect evidence for the existence of wells comes from Kościelna Wieś (14th-1st half of the 15th century), where a *kluczka* (well hook) was found, i.e., an iron clamp with a hook, which, fixed on a pole, was used to pull the bucket out of the well.⁴⁵

This situation can be explained quite easily. Archaeological investigations have primarily focused on the conical mounds hosting the manorial structures, with limited attention given to the economic base of the residences, where the wells likely existed.

In castles, we can also find alternative methods for water supply. In upland areas, these were rainwater cisterns. Examples of these cisterns have been identified at various sites, including Bolczów, Bolków, Chojnik, Czorsztyn, Cisy, Grodno, Melsztyn, Nowy Dwór in Wałbrzych, Niedzica, Ogrodzieniec, Olsztyn (near Częstochowa), and the Pieniny. We also know of one such receptacle in a castle located on a river, i.e., the castle of the Teutonic Knights in Działdowo.⁴⁶

⁴² *nowa piwnica na wino i inna stara w wielkim sadzie, piwnica na wino koło łaźni naprawiona, Laberschek 2016, 207.*

⁴³ Lechowicz 1987, 5-7.

⁴⁴ Tomala 1995, 117-118.

⁴⁵ Kajzer 1994, 113.

⁴⁶ Extensive literature on the castles mentioned: Kajzer et al. 2001.

The sources do not offer many descriptions of wells or cisterns. The mention of a *źródło* (spring) near the manor house in Kobylany was interpreted by Janusz Kruk as information about a well located there.⁴⁷ A well was also mentioned in 1565 in a description of manor buildings in Nowa Wieś.⁴⁸

In 1565, a description of a *folwark* in the village of Podstolice mentioned a well-crafted from oak.⁴⁹ In 1570, another description detailed a well equipped with a crane and a *kubel okowany*⁵⁰ (bucket with metal fittings) at the *folwark* of Zawiszyn. A well is also mentioned in Bądków, and we learn that it was 'new and solidly built.'⁵¹ While there are numerous other mentions of wells, I have chosen to cite descriptions specifically noting those situated close to buildings, indicating their primary use for kitchen purposes.

From the information presented above, drawn from both written accounts and archaeological findings, it becomes evident that meal preparation during the late Middle Ages and early

modern period demanded significant effort. Not only did it necessitate more space, but it also often required specialised facilities. References in historical records highlight the presence of bakeries, *serniks*, breweries, and malt houses (malt drying places). The former two were housed separately most likely due to the fire hazard, while the latter perhaps because of the unpleasant odours that were produced by the brewing of beer and the ripening or drying of cheeses. Thus, instead of the single kitchen room that we are now accustomed to, meal preparation on many farms involved not only utilising various rooms but also separate structures dedicated to both food production and its preservation and safe storage. We need to take this into account when planning excavations at settlements from this period.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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⁴⁷ Kurtyka 1997, 637-638.

⁴⁸ Górska-Gołaska 1995, 327.

⁴⁹ Górska-Gołaska 1999, 718.

⁵⁰ Piber-Zbieranowska 2017b, 250.

⁵¹ Piber-Zbieranowska 2021, 11.

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