

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

I don't know about you, but every time I read the Water Margin, I get hungry. It seems like every other page features a feast of some sort, with our heroes washing down big chunks of meat with large helpings of alcohol. Of course, sometimes you get unlucky in a roadside tavern and end up biting into a steamed bun filled with unsuspecting traveler. And sometimes you get really unlucky and you end up BEING the unsuspecting traveler. But if you can get over that little hang-up, the novel really serves up a never-ending stream of culinary delights. So, I want to use this supplemental episode to take a look at food in the Song Dynasty.

My main sources for this information are two books: One is called "Society and Life during the Song, Liao (2), Western Xia (4), and Jin (1)." The other is called "Song Dynasty Travel Guide." I will include links to both books with the post for this episode on the podcast website, but both books are in Chinese, so they won't do much good for the non-Chinese readers out there.

Overall, the thing that really struck me was how similar the Song Dynasty food scene was to our present-day culinary culture in many aspects. This was a time of great variety, at least for those who could afford it, and we will get to that point later. But if you had money, there was no shortage of delights for your palate.

The Song Dynasty had a vibrant food scene, which took off as retail and commerce flourished. For instance, in Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song, it was said that most residents ate out most of the time rather than cook at home. There were night markets filled with eateries that ran until midnight, and then they would open again just five hours later for the breakfast crowd. You could get all sorts of pastries, fruits, meats, soups, and teas at these night markets, usually for just a few coins, thus making them accessible to large portions of the residents. When these shops reopened for breakfast, they served things like porridge and pastries, and they also offered warm water for customers to wash up as

part of their morning routine. And in some bustling sectors of the city, these markets ran through the night. As someone who grew up in the southeastern city of Guangzhou, which is the culinary capital of China and is famous for a food scene that runs deep into the night, these descriptions brought back more than a few childhood memories for me.

The capital Kaifeng was home to all types of dining establishments, featuring culinary styles from the North, South, and Southwest. You had large, multi-story restaurants, where revenge-minded heroes might occasionally toss an adulterer out a window. You had tea houses where said adulterers might conspire with meddling neighbors. You had small eateries where men of valor bonded over bottles of grain alcohol. You had stalls selling various treats like date cakes. You also had many vendors walking the streets, hawking everything from fresh fruits to steamed buns to rice porridge, and occasionally one of them might get unlucky and stumble over the dead bodies of men who ran afoul of one of our heroes the night before.

Similar culinary cultures could be found in other major cities of the time. Just think back to the description of all the fine dishes that Song Jiang was subjected to during his woe-is-me exile in Jiangzhou Prefecture. Even small towns and transport hubs had their own bustling food scenes. In fact, Lu (4) You (2), a famous Southern Song Dynasty poet, had many references in his poetry describing the food scene in small towns and country hamlets. And this is certainly reflected in the novel as well. Remember when Lu Zhishen went on a pub crawl in the market town near his monastery, hoping to find a place that would serve him wine? Or when Song Jiang and his escorts went to one tavern after another in a riverside town, hoping for service? Even in those small towns, there appeared to be no shortage of restaurants.

So, let's talk about what kind of food they were eating, and let's start with the staple foods. In the North, this consisted primarily of millet and wheat. In the South, it was primarily rice. And this North-South divide more or less continues today.

I should note, however, that even though the North relied primarily on wheat and millet, during the Northern Song, the government also transported more than 850 million pounds of rice to the capital every year. So that means rice was also a common staple food in the North, particularly for officials and soldiers, i.e., the people who work for the government. In fact, I came across a story from around the time of our novel that reflects this.

According to this story, one of the Huizong Emperor's favorite officials lived next to a monastery. Every day, you could see, quote, "snow white grains of rice" flowing out of the ditch running away from the officials home. Presumably these were leftovers discarded after the official and his family had their meals. A monk in the neighboring monastery started scooping these grains of rice out of the ditch, washed them clean, and then dried them and stored them. Within a few years, he had collected enough gutter rice to fill a whole bin. Later, when the capital was sacked by the troops of the Jin kingdom, the official's household ran out of food, and he and his family were starving. At that point, the monk cooked the rice that he had scooped out of their ditch, and delivered it to them, and the family survived on this rice.

In addition to rice, people also steamed millet, and both were also used in congees, which were basically grain porridges. In the South, congees were made with rice. In the North, they were usually made with barley, beans, or glutinous rice. Congee was a way to stretch your supply of grain, which made it a subsistence food for the lower classes, as well as a popular item doled out to the masses during famine relief. But congee could also be a fancier dish. It came in both savory and sweet flavors with various ingredients like meats and vegetables. For instance, in the capital, there was even

something called the “Congee of Seven Treasures and Five Flavors.” The seven treasures were walnuts, pine nuts, a particular type of mushrooms, persimmons, millet, chestnuts, and beans. And there were also shreds of meat and tofu as well.

While rice and millet were steamed or made into congee, wheat was most often turned into flour and used to make a whole slew of dough-based items like buns and noodles. And buns were not just food for the masses; they were popular with the wealthy and powerful as well. In fact, the real Cai Jing, the Prime Minister Cai in our novel who kept getting his birthday presents hijacked, actually had a buns department in his home kitchen, such was his fondness for buns, and in particular, buns filled with crab roe.

There was a dazzling variety of buns, with all sorts of toppings and fillings. There were roasted buns, which were also called Hu (2) buns, or barbarian buns, because apparently roasting came from the so-called barbarian nomads who had invaded the heartland in an earlier age. There were savory buns, sprinkled with seasoning like sesame, and sweet buns flavored with sugar or honey. There were also all sorts of filled buns and dumplings, like wontons, shrimp-stuffed buns, sweet-meat steamed buns, roasted fruit-filled buns, and something called Mrs. Cao’s Meat Pies, which were apparently so good and so famous that they inspired a slew of imitators. Again, not unlike today, when you might have so many imitators of one famous restaurant that you end up with establishments named something like “The Real Luigi’s”.

So that’s staple foods. Next, let’s go to vegetables. And again, there were many, many varieties here, whether it’s greens, melons, carrots, beans, herbs, and so on, with lots of regional specialties. Aside from fresh vegetables, there were also many types of pickles, like ginger and carrots. Also, vegetarian food had by this time become a popular cuisine, thanks to the rise of Buddhism and its strict observance

of vegetarianism. Well, unless you are Lu Zhishen, in which case it was “Bring me whatever meat you have; I’m not picky.”

One meat from this time period that I don’t think Lu Zhishen would have appreciated, however, was fake meat. Centuries before the Impossible Burger, the folks in the Northern Song were already making fake meat from vegetarian components, and apparently doing a darn good job of it, too. Just as an example, they had a dish called “steamed vegetable duck,” which was steamed gourd. They had fake pan-fried pork, which was thinly sliced gourds and wheat bran, pan-fried with oil, green onions, pepper, and wine. I mean, that sounds pretty darn good. There were in fact all sorts of fake meats, everything from fake chicken to fake puffer fish, because apparently even monks want to live dangerously every so often.

Now, during the Song Dynasty, they served fruits before you got to the main courses, so let’s talk about fruits before we get to the meats. Again, I was just struck by the wide array of selections that were available during this time. According to records, in the major city of Luoyang (4,2), you could find 30-some varieties of peaches, 16 varieties of apricots, 27 varieties of pears, 27 types of prunes, 11 types of cherries, 9 types of pomegranates, and 6 types of apples. And there were other fruits like papaya, lychees, dragon eyes, sugar canes, dates, water chestnuts, grapes, and so forth. And again, there were a lot of regional variations in what fruits were available where, but the overall theme was that there were many choices.

While researching this topic, I came across a description of one dish that was apparently quite popular at the time. They put cherries on steamed rice and heated it up until the cherries burst, and their juice seeped through the rice, infusing it with the sweet flavor. And now I’m honestly tempted to try this at home.

They also did some other things with fruit that I did not expect. They made cold treats with them. Yeah, they had frozen desserts back in the Song. I was kind of surprised to learn that, but apparently by the Tang Dynasty centuries earlier, ice was already being sold in street markets. People stored winter ice for use in the summer, and during the Northern Song, they made frozen fruit treats as well as various cold beverages with fruit juices. One popular item was basically crushed ice infused with fruit juices, like our snow cones today. One guide book of the capital Kaifeng from the time period mentioned that there were two stalls outside one of the city gates that were the most popular places for frozen treats, which they served in silver wares. During the summer, the guide book said, there was always a line at these stalls.

Now, let's get to the main action: The meats. And here we see a clear class divide. For the upper classes, the meat of choice was far and away lamb, while the lower classes, when they had meat, were eating mostly pork. One illustration of this divide can be found in a record from the reign of the Shenzong (2,1) Emperor, whom we mentioned at the beginning of the novel. During his reign, the kitchen in the imperial palace served 574,696 pounds of lamb in one year, compared to just 5,464 pounds of pork.

As lamb became the preferred meat for the upper crust, its prices rose increasingly out of reach for the lower classes. During my research, I came across a story about a poor scholar who really loved lamb but couldn't afford it. So, he devised a rather ingenious and roundabout solution. He struck up an acquaintance with Su (1) Dongpo (1,1), a famous scholar and literary figure during the Northern Song. As acquaintances were wont to do, the two men wrote letters to each other. But the poor scholar would then take the letters from Su Dongpo and trade them for lamb. You see, Su Dongpo's penmanship was revered throughout the land, and anything bearing his handwriting was something of a collector's item. So this scholar traded Su Dongpo's letters for lamb, and he got something like a dozen pounds of lamb

for every letter. Later, when the prime minister learned about this, he made sure that Su Dongpo never heard the end of it, in part because they were rivals. He went so far as to mockingly call Su Dongpo's letters something to the effect of "lamb currency." So, when we read in the novel that so-and-so slaughtered a sheep to treat their guests, keep in mind that this was no small gesture, because lamb would've been a rare treat for most of the population.

While the upper classes were busy laughing at each other over their lamb chops, the lower classes contented themselves with pork. And there was apparently a huge supply and demand for pork. It's said that in the capital Kaifeng, people drove pigs into the city nonstop every day for slaughter. Each herd that came in had tens of thousands of pigs, driven by dozens of people. Remember that in the novel, one of our heroes, Shi Xiu the Daredevil, went into business as a butcher, and he would go bring home pigs every so often. I could just imagine him being one among all these countless pig drivers.

Another record said that in the major city of Yanan (2,1), there were countless butcher shops. There were apparently even streets where every household was a butcher. And all these shops had sides of pig hanging in their stalls, and each shop would sell dozens of sides of pig each day.

The most famous pork recipe from this time was probably Dongpo pork, named after the aforementioned scholar Su Dongpo, who supposedly invented the dish after he was sent into exile. This is basically slow-cooked fatty pork, and it is amazing.

So we've talked about lamb and pork, two meats that our heroes have chowed down with abandon throughout the novel. What about the other meat that we often read about? Beef. Well, this is where we run into some issues. Beef, as it turns out, was something of a forbidden treat. Governments throughout Chinese history often had some kind of ban on the slaughter of cattle for food because of their importance for agriculture, and the Song Dynasty was no exception. So this meant beef would have

been a rare delicacy, found only at very special occasions where exceptions to the ban might be allowed. So, it seems unlikely that our heroes would be able to just stroll into a random village tavern and order 3 pounds of beef, or that the tavern keepers would just casually mention that they had freshly slaughtered an ox earlier that day. And remember the scene in episode 55, when Li Kui doused a waiter with fish soup because the guy said they only served lamb and not beef? Li Kui took it as an insult, assuming the waiter meant they didn't serve low-class meats that someone like him could afford. But from the sound of things, maybe the waiter was actually saying they didn't serve a rare delicacy like beef. I actually spent quite a bit of time researching that seemingly contradictory point, but to no avail. But hey, it's Black Whirlwind. He doesn't need a logic to fling hot fish soup at you.

While beef appears to be off the table, there were a variety of other meats to make up for it. There was a wide range of fowl, like chickens, ducks, and geese. There were also wild game, like rabbits, as well as an array of seafood. We have records of many dishes using these ingredients. For instance, the capital's markets offered dishes like stir-fried rabbit, onion-splattered hare, pan-fried quail, stir-fried clams, ginger shrimp, and drunken crabs. I don't know about you, but I'm drooling just thinking about that list.

Let's talk a little bit about seasoning. There was a saying from this time that "Your home cannot be without firewood, rice, oil, salt, fermented soybeans, vinegar, or tea." From that, we can see that salt, vinegar, and fermented soybeans were among the basic seasoning for many homes, although apparently they could also be out of reach for the poor. Ginger and pepper were also among common spices. And a note on fermented soybeans. There are records of something called "soybean juice" being used for flavor at this time, and that sounds like some form of soy sauce. However, it appears that the



paste-like fermented soybeans were the much more common form of seasoning at this time than soy sauce.

We've focused on food so far. Let's now turn our attention to the other thing that our heroes spent a lot of time ingesting -- alcohol. During the Northern Song, there were 4 main categories of alcohol for consumption: yellow wine, fruit wine, something called "integrated" wine, and white wine.

By far the most common type of alcohol at this time was yellow wine, which was brewed from fermented grain such as millet, wheat, and in the South, glutinous rice. This type of wine had long been brewed in China, going back more than a millennium before the Song Dynasty. It has a yellowish color, which some compare to the feathers of baby geese. Sometimes people would also tint it red with red flowers and other herbs. This would have been the wine that our heroes chugged.

Now, you might remember some occasions in the novel when our heroes talked about how murky a particular bowl of wine was. For instance, in episode 40, when Wu Song stopped in at the black tavern run by Sun Erniang the Female Yaksha, she tried to drug him. So she told him that she had some good wine but it was a bit murky, and his response was, "The murkier the better." As it turns out, murky wine was nothing unusual at this time. When you pour a bowl of yellow wine, it came with lots of sediment from the brewing process. That was just how you drank it.

The second category of wine was fruit wines, and these were made from a wide variety of fruits. Grapes were by far the most common among these, but there were also wines made from oranges, coconuts, pears, lychees, dates, cherries, osmanthus, and so on. But as a group, fruit wines were not all that common compared to yellow wine, and the brewing techniques for fruit wines were still rather rudimentary at this time.

The third category of wine were “integrated” wines. These were so called because they were infused with plants or animals that were believed to have medicinal purposes. For instance, such wines might be infused with chrysanthemums, medicinal plants, poisonous snakes, or deer musk. And they would be ingested as remedies for ailments.

The final category of wine was called “white wine”, or in Chinese, Baijiu (2,3). Far from a sweet riesling, this was distilled alcohol, the ridiculously high-proof stuff that burns going down. Now, these were not all that common in the time of our novel. It wasn’t until the Yuan Dynasty more than a century later that distilling techniques from the Middle East spread into China, and those techniques were the ones really responsible for the incendiary liquor we know as baijiu today. During the Song, they used a different distilling technique that perhaps did not make as strong a liquor. And it was apparently hard to find such distilled alcohol in most of the empire. The one famous vintage of baijiu from this time hailed from Guilin, a city in the southwest, an area considered to be a podunk backwater at the time, a place where you sent disgraced officials.

Now that we’ve covered the types of alcohol being served at this time, let me talk a little bit about the drinking culture of the Song. One defining characteristic is that during the Song, they served and sold wine in bottles. Up through the Tang Dynasty a few centuries earlier, wine was sold and served in buckets. But by the Song Dynasty, they had switched to bottles, each holding up to about 18 ounces, or about one and a half soda cans.

During the Song, a number of famous vintages came into existence. These were typically associated with specific taverns, restaurants, or locales. The imperial palace also made its own famous brew. There were strict government controls on brewing. To be allowed to brew wine, you had to be either an officially recognized tavern, or you had to be a high official or a member of the imperial family. So one result of these regulations was that many high officials or relatives of the emperor had their own fine

vintages stashed at home. Oh, and now that we think about it, you just have to wonder how many of our heroes in the novel might have been illegally making their own brew.

When you need a beverage other than alcohol to help you sober up, you could turn to the other must-have drink of the time -- tea. As we mentioned earlier, tea was considered an essential household item, and we see many references to it as something served as part of social interactions. So let's take a look at tea culture in the Song Dynasty.

There were two basic types of teas at this time. Loose tea is basically the loose-leaf tea we know today. You pluck the tea leaves, steam them, and then dry them by roasting. The best loose leaf teas came from areas around the Yangzi (2,3) River, including Jiangzhou (1,1), the prefecture where Song Jiang was exiled to.

The other type of tea was called disc tea. After steaming the picked tea leaves, instead of roasting them like you do with loose-leaf tea, you instead pressed the moisture out of the leaves, ground them to powder, put the powder into a mold, and pressed it into a disc shape. In later eras, this style of tea preparation took a back seat to loose-leaf teas, but during the Northern Song, it was actually considered the premium type of tea.

So, how did you drink this premium tea? In prior eras like the Tang Dynasty, people heated a pot of water on a stove and essentially cooked the disc of powdered tea in the pot. They would even add salt and ginger to it for flavor. By the Song Dynasty, all of that had gone out of fashion. Instead, they put some of the powdered tea in a tea cup and pour a little bit of boiling water into the cup to make a slurry or paste. Then, they poured more boiling water into the cup and whisked it until the powdered tea floated to the top, giving the beverage a thicker, creamy look. I've linked to a video demonstrating this technique in the website post for this episode. So go check it out if you are interested.

If tea wasn't your cup of ... umm ... tea, there were also some other beverages you could turn to. For instance, they were making soy milk by this time. And as I mentioned earlier, during the Song they had cold treats, and some of these were drinks, like pear smoothies, coconut wine, and papaya juice.

As we have seen, there was definitely no shortage of culinary options during the Northern Song, as long as you had money. There was an obvious class divide between the rich and poor when it came to culinary choices. There were many recipes by this time, carefully crafted based on the principles of color, fragrance, flavor, appearance, and name. But all these fancy recipes were mostly available only to the upper classes. On one extreme, you had records of a meal that a Song emperor had at one of his ministers' home, where they sampled 30 courses before they drank 15 cups of wine. At the other extreme, you had the poor, struggling to scratch out the standard three meals a day and sometimes unable to afford even basic ingredients like salt.

I'll close with a few tidbits I came across that show the variety, creativity, and extravagance of high-end Song culinary culture. That 30-course meal for the emperor that I just mentioned? Here are just a few of the dishes: The first course was roasted quail with lychees and pig's kidneys. Course No. 2 was milk soup with something called the three crispies. That was followed by sheep's tongue soup. And in between the various main courses, there were "side dishes" like quail jerky, tender chicken, and tender rabbits. There was also a lotus flower and duck soup, and something called "carved flower with candied fruits."

Here are a couple more illustrations of the extravagant measures the upper crust took to satisfy their palates. One official loved bream, so he built a pond in his own residence, where he raised more than 1,000 breams. He even built a water wheel so that the fish would have fresh water. And the aforementioned Prime Minister Cai was such a fan of quails that he once served more than 1,000 of

them at a banquet. Rumor had it that later that night, in his dreams, he got a visit from the quail immortal, threatening to do him harm if he kept slaughtering quails, and that convinced him to stop.

The most extravagant feasts during the Song Dynasty were often called the “Four Secretaries and Six Offices.” That’s a reference to how many people had to be involved in managing these banquets. There were literally four secretaries. One was in charge of utensils, place settings, furnitures, and such. There was a Secretary of the Tea, who was in charge of beverages, seating, greeting, and seeing people out afterward. The Secretary of the Kitchen was, as you might guess, in charge of the cooking. And the Secretary of Platters was in charge of bringing out all the serving ware and bussing the tables.

Aside from those four people, there were also six other so-called “offices”, or teams of people. And these were responsible for fruits, veggies, candied fruits, lanterns and candles, incense, and finally, clean-up duty.

The final story I’ll share is about a provincial prefect who hired a renowned female chef who had worked in the capital. She prepared for him a sheep’s head soup, a real delicacy. She used 10 sheep’s heads, which was no small expense considering how pricey sheep was. She took it a step further by only using the cheek meat from the heads and discarding everything else. When some folks picked up her discarded sheep’s heads because they thought it would be wasteful to throw them out, she scoffed and told them that those other parts were not fit for the refined palates of the upper crust. Her soup turned out to be amazing, but it was also so extravagant, and her fee so high, that the prefect soon felt that he could not afford her services. So after less than two months, he found some excuse to part ways amicably with her. Think about that: Even the highest ranking official in the prefecture could not afford this chef.

So there you have it, a look at food during the Song Dynasty. This turned out to be even longer than a regular episode, but hey, I can talk about food all day. Just talking about it is making me hungry, so I'm going to grab a snack. I'll see you next time on the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!