



By: Janet Clarkson

THE HUMBLE EGG

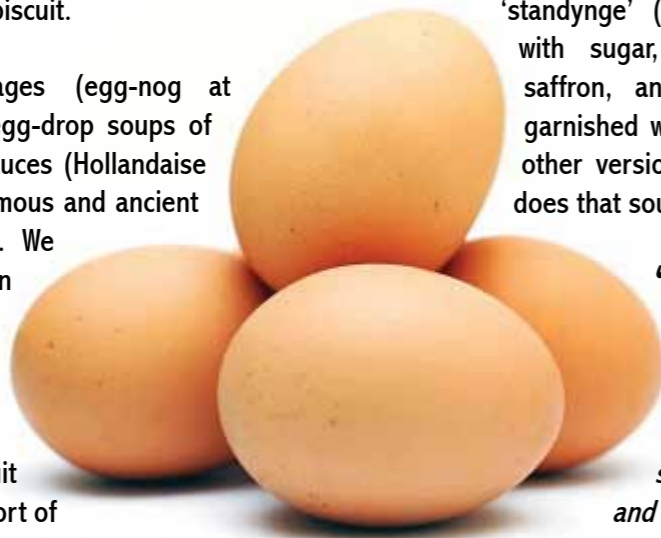
Where would we be as cooks and bakers without the egg? It is so familiar to us, and has been since ancient times, that perhaps now we take it for granted. Surely there is no other ingredient which is so ubiquitous, so universal, and so essential?

Large shells have been used as drinking cups or cooking vessels, and powdered shells to make imitation ivory as well as tooth powder. Eggs have been used widely in medicine. They are almost unique amongst foods as being considered suitable for ever age and every state of health or illness. In olden times they were believed to neutralise a swallowed poison, to be soothing to diseased eyes, to help dislodge fish-bones in the throat, and to be valuable in the preparation of poultices and plasters.

From a culinary point of view, what I find most fascinating about the use of eggs is just how long standing are some of their most popular uses. Take custard for example – the style suitable for filling your fruit tarts or profiteroles. I give you below a recipe from the fourteenth century, for ‘boiled cream’ made with cream and eggs. It is made ‘standynge’ (‘standing’) thickness, sweetened with sugar, flavoured and coloured with saffron, and finally sliced (‘lesked’) and garnished with borage flowers (or violets, in other versions of the time.) How wonderful does that sound?

Almost every culture uses eggs in its cooking. The exceptions may best prove this general rule. Vegans of course eschew eggs, and historically some African groups apparently did not eat eggs – nor did Pacific Islanders, although they quickly realised their value to visiting ships, and collected eggs to sell to the crew. For most of the rest of us, it is a rare week that we do not have egg in one form or another, even if we do not notice it because it is an ingredient in a cake or a biscuit.

We use eggs in beverages (egg-nog at Christmas), in soups (the egg-drop soups of Greece and China), and in sauces (Hollandaise and mayonnaise, and the famous and ancient ‘egg sauce’ with salt cod). We eat them hard-boiled in sandwiches and salads, and sometimes curries. Without its egg, Sunday breakfast, burgers with ‘the lot’ and our entire cake and biscuit repertoire would fall very short of ideal. Can you imagine a modern kitchen without eggs?



Such is the richness and variety of the world’s cultures however that one person’s eggy delicacy is another’s nausea-inducing horror. In the Phillipines a great delicacy is balut – a boiled fertilised and half-developed duck or chicken embryo - complete with recognisable beak and eyes and feathers along with some remaining yolk. In China there is a great demand for ‘hundred’ (or ‘thousand’) year old eggs (actually only several weeks or months old) prepared by curing in a mixture of salty, alkaline clay – a process which results in a creamy green yolk nestled in the ‘white’ – now a transparent brown jelly. Both these national delicacies are apparently acquired tastes.

Eggs are also fundamental to many origin myths, fables, and folk-tales. They have been used in the past in art as a binder for paint and as a varnish, in many industries such as the preparation of fine leather, calico, and fine wine.

“For to make Cremmeboyle”
To make Creme boyle take cowe creme and the yolkes of egges clene drawn & welle beten and boyle it up that it be standynge and put thereto sugre and colour it with saffron and salt it and leske it in dyshes and plante therin flours of Borage and serve it.

And for another good old idea, how about a bacon omelette for breakfast? A ‘froise’ or ‘fraise’ was somewhere between an omelette and a pancake, and there are many variations in cookery books dating to medieval times. Here is a somewhat later version, from a marvellous book called The Family Dictionary and Household Companion, published in 1695. This is a fascinating book, and gives a very interesting glimpse into the sort of problems that the housewife of this time might face - the entry after ‘gammon’ for example, is on ‘gangreen’!

Bacon Froise
Take eight Eggs well beaten, a little Cream and a little Flower [flour], beat them well together, like other Batter, then fry very thin slices of Bacon, and pour some of this over; then fry it, and turn the other side, pour more upon that, so fry it, and serve it to Table.



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