# Revisiting Historical Recipes

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What should a dish lifted from an historical text taste like? We still have no answers, but a multidisciplinary team in the Netherlands has been developing a method for trying to answer that question with a set of procedures which, they say, offers the best chance of reconstructing a dish to be as historically accurate as possible. Surely that is impossible..

**Marieke**: It is indeed impossible to taste what someone tasted 300 years ago. Of course, we have modern bodies and modern minds, so even if you could get the taste chemically exactly right, our perception of it would still be different.

I'm interested in this because it's also a philosophical problem, because you also can't see or hear what someone saw or heard 300 years ago. But we don't make a problem of looking at historical paintings or making historical music, right? So I think what all these sort of re-enactments or re-interpretations of historical sources are about is that we want to learn about the past, we want to know more about the past and how people perceived their world back then. And I think excluding taste from that is basically throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Just because you can't exactly taste what someone tasted in the past, not doing it at all Just strikes me as too radical. So what I wanted to do with this project was basically figure out how close you would be able to get to the taste of a dish, a historical dish, any dish, basically.

**Jeremy**: Okay, so you don't know exactly what people tasted. So how did you approach the problem?

**Marieke**: Right. So what we did was we basically first made an analysis of a small data set of historical recipes, and they were all in Dutch because we wanted to do this with a tasting panel, a volunteer panel, and because we're in the Netherlands, we figured that, you know, these people should at least be able to read Dutch. So we went

for Dutch recipes from the 17th and 18th centuries, from printed recipe books for all kinds of dishes. And we did an analysis of dishes that occurred frequently and that would we still would be able to reconstruct in a way that was legal and safe, because of course, we don't want to use any ingredients that aren't legal any more or things that are now considered to be a health issue. So we ended up. .. Well, I mean, the risk is real, of course. So we ended up with a set of recipes that, there was one for, I think for a sort of fish stew, one for a vegetable dish and the apple pie. And then we figured, well, if we're doing this with a taste panel, we had someone on the project team, Judith Konsten, and she's a professional taster. She's also experienced in setting up these taste panels for industry. And she told us, well, if you want a taste panel to be able to judge something, you should give them all the exact same thing. So it should be the exact same size, the exact exact same temperature. So basically, the dishes that had to be served hot kind of fell off there. And then we were left with the apple pie, which was great, of course, because you can make mini apple pies and you can give everyone the exact same little pie with the same amount of crust versus filling, et cetera.

**Jeremy**: And how did you decide exactly which historical apple pie to make?

**Marieke**: Right. So we ended up baking three different recipes, which was great fun. And we also wanted to know whether the fuel that we were using was influencing the taste because that's one of the arguments that you hear a lot from people who say, well, it's no use reconstructing historical recipes because the kitchens were so different, right? Most things were cooked in a hearth before the end of the 18th century and those hearths, especially in the Netherlands, were fuelled with peat, mainly a little wood and a lot of peat, because that was the fuel that was widely available, and it has a very distinct smell. I don't know if you like whiskey, but peaty whiskey has this very distinct smell, right? And I think it's really nice, but it's also ... It's very ... It can be very intense because I once did a reconstruction of a small chemical oven, which was also fired by peat, and by the end of the day, everything smelled like peat, including my hair, my clothes. So it would be, you know, it seeps through everything. So we baked those pies, the three recipes, in both an electric oven and in a wood and peat fired oven, which was a very interesting experiment because indeed, by the end of the day, everything smelled like peat except for the apple pie that didn't taste like peat at all.

**Jeremy**: That is a surprise.

**Marieke**: Yes. It was. And I think it had to do with the fact that it's ... Of course, it's in a container and the smoke is drawn away from the oven, so it gets into your hair and clothes, but not so much in the food itself. It would be different, I think, for bread, for example, if you bake something directly on the floor of the oven, but as long as it's in a container, it doesn't make that much of a difference. So we tasted those six apple pies. We also did apple pies over a wood and peat fire outside. Actually in a cake pan, because a lot of cake historically was baked in a sort of closed pan. Also didn't make much of a difference to the taste, so we decided we could do this in electrical ovens for the taste panel.

**Jeremy**: And about the ingredients. Well, two questions really. First of all, in the Low Countries, was there a difference between cooking apples and eating apples?

**Marieke**: Yes. Well, in the sense that you know, there were a lot of varieties of apples already in the early modern period in the Low Countries. And of course, some of them were preferred for cooking and some were preferred for eating. But they're not called cooking and eating apples. You just see in, for example, in a recipe, you see that they say, well, you should use a hard sour apple for this. And we had an archaeobotanist on our team, Merit Hondelink, who knows all about different cultivars and how the taste of fruits changed over time. And we ended up basically with ??? [*I could not transcribe this. Please let me know if you know.*], Goudrenet, which are still a very common cooking apple in the Netherlands. But she thought that those would come closest to the historical cooking apples.

**Jeremy**: Okay, so that was going to be my second question is, what variety did you use. Okay. So you've got you've got the apples. You've got a recipe. You're cooking them in an electric oven because you've shown that it makes no difference what fuel you use. Tell me about the volunteers.

**Marieke**: So the volunteers ... That was really fun actually. So Vera Eising, who was the junior researcher on the project, she set up the taste panels by finding volunteers through social media, newsletters, et cetera, and we ended up with 100 people, all from the Netherlands. And some of them came quite a long way, actually, because we did this in Amsterdam, where our office is based. But some people really

traveled for hours because they wanted to be a part of this, which was very, very fun. So basically the only requirements we had for the volunteers was that they should be able to read Dutch because the questionnaire was in Dutch and we wanted to question them about aspects of the recipe. So you don't want a translation bit to be a sort of barrier. So they had to be able to read Dutch. They had to be open to tasting new food. They couldn't be vegan because there were eggs and butter in the recipe. And just to make sure that we wouldn't have any health issues, we excluded people with food allergies, intolerances and pregnant people because the butter was raw and the dish was cooked, so it wouldn't have been much of a risk. But we just wanted to make, you know, better safe than sorry.

**Jeremy**: So what did you learn from them?

**Marieke**: It was fascinating, actually. The one thing that stood out — which might seem like an open door, but I actually think it isn't — was that apple pie as a recipe category is a fairly stable thing. Um, because most people recognised this as apple pie. Initially when just based on the looks of it, it was, I think, about 70%. But then after tasting it, this went up to 95%. So that was really interesting to see. Also that the visuals played a limited role because when people just looked at it, they thought it was, most of them said, well, it's some sort of quiche or pie or, you know, cake, but some of them thought it was something, uh, it wasn't sweet.

**Jeremy**: Just go back for a second. When I think of a pie, I think of pastry on the bottom, filling in the middle and pastry on top. Is that what we're talking about?

**Marieke**: So this is also an open pie. So it didn't have pastry on the top.

**Jeremy**: OK, I would call that a tart.

**Marieke**: Yeah. Yeah. So they already go with the translation thing, right? So yeah, that's also what we wanted to avoid. So yeah, basically, yes, in modern terms, this would have been a tart, I guess. The interesting thing is that in early modern recipes, this is all pie. So it's all "taart" in Dutch. And we also ... We actually also tried a recipe that had a lid on top that had to be, that had to be broken and then used to scoop the filling into your mouth. And the crust wasn't really meant for eating, which is something you see a lot in, especially

medieval pies. So we didn't want to go down that road because it would become too complicated.

**Jeremy**: Okay. Sorry I distracted you. Tell me again what the volunteers thought of the pie.

**Marieke**: Most of them really liked it. They valued it quite highly. I think it was somewhere between 7 and 8 on a 10-point scale. Some of them thought ... Quite a fair amount of people said it tastes healthier than modern apple pie, which I guess is because it has a relatively low sugar content and the crust wasn't made with white flour, but with whole wheat. So I guess that's where that came from. People were fairly well able to recognise ingredients, I must say, although there was rosewater in it and only two people identified that correctly, which I found interesting because it's not ... Of course, it's not a common ingredient in European recipes, but it is widely used in, for example, the Middle Eastern kitchen and also Spanish recipes sometimes. So I was surprised that so few people could actually identify rosewater.

**Jeremy**: And the kind of question at the heart of the whole enterprise is, well, what did it taste like? But does this tell you what it tasted like in the 17th century?

**Marieke**: It doesn't tell us what it tasted like, but it gives us an impression of what it very well may have tasted like. Sorry for being such a researcher about this. It's ... You know, you're never going to get a straightforward answer to: this is what it tasted like. So I think this is as close as you will get. And what was also my main aim with this project wasn't so much to reconstruct a historical taste, but to develop a methodology to do that, to come as close as possible. Because what you see now is that there's a lot of people cooking historical recipes, and for most people, it's just fun, you know, it's just a way to feel closer to history. And that's fine of course, that's great. But if you look at it from a historical methodological perspective, I think it's a really interesting method. It's a way of close reading for me, reconstructing a recipe, because it helps you understand the recipe and the context in which it was produced in a way that is impossible to gather if you just read it. Because you have to think through all the ingredients, the kind of kitchen this was prepared in, the steps people would have to go through, things like, you know, the absence of measures of temperature, measuring devices. So for me,

reconstructing historical recipes is more about that. It's really a way of close reading rather than reconstructing a taste.

**Jeremy**: And this methodology, you focused on apple pie, partly because you would be able to serve it cold and partly because it would be familiar. How useful do you think it would be for a dish that would be unfamiliar, maybe one from a bit earlier than the early modern period, where the flavourings, the tastes, the ingredients would be really not something we're familiar with.

**Marieke**: So what you get there is that it becomes even more uncertain. What it is, is the way things tasted back then, but also it gives you an impression and it gives you an idea of what people would have eaten in a specific context. And that in itself can be quite enlightening. For example, what we ... I'm currently working on a project on historical food conservation technologies, which is great fun. And then we have one person, she's our postdoc, and she works on fermentation. And when I hired her, of course, I asked her, you know, have you done reconstructions of historical recipes before? Because that's something you have to be comfortable with. And then she told me that she had done so many reconstructions of fermented foods and eaten so many of them that at some point she got an allergic reaction and ended up in A&E. Which shows great dedication, of course, but it also brought home to me that because people ate so many fermented foods, they must have had a higher histamine tolerance than we had. So it's also things like that. And I'm, please don't do this, do this at home. Right. Be careful. Don't eat all your fermented reconstructions at once. But it's things like that that does give you insight in how early modern bodies and societies function. So I think it's more about that than about reconstructing exact tastes.

**Jeremy**: Yeah. And I found it fascinating that that the fuel and the container didn't make that much difference. Another thing you say in the paper is that this method might be useful for understanding what I would call a kind of gastro-nationalism, how people identify with historical foods. Can you just expand on that idea for me for a bit?

**Marieke**: Yes. What I think is interesting about is that something like apple pie isn't exclusively Dutch. It's eaten all over the world. But there are people who think it is typically Dutch, in the Netherlands, and just the fact that that you can show that there's a lot of recipes that are changing, that are different over time, can help people

understand that what they think is typical for their food culture might actually be something that they share with others. And although, of course, it's great that food can have this sort of unifying quality, there's also a danger in nationalism, of course. And I think critically reflecting on historical foods and, for example, things like the fact that in the Netherlands we have Sinterklaas on December 5th ... It's like Santa Claus, but he brings gifts for children, and there's a lot of Sinterklaas related sweets, like cookies, certain cookies, certain biscuits. And those are considered typically Dutch. But if you look what's in them, it's actually a lot of spices, and this came from the colonies obviously in the 17th century, this is when all these sweets became widely available to a lot of people. Which also had to do with all the sugar from the colonies and all the slavery involved in that. So I'm not saying people shouldn't enjoy their Sinterklaas biscuits but I do think looking at these recipes from a more critical historical perspective also helps you understand that food cultures never develop in isolation.

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