

# Humor Me: BY KAREN LYON *The Temperamental Table*

When Shakespeare's contemporaries sat down to a meal, some worried less about keeping their figures than about balancing their humors. Of a phlegmatic bent? Avoid the fish. Have a melancholy nature? Go right for the sweets. Among the many challenges of the Renaissance kitchen—hauling water, stoking fires, and keeping vermin at bay—was the additional task of trying to keep one's temperament in equilibrium.

**I**n *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio attempts to squelch Katherine's hot temper by denying her meat, snatching away a roast that he claims was "burnt and dried away," and thus likely to engender cholera. "And better 'twere both of us did fast," he offers by way of explanation, "since of ourselves, ourselves are choleric." While his methods may be imperious—and his motivation suspect—Petruchio's reasoning nonetheless expresses a dietary philosophy prevalent during the Renaissance.

## WHAT'S YOUR HUMOR?

Humoral theory, based on the work of the ancient Greek physician Galen, holds that good health relies on a balance of four fundamental fluids: blood, cholera (yellow bile), phlegm, and black bile. An ideal proportion (one quarter as much phlegm as blood, one sixteenth as much cholera as blood, and one sixty-fourth as much melancholy as blood) is difficult to sustain since humors are continually influenced by what people eat and drink. So one humor will generally predominate and characterize an individual's overall temperament or "complexion." Too much blood, for example, results in a sanguine personality, and an overabundance of black bile makes one melancholy.

Each temperament carried its own set of characteristics, which still resonate in our language today. Sanguine people were thought to be ruddy and cheerful, phlegmatics pale and listless, choleric jaundiced and angry, and melancholics dark and sad (but often creative).

A 1609 English translation of a poem in *The School of Salerno* paints a broad, lyric picture of the temperaments:

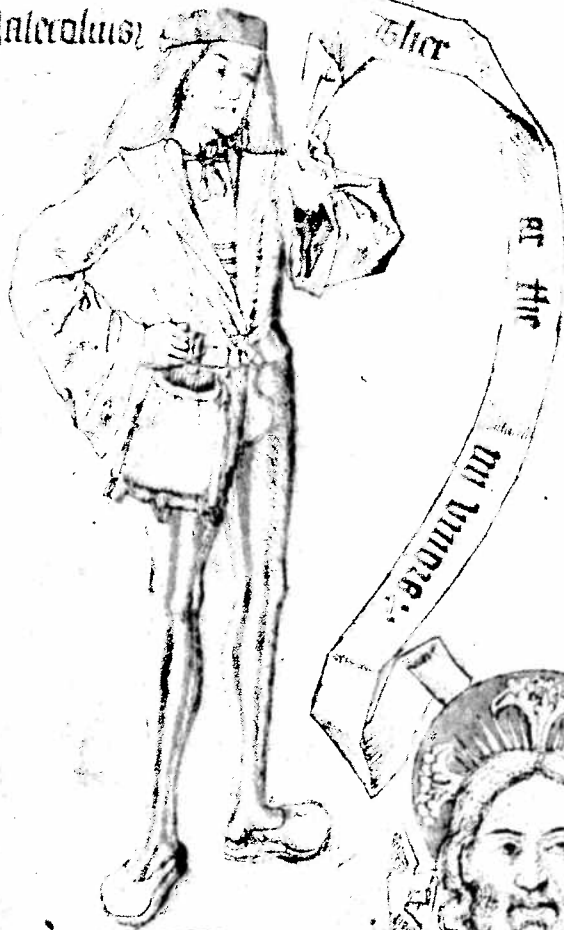
The Sanguin gamesome is, and nothing nice [i.e., not shy],  
Loves wine and women, and all recreation,  
Likes pleasant tales, and newes, playes cardes and dice,  
Fit for all company, and every fashion:  
Though bold, not apt to take offence, nor irefull,  
But bountifull and kind, and looking chearfull;  
Inclining to be fat, and prone to lafter,  
Loves myrth, and Musicke, and cares not what comes after.

Sharpe Choller is an humour most pernicious,  
All violent, and fierce, and full of fire,  
Of quick conceit, and therewithal ambitious,  
Their thoughts to greater fortunes still aspyre,  
Proud, Bountifull enough, yet oft malicious,  
A right bold speaker, and as bold a lyer.  
On little cause to anger great inclined,  
Much eating still, yet ever looking pined;  
In younger years they used to grow apace,  
In elder hayry on their breast and face.

The Flematique are most of no great growth,  
Inclining rather to be fat and square,  
Given much unto their ease, to rest and sloth,  
Content in knowledge to take little share,  
To put themselves in paine most loth,  
So dead their spirits, so dull their senses are:  
Still either sitting, to avoid the flegme,  
One quality doth yet these harmes repayre,  
That for the most part the Flegmatiques are fayre.

The Melancholie from the rest do vary,  
Both sport and ease, and company refusing,  
Exceeding studious, ever solitary,  
Inclining pensive still to bee, and musing,  
A secret hate to other apt to carry.  
Most constant in his choise, tho long a choosing.  
Extreame in love sometime, yet seldom lustfull,  
Suspicious in his nature, and mistrustfull.  
A wary wit, a hand much given to sparing,  
A heavy look, a spirit little daring.

Malcolus



Sanguis



Colours



Strenuus



The four temperaments from the Guild Book of the Barber Surgeons of the city of York. 15th century. The Art Archive / British Library

## An Ideal Diet

People were urged to avoid foods that would intensify their existing humors and choose instead from their opposite number. So overheated choleric should favor cold, moist cucumbers and lettuce, while cold, dry melancholics would do better eating lamb and sugar.



### PHLEGMATIC TEMPERAMENT

**Nature:** Cold and moist

**Flavor:** Inspid/flavorless

**Avoid:** Cucumbers, lettuce, spinach, fish, pork, veal

**Eat:** Choleric Foods



### CHOLERIC TEMPERAMENT

**Nature:** Hot and dry

**Flavor:** Bitter/salty

**Avoid:** Rice, mint, parsley, cloves, capers, rosemary, olives, rabbit, salt, pepper, goat and oxen, garlic, onions

**Eat:** Phlegmatic foods

### MELANCHOLIC TEMPERAMENT

**Nature:** Cold and dry

**Flavor:** Sour/tart

**Avoid:** Vinegar, lemons

**Eat:** Sanguine foods



### SANGUINE TEMPERAMENT

**Nature:** Hot and moist

**Flavor:** Sweet

**Avoid:** Basil, sugar, butter, peacocks, lamb

**Eat:** Melancholic foods



## OPPOSITES ATTRACT

According to humoral theory, each fluid possesses an elemental quality that reflects some combination of heat, moisture, coldness, or dryness. Foods also possess these qualities in varying degrees, which can be tempered by cooking methods. The way foods are categorized depends not so much on their perceived properties as on how they affect the body's humors. So while sugar may feel dry, it actually warms and moistens. Flavors also play a part. As shown in the chart at left, sweetness is associated with heat and moisture, tartness with cold and dryness, and so on.

The trick for the Renaissance cook lay in balancing a person's excess humor with its dietary opposite. So serving parsley to someone with an overabundance of phlegm, for example, would be conducive to good health, but giving it to a choleric person would only sharpen his "pernicious" temperament.



Wenceslaus Hollar, "Of the Court Mouse, and Country Mouse." Etching in John Ogilby *The fables of Aesop, paraphras'd in verse*. London, 1668. Folger Shakespeare Library

William Marshall. *The foure complexions*. Engraving, 1662. Folger Shakespeare Library.



Costumes from the time of James I, table scene. Drawing, early 1600s. Folger Shakespeare Library.

## OLD FLESH AND COWS' UDDERS

In 1542, a Scottish doctor named Andrew Boorde published *A Dyetary of Helth* in which he formalized what for most people of the time was intuitive, laying out what those inclined toward each temperament should eat and, more specifically, what they should avoid. Sanguine men, he decreed, must be circumspect in the eating of meat; must abstain from eating inordinate amounts of herbs, roots, garlic, onions and leeks; and must refrain from the eating of old flesh, the brains of beasts, cows' udders, and fish from muddy waters. Those of a phlegmatic nature should refrain from eating fish, white meat, or meat that is cold or viscous, and should eschew raw herbs; they should, in moderation, eat onions, garlic, pepper, ginger, "meates the whiche be hote and drye, and sauces the whiche be sowre."

Choleric men should refrain from eating hot spices and drinking wine; they should avoid eating dark meat but may eat "groser meate than any other of complexions," and purge their choler with wormwood, wild hops, violets, tamarinds, and the whey of butter. Melancholic dispositions should refrain from meat that is fried or overly salted or sour, and choose boiled meat over roasted; they must abstain from drinking red wines; they are advised to take cow's milk, almond milk, egg yolks, and hot and moist herbs, and to purge their melancholy with maidenhair, borage, sugar, and white wine.

## BON APPÉTIT!

With the advent of the scientific revolution in the mid-seventeenth century, the humoral diet began to lose favor in Europe. The scientists and dietary writers who had once instructed people in balancing their humors now began to look more empirically at the basis for their advice. While their experiments and studies did not produce any compelling ideas to replace humoral theory, they nonetheless offered little hard evidence in support of it. At the same time, a revolution of a different sort was simmering in France. The advent of classical haute cuisine, with its rich cream sauces and butter-laden reductions, led people to think about food in terms of how it tasted rather than how it might affect their bile. A new culinary fashion was born.

Many ordinary Europeans clung to their humors, though, and the theory had its defenders well into the 1800s. Its vestiges still linger today in such popular lore as "feed a cold, starve a fever" and in descriptions of taste sensations, from hot peppers to dry martinis. Even the basic philosophy continues to have adherents in India and Pakistan, where a Galenic medical study called *Unani* is taught in accredited institutions. And while eating by temperament seems unlikely to make a big comeback in this century, it could probably hold its own next to many modern diet fads.

📖 **Learn more** at [www.folger.edu/exhibitions/food](http://www.folger.edu/exhibitions/food).

**Karen Lyon** is managing editor of the *Folger Magazine*; she has written on the Teaching Shakespeare Institute, the summer progresses of Queen Elizabeth I, Renaissance magic, and most recently, the Cotswold Olympick games.

# Sweets for the Sour: Recipes

For choleric temperaments

## OYSTERS ON SPINACH WITH CAPERS

Serves 4

'Good friend,' quoth he,  
'Say, the firm Roman to great Egypt sends  
This treasure of an oyster...'

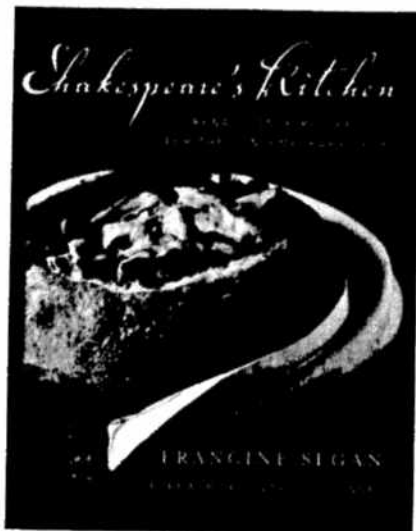
This line from *Antony and Cleopatra* suggests that Shakespeare was familiar with food history. It was indeed the Romans who first cultivated oysters near Naples in 100 B.C. and introduced them into Egypt and other areas.

The "faggot of sweet herbs" referred to in the original is a tied bundle of herbs, or bouquet garni. According to English dietary books, bouquet garni was much healthier than minced herbs, "the grose binding together and seething of herbes in brothes and pottage, be more holesomer than the fine choppyng of them."

Mace, the outer husk of nutmeg, often called for in Elizabethan recipes, is available in most supermarkets. Mace adds a lovely touch to this oyster dish and, in fact, has become one of my favorite new spices. I use it in recipes that call for nutmeg, but I especially like it with fish.

- 1 loaf French baguette bread, cut in 1/2-inch slices
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 sprigs of flat-leaf parsley
- 2 endive leaves
- 3 sprigs of mint
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 12 large oysters, shelled, liquid reserved
- 2 tablespoons small capers, rinsed and drained
- 1/4 teaspoon ground mace
- 1/4 teaspoon ground marjoram
- 1/4 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 8 ounces baby spinach
- 2 lemons, thinly sliced

1. Preheat the broiler. Brush the bread with the olive oil and broil for 2 to 3 minutes, or until lightly browned.
2. Tie together the parsley, endive, and mint with kitchen string. Melt the butter in a frying pan over medium heat. Add the oysters, the reserved oyster liquid, the capers, mace, marjoram, thyme, salt, and the herb bundle to the pan. Cover and cook for 1 minute. Turn over the oysters and cook for 1 minute. Remove the oysters from the pan with a slotted spoon and place in a warm dish. Add the spinach to the pan, cover, and cook for 1 minute, or until just wilted. Remove and discard the herb bundle.
3. Place a heaping tablespoon of spinach in the center of each plate and top with 3 oysters. Spoon the caper sauce over the oysters and arrange the lemon slices around the plate. Serve the French bread slices on the side.



In the spirit of culinary adventure, here are some Renaissance recipes that, while they may not restore your humoral equilibrium, might at least make your mouth water. Food historian Francine Segan has updated some of the greatest hits of the early modern kitchen for the contemporary cook. And remember—"tis an ill cook that cannot lick his own fingers'.



# Orlando J. Hummer's Gourmets

*For sanguine temperaments*

## **BABY CAULIFLOWER IN ORANGE-LEMON SAUCE**

*Serves 6*

In the original recipe the chef specifies to cut off the cauliflower roots because the roots and leaves were usually cooked with the vegetable.

Taking a cue from the Elizabethans, on both not wasting and on cooking foods in broth, I now save leftover meat scraps and vegetables and tie them into a little sack made with cheesecloth closed with kitchen string. I add this sack to the cooking water for a sort of instant broth and flavor boost when I'm steaming vegetables or cooking pasta or rice.

6 heads of baby cauliflower  
2 cups Renaissance Stock (*see below*)  
2 tablespoons butter  
Zest of 1 lemon  
2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice  
Zest of 1 orange  
1/2 cup freshly squeezed orange juice  
Salt

1. Clean the cauliflower, leaving on some of the green leaves. Bring the Renaissance Stock to a boil in a pot with a steamer insert. Steam the cauliflower for 15 minutes, or until tender, and drain.
2. Combine the butter, lemon zest, lemon juice, orange zest, and orange juice in a large saucepan and simmer for 2 minutes. Season to taste with salt.
3. Place the cauliflower in a shallow serving bowl and pour the sauce over the cauliflower.

## **RENAISSANCE STOCK**

*Makes approximately 2 1/2 quarts*

The dried fruit imparts a delicate sweetness to this lovely stock. Sweet is a theme throughout Sir Hugh Plat's *Delightes for Ladies*, which includes recipes for making sugar animals, rock candy, and marzipan and for preserving clusters of grapes by placing the stems into apples.

The book also contains nonedible recipes—such as a “handwater of Scotland” made with thyme, lavender, and rosemary—as well as outlandish advice to keep the skin clear and blemish-free by rubbing on the burned, ground jawbone of a hog.

4 1/2 pounds chicken parts (necks, backs, wings, giblets)  
1 lamb shank (about 8 ounces)  
2 sprigs of rosemary  
2 bay leaves  
3 sprigs of mint  
4 sprigs of flat-leaf parsley  
1 whole mace  
2 onions, peeled and quartered  
1 cup white wine  
1/2 cup ground blanched almonds  
8 dates, pitted and chopped  
1/2 cup currants  
Salt and freshly milled black pepper



Place the chicken and shank bone in a large pot. Add 2 3/4 quarts of water and bring to a boil. Skim the impurities that rise to the top. Add the rosemary, bay leaves, mint, parsley, mace, and onions and simmer for 30 minutes. Add the wine, almonds, dates, and currants and simmer for 1 hour, periodically skimming any impurities that rise to the top. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Recipes reprinted with the author's permission from *Shakespeare's Kitchen* by Francine Segal (Random House, 2003). Photography by Tim Turner.



*For phlegmatic temperaments*

### **RENAISSANCE RICE BALLS**

*Serves 10 (approximately 36 rice balls)*

Rice balls like these, today known as "arancine," or little oranges, are still made in many parts of Italy. During the Renaissance these savory balls would have been colored purple or yellow with dried edible flower petals or saffron. This dish can be easily re-created using food coloring to produce the different colored balls. Of course, they are delicious without the coloring!

1 pound Italian rice (*such as arborio*)  
1/3 cup cream  
1 large egg, beaten  
1 cup grated caciocavallo cheese  
2 tablespoons sugar  
yellow food coloring (*optional*)  
purple food coloring (*optional*)  
1/2 cup flour or dried bread crumbs  
3/4 cup vegetable oil

1. Cook the rice according to the package directions. Combine the cooked rice, cream, egg, cheese, and sugar in a large bowl. Cover and refrigerate until thoroughly chilled, or up to 2 days.
2. If desired, divide the rice into 3 equal portions. Using the food coloring, color 1 portion bright yellow, 1 portion purple, and leave the remaining portion white.
3. Form each of the portions of rice into 1-inch diameter balls.
4. Place the flour or bread crumbs on a flat plate. Heat 3 to 4 tablespoons of oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Lightly roll 1 color of the rice balls in the flour or bread crumbs. Cook, turning occasionally, until completely browned on all sides. Remove the rice balls from the pan and drain on paper towels. Discard the oil in the pan, wipe it clean, and repeat the process with the remaining rice balls.

*For melancholic temperaments*

## INDIVIDUAL MEAT PIES WITH COINTREAU MARMALADE

*Serves 8*

Elizabethan street vendors sold little minced pies like these, as well as oyster pies, apples, and nuts, to theatergoers. The audience ate during the entire play and tossed cores, shells, and scraps onto the theater floor.

These tiny meat pies delicately flavored with orange liqueur are just as perfect now as then, for picnics or pre-theater nibbling.

8 ounces ground lamb, beef, or veal  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon freshly milled black pepper  
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg  
1/2 teaspoon ground mace  
3 pitted dried plums, finely chopped  
1/2 cup currants  
1/4 cup freshly squeezed orange juice  
1/2 recipe of Renaissance Dough (see below)  
1/4 cup Cointreau  
1/2 cup thick-cut orange marmalade

1. Combine the meat, pepper, salt, nutmeg, mace, dried plums, currants, and orange juice in a bowl and refrigerate for at least 6 hours, or overnight. Remove the meat mixture from the refrigerator 1 hour before baking.
2. Preheat the oven to 450°F. Roll out the Renaissance Dough 1/16 inch thick on a floured work surface. Cut twenty-four 3-inch circles from the dough. Press the dough circles into mini-muffin pans. Loosely fill each muffin cup with the meat mixture (*about 1 tablespoon per pie*) and bake for 15 minutes.
3. Bring the Cointreau to a boil in a small saucepan, stir in the marmalade, and cook until the marmalade is warm.
4. Spoon some of the marmalade mixture on top of each mince pie and serve.

## RENAISSANCE DOUGH

*Makes 1 double crust*

2 cups sifted loosely packed pastry flour (8 ounces)  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 large egg, beaten, cold  
1/2 cup butter, cut in small cubes, cold

Mix the flour, 1/2 cup ice-cold water, the salt, and egg together on a cold surface until crumbly. Flatten the dough with a rolling pin and place one quarter of the butter cubes on the dough. (Keep the remaining butter refrigerated until ready to use.) Roll the butter into the dough, fold the dough over, and roll again. Repeat the process 3 more times until all the butter is incorporated. Cover the dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.



**Francine Segan** is the author of four books including *Shakespeare's Kitchen* (2003) and the *Opera Lover's Cookbook* (2006), which was nominated for both James Beard and IACP awards. Her monthly column on food and travel for the Tribute Media Syndicates appears in 65 newspapers and she can be seen on numerous radio and television programs and several specials for the History and Discovery channels.

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