

Exploring Tourtière

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With all of the eating and cooking that goes on at Christmas, I came to be looking through my recipe collection at one point last month for a recipe for tourtière (a French Canadian pork pie traditionally served during the Reveillons after midnight mass on Christmas eve.) While I knew that there were many variations, I was not prepared for quite the breadth which I found.

One of my cookbooks, *A Taste of Quebec*, has about 6 variations on the tourtière, and a note which says that there is some question as to whether the name comes from the original ingredient - the tourte, or passenger pigeon once common around Le Qle de OrLJans (which is located in the St. Lawrence River); or the implement in which it was cooked, the tourtière (perhaps a corruption of tarte or torta). With this in mind, I decided that it might be interesting to see if I could trace it's origins through my older cookbooks.

The tourtières in the most modern book, *A Taste of Quebec*, are generally based on pork. They are not, however, always ground. This surprised me somewhat as, the tourtières which I remember growing up - the frozen ones they sold in the grocery store - were always made of ground meat. I don't remember seeing potatoes in them either, although they seem quite common in these recipes.

Tourtière de Quebec: ground pork, onion, chopped celery, bay, black pepper, savoury, rosemary, nutmeg, cinnamon, rolled oats to thicken (meat and stock not separated, rolled oats thought to be Scottish influence).

Tourtière du Saguenay: 1 lb cubed pork + 3 lbs other meats, onions, black pepper, cinnamon and potatoes. Alternate layers of meat and potatoes, each sprinkled with spices.

Pate a la Viande: Ground Pork, ground veal, butter, onion, salt, pepper, cinnamon, bay, stock. Stock not separated.

Tourtière de Charlevoix: Stewing beef and pork, onions, black pepper, potatoes. Meat mixture cooked as casserole, stock not separated.

Identical ingredients, slightly different method are used in the Cipate recipe on the next page - meat and potato mixture is put in layers in deep casserole lined with pastry, with pastry between the layers.

Tourtière de Fleur-Ange: ground pork, chopped celery & leaves, onion, garlic, fresh parsley, savoury, cinnamon, cloves, black pepper. Stock not separated.

Cipaille (or Cipate) calls for boneless chicken meat, lean beef, and lean pork (but is traditionally made with game) - as well as onions, salt pork, potatoes, black pepper, mixed spices (ground cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice) and chicken stock. The

meat is cubed and mixed, combined with the chopped onion and chilled overnight. It is layered into a cast iron pot - 3 layers each of meat, spices, potato, pastry.

Aunt Gertie's Meat Pie uses ground beef and ground pork, as well as onions, black pepper, allspice, and savoury. Meat is cooked, other ingredients added, then stock is separated and both are chilled before being recombined.

Another book which I own is called *A Taste of History*, and looks at recipes in use in Quebec during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. These dishes are not simple home cooking, but rather ones which might have showed up in the restaurants or inns of the day, and the margin notes include comments from and items mentioned in the writings of the period. The book mentions that the colonists made pies of the *tourtelle*, or passenger pigeon, but also comments that French country cooking has its own *tourtières*, made variously from veal, pigeon, turkey, hare and pork.

The recipe in the book, attributed to a publication from 1670, is for a Pigeon Pie. It contains forcemeat balls made of ground veal with beef fat, green onions, black pepper, parsley, nutmeg and cloves. They are layered into the pastry-lined copper pie plate, then covered with browned pigeon quarters, mushrooms, asparagus, beef marrow, egg yolks, capers and truffles. More meatballs are added, along with additional mushrooms and asparagus, if desired. The recipe notes that if pigeon is unavailable, quail or duck may be substituted.

The *Medieval Kitchen* contains recipes from both France and Italy from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The first recipe which caught my eye was "Hungarian" Torta, and is Italian in origin. It calls for a large capon (chicken), a large loin of pork, onions, sweet fine spices, and lard. The meat is cut into small pieces, fried in the lard, then cooked along with the spices and some water. The pastry is composed of many thin layers (closer to today's puff pastry, perhaps). The authors compare it to the Moroccan *pastilla* or *bastilla*.

A recipe for Rabbit Baked in Pastry is French in origin, and calls for rabbit, finely chopped pork fat, cloves, ginger, grains of paradise, and black pepper to be encased in pastry and baked.

The Veal Pate calls for veal and beef fat to be finely chopped, and spiced with ginger and cinnamon. The addition of cheese is suggested during winter.

So, can we come to any conclusions here? Good question. It seems clear to me that the cooking and preparation techniques used in some of the modern recipes, such as Aunt Gertie's Meat Pie, can be traced back to the Middle Ages -although not necessarily to France. The ingredients are not quite as simple.

If we accept that the modern Canadian *tourtières* were based on a pie made from passenger pigeons, then at some time Canadian cooks must have had to find an alternative meat source due to the extinction of that bird. Why beef or pork and not

chicken or quail, as seen in the second book? I suspect that they were cheap and readily available, and would have seemed reasonable if they were already using the fat of those animals as larding (extra fat added to a meat dish during cooking to keep it from getting too dry).

Allspice is known as *quatre-epices* in French. The name literally means "four spices", and refers to the four spices which it is said to resemble in taste: cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and (I think) ginger. The fine spice powder referred to in the recipe from the third book is probably a combination of black pepper, cinnamon, ginger, saffron and cloves. Look familiar?

As for as the "ground" part of the modern recipes, I don't think that this is too far off from the small pieces used in the Hungarian Torta, or the forcemeat from the Pigeon Pie. Once again we come to the question of price and availability of meats and cuts for the modern recipes - ground meat is usually the cheapest variety going, and both beef and pork are commonly available.

What about the potatoes? Well, they're not native to Europe, so they don't show up at all in the medieval cookbook, and not until 1855 in the second book. I suspect that their introduction was again a question of availability and cost - potatoes are root vegetables which will keep relatively well through the winter, and provide a quick and cheap way to stretch the meat in a pie.

So, would I serve a modern tourtière at an SCA event? Yes I would - as long as I used one of the recipes without potatoes. Would I call it "period"? Well...maybe. But I'd want to use one of the ones which calls for meat cubes or use finely chopped meat instead of ground. And use black pepper, cinnamon, cloves and ginger instead of the allspice (or *poudre douce*, if I had any made up).

Before I finish, I have one last, quick comment regarding the Pigeon Pie recipe in the second book. It is quite complex and time-consuming, especially compared to the more modern ones. However, consider the source - the book specialises in dishes that were found in printed cookbooks used in fine homes and upper class establishments, in a time where there would presumably have been servants to prepare the food. It seems likely to me that this recipe is a more upscale or refined version of the common form of the day - hence the time-consuming forcemeat balls, instead of simply cubes of veal, and the addition of the asparagus and truffles.

If you're interested, here's the recipe for Aunt Gertie's Meat Pie:

2 lbs ground beef

1 lb ground pork

2 medium onions, chopped

salt

black pepper, ground

$\frac{3}{4}$ tsp allspice

$\frac{1}{2}$ sp dried savoury

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup water

pastry for 2 deep-dish 9-inch double crust pies

Brown the meat. Add the remaining ingredients, (except pastry). Simmer over low heat for 1 to 2 hours, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat. Strain through a sieve, and refrigerate both meat and stock. When cooled, remove the hardened fat from the stock (the stock should be jelly-like - if it isn't, try putting it in the fridge a bit longer). This will also help the fat solidify. Mix the meat and the stock, and put into the pie shells. Put on the top crusts, crimp (press down on) the edges, and cut vents in top. Bake at 425°F for 10 minutes, then 350°F for another 20 to 25. If you like, you may freeze these either before or after the crust is cooked.

Bibliography

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