

The Collation and the Feast

Two Modes of Hospitality at the Medieval Tournament

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Part of the Immersive Hospitality Series

Introduction: A Host's Two Vocabularies of Generosity

When we imagine the hospitality of a medieval tournament, we tend to picture one thing: the great feast. The seated banquet, with its courses of roasted meats and spiced dishes, its subtleties and ceremony, its hierarchical seating and ritual handwashing. This was indeed the crown jewel of tournament hospitality, the moment when a host's wealth, taste, and social power were most visibly on display.

But the feast was only one mode of hospitality operating at a tournament, and in some ways it was the simpler one to understand. The feast was a scheduled, formal, ritualized performance of generosity. Everyone knew what it was. It had rules. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Far less studied, but arguably just as important to the lived experience of a tournament, was what we might call "ambient hospitality": the informal provision of food, drink, and refreshment that sustained participants and guests throughout the active day. This was the collation: the table of bread, cheese, fruits, cold meats, and wine that was available between bouts, before the formal meal, and sometimes late into the evening. Where the feast was a single, impressive event, the collation was an ongoing statement of care. It said something different about the host, and it created a different kind of social space.

The following pages explore the distinction between these two modes of tournament hospitality, drawing on primary sources including household accounts, chronicle descriptions, courtesy literature, and the eyewitness accounts from tournaments at Chauvency (1285), Le Hem (1278), and the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520).

Understanding both modes, and the relationship between them, is essential for grasping how medieval hosts thought about guest experience across time, not merely at single impressive moments.

I. Defining Terms: What Was a Collation?

The word "collation" has a surprisingly specific origin. Bridget Ann Henisch, in her foundational study *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (1976), traces it to a decree of 817 that permitted monks to have a drink while they listened to the regular evening reading of a passage from Cassian's *Collationes*, a fifth-century anthology of wise thoughts from the early desert hermits. The collation was, in its earliest sanctioned

form, a very light snack: no more than a drink and a morsel of bread, taken just before bedtime, as a concession to human frailty during periods of fasting.

Over time, the word expanded beyond its monastic context. By the later medieval period, “collation” had come to mean any light, informal refreshment, distinct from and subordinate to the formal meal. In French sources, related terms include *goûter* (a light afternoon refreshment), *réfection* (a more general term for sustaining food), and *merenda* (a between-meal snack that most medieval dietary authorities condemned, even as everyone ate them). English sources sometimes use “nuncheon” for a midday snack, particularly for workmen.

The key distinction is not merely one of size or formality. The collation operated on fundamentally different social logic than the feast. The feast was an event you attended. The collation was a provision you encountered. The feast required your presence at a specific time and place, seated in your proper rank. The collation was available; you came to it as your schedule and inclination allowed.

II. The Feast as Formal Event

Structure and Ceremony

The formal feast at a medieval tournament followed well-established conventions of aristocratic dining. Peter Brears, in his award-winning *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*, has reconstructed the precise rituals of dinner service from surviving household ordinances and regulations. The sequence was highly codified: the ceremonial laying of the cloth, the ritual offering of water for handwashing (with ewer and basin), the carving and presenting of dishes by trained household officers, and the structured progression of courses.

A feast was organized into courses, each of which might contain multiple dishes presented simultaneously. In French practice, a feast might have seven or more courses; in English tradition, three was more typical, though each could contain a staggering number of individual dishes. The coronation feast of George Neville as Archbishop of York in 1465 featured seventeen dishes in the first course, twenty in the second, and twenty-three in the third, not counting the subtleties between them.

Tournament feasts, while rarely reaching that scale, nonetheless followed the same structural grammar. The feast was held in the evening after the day’s combat had

concluded. It took place indoors or in a designated banqueting space, whether a great hall if one was available or a purpose-built temporary structure. At the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, the English constructed an enormous dining room measuring approximately eighty by thirty feet, larger than the dining hall at Henry VIII's own palace of Bridewell.

Seating, Hierarchy, and Social Performance

Seating at the feast was rigidly hierarchical. A guest's rank could be read directly from their distance from the host's table. Those of highest status sat closest to the host; those of lower standing were progressively farther away. This was not merely social convention; it was a visible, spatial enactment of the social order. The feast made hierarchy legible.

The host's table was typically elevated on a dais, and distinguished guests shared a salt cellar, trenchers, and sometimes drinking vessels according to established protocols of courtesy. Conduct literature such as the *Boke of Kervynge* (Wynkyn de Worde, 1508) and the various "bokes of nurture" compiled in the *Babees' Book* tradition laid out in precise detail how food should be served, carved, and shared.

The Voidée: The Feast's Ritual Conclusion

The formal ending of the feast was itself a distinct ritual called the *voidée* (from the French *voidée*, meaning "cleared"). After the hall was cleared, a final service of hippocras (sweet spiced wine), wafers, comfits, and candied spices was offered. This closing ceremony had quasi-eucharistic overtones, the spiced wine and wafers echoing communion elements, and served as a digestive conclusion to the meal. In the greatest households, the spices were served separately in a different space, presented on ornate gold or silver spice plates, and passed in a painted wooden coffer called a *drageoir*.

The *voidée* reinforced the message of the feast: this was ritual, formal, bounded. It had a liturgical structure: beginning with the handwashing, ending with the *voidée*, bookended by ceremony. It was, in every sense, a performance of hospitality.

III. The Collation as Ambient Hospitality

A Different Kind of Generosity

Where the feast declared “look at what I can give you,” the collation quietly asserted “you are provided for.” This is a different kind of statement entirely, and it operated through different mechanisms.

At a tournament, the active day was long. Combat could begin in the morning and continue into the afternoon. Between bouts, there were intervals for rest, re-arming, and socializing. Spectators needed sustenance. Knights and their retinues needed refreshment. The household officers, heralds, minstrels, and servants required food to continue working. And unlike the feast, which served a defined guest list at a defined time, the collation had to accommodate people whose schedules were dictated by the unpredictable rhythms of the tournament itself.

The collation table, as it appears in period sources, typically featured foods that did not require hot preparation or precise timing: bread and rolls in variety, cheeses (both fresh and aged), cold meats, fruits (fresh and dried), nuts, pickled vegetables (the medieval “compost,” a pickled relish of mixed vegetables and fruits), pasties (self-contained pastry pockets with various fillings), and wine or ale. These were foods that could sit on a table for hours, could be eaten standing or walking, and required no formal service.

Evidence from Primary Sources

Direct descriptions of the collation at tournaments are rarer than descriptions of feasts, precisely because the collation was informal and therefore less remarkable to chroniclers. But evidence accumulates from several types of sources.

Household accounts provide the most concrete evidence. When we see provisions purchased for a tournament that far exceed what could be consumed at the evening feasts alone, we can infer that significant food service was happening throughout the day. The provisioning records for the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 are staggering: the English alone brought more than two thousand sheep, ninety-eight thousand eggs, thirteen swans, three porpoises, the equivalent of approximately two hundred thousand liters of wine, and sixty-six thousand liters of beer, for an eighteen-day event serving roughly twelve thousand people. Even accounting for the multiple formal banquets, these quantities point to massive ongoing food service beyond the feast.

The English built fountains that ran continuously with wine and beer, a spectacular gesture that was explicitly ambient rather than formal. You did not sit down to be served wine from a fountain; you walked up and helped yourself. This was the collation principle writ large and made theatrical.

Jacques Bretel's eyewitness account of the Tournament of Chauvency in 1285, *Le Tournoi de Chauvency* (approximately 4,500 verses), provides the most vivid surviving picture of the full texture of tournament life. While Bretel gives considerable attention to the evening entertainments (the singing, dancing, socializing, and romantic encounters) he also captures the rhythm of the day that included both formal and informal food service. The Chauvency tournament attracted between eight and ten thousand people over six days. Feeding this many required continuous provisioning that went far beyond the formal feasts.

Literary sources and visual evidence from illuminated manuscripts also contribute. The *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* depicts the Duke hosting a feast while a tournament takes place in the background, but other manuscript illustrations show more informal outdoor dining: people seated on stools with cloth stretched across their knees, food being handed around, eating in clearings. These images capture the collation mode: food consumed in the midst of activity, not as a separate formal event.

The Food Vendor as Collation Supplement

An important supplement to the host's own collation was the commercial food vendor. Tournaments were fair-like events that attracted merchants of all types, including food sellers. Bread vendors, meat vendors (selling roast, boiled, and fried meats), sausage sellers, fritter makers, wafer makers (ouboyers), and sellers of pasties all set up stalls. These vendors were regulated by numerous laws governing sanitation, weights and measures, and quality; it was, for instance, illegal to sell warmed-up pies from the previous day.

The presence of food vendors created a layered hospitality landscape at the tournament. The host provided the formal feast and the collation for distinguished guests and their retinues. The vendors provided fast food (bread, fritters, pasties, roasted nuts, fruit, sausages) for the broader crowd and for servants supplementing their masters' provisions. The noble attendees, who brought their own cooks and supplies, could control the quality of their food; the poor and common spectators relied more heavily on

purchased food. This stratified system meant that different social classes experienced fundamentally different hospitality at the same event.

IV. Two Modes Compared

Temporal Logic

The feast was bounded in time: it had a beginning (the handwashing), a middle (the courses), and an end (the voidée). It was scheduled and anticipated. The collation was temporally diffuse: it was available, and you came to it when you could. The feast demanded your full attention and participation; the collation operated in the background of other activities.

Spatial Logic

The feast was held in a defined, enclosed space: a hall, a tent, a banqueting house. This space was organized hierarchically, with the host's table elevated and guests arranged by rank. The collation, by contrast, existed in more open, transitional spaces: near the tournament field, in or near pavilions, in the common areas of the camp. The collation space was organized for access, not hierarchy.

Social Logic

The feast communicated power, wealth, and social order. It placed the host at the top and arranged everyone else relative to that center. The collation communicated care, provision, and ongoing attentiveness. It said that the host was thinking about the guest's experience across the entire day, not merely at the single impressive moment. The feast was about display; the collation was about comfort.

What Each Required of the Host

A feast required a host to be an impresario, needing to command a kitchen staff capable of producing multiple elaborate courses, to provide entertainment, to orchestrate the ceremony. The collation required a host to be a logistician, needing to provision a table of durable, portable, appealing foods that could sustain people over many hours without dedicated hot kitchen service. Both required considerable expense, but they drew on different skills and communicated different virtues.

V. Hippocras: A Beverage at the Intersection

Hippocras, the sweet spiced wine strained through a cloth bag known as the manicum hippocraticum (sleeve of Hippocrates), occupies an interesting position at the intersection of feast and collation. In its formal role, hippocras was the drink of the voidée, served with wafers at the ritualized conclusion of the feast. Several medieval menus explicitly end with “hippocras and wafers”: the Boke of Kervynge instructs hosts to “serve your soverayne with wafers and Ipocras.”

But hippocras also circulated informally. As a prepared, preserved beverage (it could be made in advance and kept), it was well suited to the collation context. Its spiced sweetness made it a luxury offering that signaled generosity without requiring the full apparatus of a formal meal. Its medicinal associations (medieval humoral theory considered spiced wine therapeutic) gave it a practical justification as sustenance during a physically demanding event.

Recipes for hippocras survive from multiple medieval sources, including *Le Ménagier de Paris* (c. 1393), the *Forme of Cury* (c. 1390), and various fifteenth-century English recipe collections. The typical recipe combined red or white wine with cinnamon, ginger, galangal, grains of paradise, and sugar, filtered until clear. The *Ménagier* specifies Burgundy wine from Beaune. The expense of the spices and sugar involved meant that hippocras was inherently a high-status offering, and serving it at the collation as well as the feast was a particularly strong signal of the host’s generosity.

VI. Implications for Understanding Medieval Hospitality

Once we recognize the collation as a distinct mode of hospitality alongside the feast, it changes how we understand what medieval hosts were doing, and what they were communicating. A host who provided only the evening feast was doing the minimum expected. A host who also maintained an ongoing collation throughout the tournament was making a more expansive claim: that the guest’s comfort mattered not just at the highlight moments, but across the full arc of the experience.

The distinction also shapes how we might interpret the surviving sources. When chronicles praise a host’s generosity at a tournament, they may be responding not just to the magnificence of the feast but to the totality of the hospitality experience, the sense

that food and drink were always available, that guests were sustained and cared for at every hour. The description from the tournament held by Edward III at Clipstone suggests this kind of total provision: “in tents and other places, where food and all other necessities had been prepared; everything was on a generous scale and served unstinting.”

The collation also has implications for understanding the social dynamics of the tournament. The feast was a controlled environment where the host managed the guest’s experience minute by minute. The collation was a more open, less controlled space where guests mingled, conversations happened freely, and social bonds formed outside the rigid hierarchy of the banquet table. The collation was the networking space of the tournament.

VII. Sources and Suggested Reading

Primary Sources and Key Editions

Jacques Bretel, *Le Tournoi de Chauvency* (1285). Manuscripts: Mons MS 330-215 and Oxford MS Douce 308 (Bodleian Library). English translation in Nigel Bryant, *The Tournaments at Le Hem and Chauvency* (Boydell Press, 2022).

Sarrasin, *The Romance of Le Hem* (c. 1278). English translation in Bryant (above).

Le Ménagier de Paris (c. 1393). Critical edition: G.E. Brereton and J.M. Ferrier (Oxford, 1981). English translation by Janet Hinson available online.

The Forme of Cury (c. 1390). See Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, eds., *Curye on Inglysch* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

Wynkyn de Worde, *The Boke of Kervynge* (1508). Modern edition by Peter Brears (Southover Press).

René d’Anjou, *Livre des Tournois* (c. 1460). The key primary source for tournament organization and protocol.

Du fait de cuisine, Maistre Chiquart (1420). Guidelines for preparing a two-day banquet for the Duke of Savoy’s court.

Secondary Scholarship

Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976). Foundational study drawing on devotional literature, sermons, courtesy

books, recipe collections, household accounts, chronicles, and romances. Essential for the etymology and social history of the collation.

Peter Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England* (Prospect Books, 2008). The standard text on the mechanics of food production and service: equipment, household organization, architectural arrangements, and the precise rituals of dinner. Winner of the André Simon Award.

Peter Brears, *All the King's Cooks: The Tudor Kitchens of King Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace* (Southover Press, 1999). Detailed account of how large-scale kitchens operated, including the logistics of provisioning and serving.

P.W. Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (Sutton, 1993). Broad survey of food culture and dining practices.

Richard Barber and Juliet Barker, *Tournaments: Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages* (Boydell Press, 1989). The standard reference for tournament culture, including the social and ceremonial context.

Sidney Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1997). Essential for the Field of the Cloth of Gold and the political dimensions of tournament hospitality.

Charles Giry-DeLoison, *1520, Le Camp du Drap d'Or: La rencontre d'Henri VIII et de François Ier* (Somogy, 2012). Detailed study of the Field of the Cloth of Gold drawing on surviving account books.

Cloëe Crossley-Holland, *Living and Dining in Medieval Paris* (University of Wales Press, 1996). Useful for understanding the material culture of dining and food service in a French context.

SCA and Living History Resources

Magistra Rosemounde of Mercia (Micaela Burnham), "Food at the Tournament" (2010). SCA class documentation drawing on primary and secondary sources to reconstruct tournament food culture. Particularly useful for the food vendor context.

East Kingdom Wiki, "Kelton's Hippocras II." Detailed research and redaction of hippocras recipes with source analysis.

VIII. Open Questions for Further Research

A systematic comparison of household accounts from specific tournaments to determine what proportion of provisions went to feast versus daily sustenance would strengthen

the quantitative case for the collation's importance. English royal accounts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are the most promising source for this.

The role of women in managing collation-style hospitality at tournaments deserves focused attention. Queens and ladies of the tournament are documented as hosting banquets and distributing prizes, but their role in overseeing the ambient hospitality of the camp is less well documented.

A comparative study of collation practices across different regional traditions (English, French, Burgundian, German) would reveal whether the collation functioned differently in different tournament cultures.

Finally, the relationship between the collation and the commercial food vendor economy at tournaments could be explored as an early example of public-private partnership in event hospitality.