

Loneliness and Food in Early Modern England

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Does loneliness have a taste? The *Sabor de Soledad* snack eaten by *30 Rock* character Liz Lemon ('Subway Hero', season 2, episode 12) was 'very hot and affectionate.' It is relatively rare, though, to find descriptions of loneliness in terms of taste. More often, we associate emotions like loneliness or sadness with comfort eating rather than specific flavours. Although comfort foods can be soft or creamy, sweet or salty, their taste cannot be generalised; they are idiosyncratic evocations of childhood favourites or memories of loved ones, which bring us a sense of well-being during times of celebration and loneliness. They vary according to gender, culture, and time. Today's popular North American comfort foods of ice cream, chocolate and pizza/pasta would have been luxury foods eaten primarily by the middling and upper sorts in early modern Europe.¹

Early modern food history, moreover, does not deal with loneliness specifically. Modern historians have been interested in culinary nostalgia and homesickness, but early modernists tend to think of food and recipes in terms of sociability.² Such an approach is largely source driven, particularly for the early modern period. Documents like diaries and letters, recipe or account books were typically created or used in wealthy, literate households and often recorded social information about events, networks and memorable foods. To further complicate the question, loneliness itself is a nebulous concept when applied to the early modern period. It often referred to spaces far from society that brought vulnerability and danger, rather than an emotion.³ But one might also choose solitude, a state of 'oneliness' that was enjoyable.⁴ Excessive solitariness, however, was a category of melancholy, being a decision to cut one's self off from society. At first it might be pleasurable, a continuation of idleness in which one could 'build castles in the air' or spend all day in bed, until one began

to dwell on fear and suspicion; eventually, ‘these wretches do frequently degenerate from men, and of social creatures become beasts, monsters, inhumane, ugly to behold.’⁵ Physicians were also aware that nostalgia, or homesickness, could affect one’s health and appetite, proving fatal in the worst cases. However, before the twentieth century, this was seen primarily in terms of missing the land, the customs, and the foods of one’s homeland, rather than one’s family and friends.⁶ To be sociable was to partake in sharing food and drink. For those who had solitariness forced upon them, such as gentlemen rustivating in the countryside, the choice was to entertain lavishly or to visit local taverns and alehouses; they might be separated from their usual companions, but sociability remained important.⁷ But when it came to melancholy or homesickness, a lack of appetite was a symptom of one’s separation from society. Just as meals eaten alone do not necessarily equate to loneliness, a meal in a crowded setting might elicit a sense of separation from loved ones. While food might forge connections across time and place, specific flavours could also evoke memories of loss and aloneness—rosemary, famously, for remembrance.⁸

Food and loneliness, then, were uneasily paired in the past, and the absence of ways for thinking about them together remains today. This chapter considers how we might develop a methodology for thinking about food and loneliness by building on ideas of lonely spaces and homesickness. Drawing on the concepts of liminality and modern taste profiles, I examine moments of transition associated with aloneness and the foods eaten during those times. This chapter considers a series of liminal moments—grief, illness, quarantine, and imagined cannibalism—to argue that loneliness did indeed have a taste in early modern England. The taste was far more complex than ‘hot and affectionate’; it had a pungent, bitter, earthy and woody profile, dominated by mace, rosemary and vinegar.

Methodology

It is easier to identify the relationship between people and food at liminal (or ‘betwixt and between’) times that were marked by one’s separation from regular life or loved ones—occasions when we might expect to feel lonely today.⁹ The concept of liminality emerged from anthropology to describe transitions from one stage to another, initially focused on rites of passage. The ‘threshold person’ exists temporarily between leaving the previous state of being while not yet being attached to the next stage; they are on the threshold (*limen* in Latin).¹⁰ Liminality’s inherent flexibility has resulted in its widespread adoption to analyse a range of transitional spaces and times, such as grieving, illness or shipwreck. These moments can also all be linked to an early modern understanding of what we might call loneliness today. Grief and solitude were considered species of melancholy, while illness and shipwreck were times when individuals were removed from their regular life—or even society altogether.¹¹

Early modern grief rituals, for example, emphasised the liminality of the deceased and the changing status of the family. For the recently widowed, for example, loneliness was recognised as part of the transition, as was the changing status of the bereaved which could bring both legal authority and financial vulnerability.¹² A series of events marked the transition from life to death, from the ritual wake and funeral procession to the funeral feast. Even after burial, the dead were not considered immediately separated from the living, but underwent gradual detachment; popular practices, such as English funerals that paralleled weddings for unmarried girls or criminals, were intended to appease the dead in order to prevent them from returning to their families.¹³ Grief came from anticipation (before death) and shock (at moment of death), while mourning including stages of numbness or disbelief, longing and preoccupation with the loved one, and apathy or depression, followed by readjustment—in other words, several stages of loneliness. Customs included marking times,

such as the month after a death, the anniversary of the death, and All Souls Day, or wearing specific colours to mark the stages of mourning: full (black) or half (lilac or grey) mourning for those who could afford new clothes, or even just a black ribbon for poor women.¹⁴

Illness, too, was marked by betwixt and between. An ill person was confined to the sick room or to the bed. Visitors traversed the boundaries of the space, but within the space, there were specific behaviours expected. For example, religious literature exhorted the healthy to visit the ill, bringing company, prayers, and gifts; this does not suggest ‘loneliness,’ but it does hint at separation from regular sociability and daily life. Sick roles required sufferers to behave in certain ways, too, such as remaining in bed or their room, allowing others to provide care, taking their physic.¹⁵ Even outbreaks of epidemic disease were states between normality and post-plague, which changed the space and behaviours of people: urban areas sounded and smelled differently, while people avoided each other on the streets and as much as possible in marketplaces.¹⁶ Turner considered liminality within the context of *communitas*, specifically the separation of the threshold person from their usual group (family, friends, community), as power and relationships shifted. The concept of liminality, then, offers a way to examine the moments when people experienced a sense of separation from daily life and usual companionship. Such moments were also typically marked by specific foods, such as funeral cakes, sick dishes, or plague preventatives. Liminality can reveal the experience of food during moments of separateness.

Given that liminal moments were accompanied by identifiable foods, it is possible to consider whether each moment—or even loneliness overall—had a distinctive *sabor de soledad*. Certainly, clusters of ingredients did appear regularly in foods associated with liminal moments, such as vinegar, rosemary, or mace, but that is not the same as being able to point immediately to a particular profile for loneliness. It is possible, however, to identify overlaps among the foods. Over the past two decades, sensory wheels have been created to

describe the flavours, textures or scents of foods like wine, chocolate, and spices. The resulting taste profiles classify flavours and scents by considering the chemical and qualitative similarities across foods, with the goal of providing a standardised vocabulary for products and commodities.¹⁷ The McCormick Spice Wheel is the original wheel for herbs and spices; its most recent version accounts for the sensory qualities of individual spices, which includes ‘feeling factor’ (from pungent to astringent), basic flavours (salty, sweet, sour, bitter), mouth feel (such as fattiness, soapiness or medicinal), or other characteristics (e.g. terpene, woody, fruity).¹⁸

Although there is no equivalent early modern classification system, herbals and pharmacopoeia sometimes describe the scents, tastes and textures of *materia medica* (including foodstuffs). It is possible, to some extent, to map early modern descriptions onto the McCormick spice lexicon, enabling the identification of taste profiles for types of food. Take, for example, William Lewis’ 1753 descriptions of mace and nutmeg. Mace, he wrote, was similar to nutmeg, though less astringent, while nutmeg was unctuous and lightly bitter.¹⁹ The McCormick lexicon also points to similarities between mace and nutmeg, with both being described in terms of sassafras, pine, floral, musty, soapy and woody. Nutmeg, however, has a more menthol flavour, while mace is slightly more bitter.²⁰ The menthol taste and coolness is presumably the hint of astringency in nutmeg that Lewis identified, which (for modern people) would mask bitterness in comparison to nutmeg.²¹ Placing early modern descriptions alongside the McCormick spice wheel makes it possible to identify flavour profiles for ingredients in foods eaten by people during liminal moments—and to consider whether there was a distinct taste of loneliness in early modern England.

Grief

As repositories of family history and continuation, recipe books were continually written and rewritten in the shadow of loss, or anticipatory grief: the separation from beloved family members, whether through marriage or death. Although early modernists have drawn extensively on manuscript recipe books to study science, medicine and food, the default has been to think about recipes in relation to sociability rather than loss. This approach makes a lot of sense in that thinking about food, not just eating it, was an important part of daily social interactions. Recipes were a social currency in early modern Europe, being shared, collected and used in a variety of ways. There were a growing range of published books, typically aimed at middling-sort women or literate servants, with recipes being regularly published in newspapers. The papers of gentile families reveal even more about the social processes behind sharing and collecting on recipes, with manuscripts revealing family connections through the inclusion of donors' names that pointed to intimate family relationships and wider social networks.²² Recipes appear in family papers as scraps of paper, newspaper clippings, notes in books, or entries in a family's recipe book.²³ There are tantalising hints of the oral transmission and memorization of recipes, as well as clear evidence of copying, or blurred boundaries, between print and manuscript recipes.²⁴ Recipe books were intentional compilations of a family's memory, as traced through their imagined relationship to food, which can tell us much about their owners' social contexts.

However, when considered within the wider context of loneliness—specifically the elements of nostalgia and homesickness that can be bound up in grief—recipe books might also tell us about compilers' preparations for partings from loved ones, or anticipatory grief.²⁵ Sara Pennell and Elaine Leong, for example, have discussed the ways that manuscript recipe books might be created as starter collection. Their focus is on the intergenerational and interfamilial transmission of knowledge, but a starter book that prepared a daughter for marriage simultaneously readied her to leave her birth family.²⁶ Passed down through the

generations, recipe books were often archives of family birth and death dates or the family's knowledge or intellectual lives.²⁷ The Johnson family's book, for example, shows signs of a potential struggle for ownership as it passed through the family. The book was initially signed Elizabeth Phillips 1694, then 'Eliz Johnson ye gift of her Mother Johnson' followed by a crossed-out line that cannot be read. The next line resumes: 'Maurice Johnson of Spalding in Lincolnshire claims this Family Book as right it belongs to him'—even though it had come into the family through his stepmother.²⁸ Under Maurice's ownership, however, the book did indeed become a family book, with several compilers working on the book collaboratively.²⁹ Recipe collecting—or thinking about family foods, as well as eating them—occurred within a web of shared history, not just fixed in one time; where recipes served to preserve foods or health, then the recipe books themselves preserved family memory.³⁰

Recipe sharing occurred within and across the generations, with compilers knowing and trusting the family recipes in two ways: not only had the compiler already tried the recipes out at family events, but because of a close relationship with the family member.³¹ Take, for example, the transmission of chocolate to Europe, which remained firmly embedded in Indigenous networks even as it was Europeanized. The Spaniards who spent extended periods in the Americas, perhaps marrying or born into local families, brought back to Europe a taste for chocolate that was prepared using Mesoamerican equipment and methods. Even if the chocolate could only be flavoured with readily available spices instead of the original ones, the Spanish still wanted the sensory experience of making and drinking chocolate in the familiar way that they had learned—a way of evoking connections to and memories of loved ones on the other side of the world.³² Recipes, then, provided links to absent family members, whether alive or deceased.

One example of the relationship between recipes and anticipatory grief is the group of recipe books compiled by the Sloane family, which highlights their role as repositories of family memory. The books are connected to Sir Hans Sloane, a well-known eighteenth-century physician in London. Two books are held at the British Library, donated in 1875 by the Earl of Cadogan (a descendant of his daughter, Elizabeth Sloane who married into the Cadogan family in 1717). One book of household recipes, primarily for cookery, was owned by Elizabeth Sloane.³³ The second Cadogan book, c. 1750, contained medical, household and veterinary recipes, including several attributed to Sir Hans Sloane.³⁴ A third book, which belonged to Elizabeth Fuller, is dated 1712 and 1820.³⁵ Given the initial date and name, it is likely that the book's first owner was Sloane's step-daughter from Jamaica, Elizabeth Rose, who married John Fuller in 1703. Sloane's nephew, William, married into the Fuller family as well in 1733.

Two of the books do not reference Sloane specifically, but the books represent the family's tastes and concerns over time, passed on through the generations as a way of remembering what came before. Elizabeth Cadogan, of course, compiled her collection long before her marriage; born in 1695, she was sixteen when she signed and dated the book on October 15, 1711. The handwriting in the book is particularly good, with lots of blank space left for new recipes, suggesting that this was a good copy book rather than one for testing recipes. There are, even so, some indications of use: a black 'x' beside recipes such as 'to candy cowslips or flowers or greens,' 'for burnt almonds' or 'ice cream.'³⁶ The 'x' was a positive sign, as compilers tended to cross out recipes deemed useless—but also suggest a young woman with a sweet tooth. Elizabeth Fuller compiled her book of medicinal and cookery recipes several years after her marriage. The book, which was used by the family well into the nineteenth century, is written mostly in one hand, but there are several later additions, comments and changes in other hands. None of the remedies were Sloane's, but

there were several from other physicians. The idiosyncratic recipes reflect the family's particular interests: occasionally surprising ailments (such as leprosy) and a disproportionate number of remedies for stomach problems (flux, biliousness, and bowels). Not surprisingly, the Fuller family drew some of their knowledge from their social and intellectual networks in the Caribbean, such as a West Indies remedy for gripes in horses.³⁷ Both recipe collections suggest continued use through the generations as a family book, with the compiler's personality and family's background clearly stamped on it.

By contrast, Sloane's recipes were the focal point of the Cadogan medicinal remedies book, a collection of the family's ailments—and the domestic treatments of their patriarch, a renowned physician. The primarily medical book appears to have been intended as a good copy, or perhaps a starter collection, although it became a working copy with signs of hastily added recipes. In particular, the recipes attributed to Sloane were written in the clearest hand in the text (but not Sloane's own hand) and were the first ones included in the book. There are several blank folios, but the multiple hands suggest regular updating over time. There are no textual signs of use, such as crossings out or comments, but several loose recipes were inserted into the book, indicating that they were useful enough to try, if not proven sufficiently to write in the book. Recipes were often circulated on bits of paper and stuck into books for later; to enter a recipe into the family book (as with Sloane's own remedies) solidified its importance—and that of the recipe donor—to the family.³⁸ Many of the remedies attributed to Sloane were homely, intended for a family's everyday problems: shortness of breath, itch, jaundice, chin-cough (whooping cough), loose bowels, measles and worms. There are, however, two that spoke to his well-known practice of prescribing Peruvian bark and his work on smallpox inoculations: a decoction of the [Peruvian] bark and 'directions for ye management of patients in the small-pox.'³⁹

It is the presence or absence of Sloane's remedies in the family books that is most intriguing. It is unlikely that absence reflected a distant relationship between Sloane and his step-daughter. After all, his other step-daughter Anne Isted (and her husband) consulted him for medical problems and the Fuller family often wrote to him about medical education, books, and curiosities. There is evidence that Sloane maintained close family relations with his children and extended family, with letters from his stepdaughters and their families hinting at an affectionate relationship that continued even after his wife died in 1721.⁴⁰ It is the apparent closeness that makes the Cadogan medicinal recipe book so important for understanding the role of the recipe books within the family.

Collecting recipes has a powerful emotional significance as the 'paperwork of kinship.'⁴¹ Sloane was ninety-years old when the Cadogan family compiled their medical collection. He had already lived a long and esteemed life, and his health was starting to show signs of failing by 1750. It must have been a bittersweet moment as Elizabeth Cadogan—or perhaps the family together—selected what recipes would help her family to remember her father after he died. These were not just his most treasured and useful remedies, but ones that also evoked memories of family illnesses and recoveries. As the Sloane Family books show, recipe collecting was fundamentally about remembering a family's meaningful foods and events—and, in the case of the Cadogan remedies, preparing for the time when loved ones were gone. The foods (or even medicines) that appeared in recipe books could thus provide support during lonely moments, such as homesickness or grieving. Recipe books commemorated more than sociability and family continuation; they were also a form of anticipatory grief, marking the inevitability of separation.

Although recipe books were created in preparation for loss, they contain few recipes that explicitly mention foods for grieving or funerals—and of course, their wide-ranging and practical nature means that there are too many foods to find a taste across the book. Food was

crucial to remembrance, but the lonely moments of homesickness were not necessarily liminal in the same way as bereavement. Fortunately, other sources suggest what types of foods might have been served at funerals. Account records for the elite and yeomanry suggest that about a quarter (or more) of a funeral's budget was typically given over to food and drink. Funeral foods typically included cake (along with sugar and spice), bread, cheese, meat and cider/beer or sherry/port.⁴² Contemporary dictionaries and encyclopaedias or folklore accounts also refer to specific dishes associated with mourning. An arvil-supper (a northern term) referred to the funeral feast, which—at least in Wales—was comprised of cake, cheese, beer and milk.⁴³ Other dishes were mentioned in conjunction with the poor specifically. Arvil-bread was distributed to poor mourners, while soul-mass cakes were put out for the poor (especially children) on All-Souls Day, a time of remembrance of loved ones.⁴⁴ In Hereford, a sin-eater might be hired to eat a loaf of bread and drink beer over the corpse, thus removing the sins of the deceased.⁴⁵ The basic feast could be scaled up or down, according to one's financial means, though many of the grieving traditions included an element of charitable food sharing with the poor.

Figure 1: Image of an eighteenth-century English funeral, with food and drink being served to guests. From Jean-Frédéric Bernard, *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World* (London: W. Jackson for Claude Du Bosc, 1733). Source: Wellcome Collection, London, Public Domain.

What the food tasted like, however, is less obvious on the surface. Writing in 1686-7, John Aubrey described soul-mass cakes alongside seed cakes and harvest cakes, which suggests similar ingredients and flavours.⁴⁶ Such recipes do show up in recipe books, but as cakes and breads that could be used for other occasions, too. Take, for example, a 1705 recipe

for cake bread, which included currants, butter, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, yeast, sack (Spanish wine), cream, and rosewater.⁴⁷ In this recipe, the spices and dried fruit evoke an autumnal taste, while several ingredients (e.g. sugar, spices, sack) were expensive and imported. Seed cakes, which regularly appeared in printed and family recipe books, were a less expensive option, flavoured by caraway seeds that were readily grown across Europe, while still offering the bitter, pine-y, woody and musty flavour profile of nutmeg, cinnamon and mace.⁴⁸ Significantly, in humoral medicine, all four spices were classed as having hot and dry properties, which could counter-balance cold ailments, such as grief or sorrow (a type of melancholy).⁴⁹ These spices had several medicinal benefits, including strengthening the stomach and aiding digestion. Even currants, despite having cool rather than hot properties, were thought to ease digestion.⁵⁰ The taste of cakes associated with mourning could treat grief by warming the coldness of sorrow and tempting a weakened appetite.

Although recipe books do not refer specifically to funeral foods, they regularly include recipes for foods that would also be served at funerals. Seed cakes were not exclusively associated with funerals, but death was one association with them. Eating a seed cake would not have always evoked thoughts of grief, of course, as taste could be context dependent. Within the context of a funeral, however, there was a specific taste profile to the foods served—and ingredients that also had medical indications to help with the symptoms of grief, such as lack of appetite. The taste of loneliness might not run through recipe books in a clear way, but the books emphasise how thinking about family foods was an important part of the process of separation from one's family. Food offered a sense of family continuity, despite physical absence. Recipe books underscore the powerful relationship between food, family and anticipatory grief.

Illness and Epidemics

Illness was not necessarily a lonely period, but it was a time when sufferers' usual lives shifted, potentially creating a sense of social separation. When people became (seriously) ill, their daily routines changed. The severity of the illness was indicated by whether the sufferer stopped work or housework, stayed in the home, or took to their bed. The difference between normal time and illness time was even more stark during outbreaks of plague, when people acted in socially distanced ways. Whether considering ordinary ill health or epidemics, food delineated the boundary between illness and health.

Sociologist Talcott Parson's called the changes to sufferers' routines the 'sick role': when a person could withdraw from normal duties because they had an obvious illness, but was obligated to seek medical help to recover and to return to normal duties as soon as possible.⁵¹ Medical historians have drawn on Parson's concept (though in a critical way), recognising that life could indeed change profoundly for sufferers—from the wealthy who might choose to take to their beds to the poor who might need poor relief because they were unable to work; rather than focusing on the doctor-patient relationship, however, they have focused on the experience of being ill.⁵² As part of adopting the sick role, sufferers were expected to withdraw from their usual business, with the resumption of duties marking recovery—though the boundary between health, minor illness (when one might stay in the house) and full sick role (when one stayed in bed) was blurry, the shift depending on an individual sufferer.⁵³ Even being confined to bed, however, was not necessarily lonely. In a smaller house (or for those of a dependent status), the sick bed might be in a public space or even shared with others.⁵⁴ To be ill was not to be cut off from society; indeed, Christians were enjoined to visit the ill as part of their godly duties, and patients certainly kept track of who visited them, and when.⁵⁵

Tending to the sick was sociable in food-related ways, too. An ill person, for example, ate a special invalid diet while recovering. Dietetics (or the understanding of how food choices

affected health) might inform a patient's choices, such as cooling foods during a fever or warming foods during a cold. Certain foods were considered helpful for strengthening an invalid or easily digestible by those with a poor appetite; many of the staples of medieval invalid foods such as chicken, white fish, eggs and grains would have been familiar to eighteenth-century people, too.⁵⁶ Given that ill people were expected to eat differently, someone needed to prepare the special foods.⁵⁷ In her *Art of Cookery*, Hannah Glasse even occasionally implied in her recipes for invalids that the carer might need to feed the patient, such as giving a spoonful at a time of beef or mutton broth "for very weak people."⁵⁸ However, the experience of illness—particularly for long-term sufferers—was liminal; recovery was uncertain, and daily routines while ill, including the need to eat meals separately, were out of step with normal household activity.⁵⁹

Figure 3: This image by Michael Burghers (ca. 1700) shows a woman, Mrs John Webb, who is being nursed when ill in bed with 'a dead palsey, and convulsion in the nerves' before being cured by a physician. Given the severity and length of her illness, she would have needed someone to feed her. Source: Wellcome Collection, London, Public Domain.

But illness also brought with it a loss of regular sociability. Recipe books offer some clues (by their absence) as to the foods eaten during less sociable moments, particularly during illness. Gruel (a thin oatmeal porridge), for example, was typically eaten out of company's sight. In Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, a family quarrel starts when the hypochondriac Mr Woodhouse chooses to eat gruel in front of guests.⁶⁰ Gruel might have been considered a healthy food for all kinds of people in the eighteenth century, but since the sixteenth century, it had a lingering stigma as a poor person's food.⁶¹ Some foods were not

meant for sociable moments, with gruel's absence reflected in recipe books. Indeed, recipes for gruel rarely appear in family collections, although it often accompanied medicines. The Grenville Family's head pills, for example, were to be taken with gruel in the morning, while Mrs Knight's electuary for costiveness was taken with water gruel mixed with mallows.⁶² Printed recipe books, aimed at a wider audience of servants and middling sort or urban housewives, tended to assume ignorance about food preparation and so provided a wider range of practical recipes including gruel. Glasse, for example, had a simple recipe for water gruel: a spoonful of oatmeal added to a pint of water, then boiled three or four times, constantly stirring, with butter, salt and pepper added.⁶³ Glasse, however, placed the recipe in the 'Directions for the Sick', indicating the food's specific usage; there was a clear distinction between plain dishes that were eaten privately and foods that were publicly consumed. Dishes that might be classed as sick-dish cookery, however, and intended to be eaten privately can sometimes be found in recipe books.

Figure 2: T. Rowlandson (1756-1827), 'A man in pain receiving medicines from a housemaid.' This image is reminiscent of Mr Woodhouse, as well as the medicinal uses of gruel. In this image, an old man stands up from his chair, clearly in pain.

There are medicine bottles on the table and mantelpiece. A young woman hands him a bowl filled with gruel. The laughter of the man in the doorway suggests that the woman is treating the old man as a malingerer. Source: Wellcome Collection, London, Public Domain.

The foods served to invalids were typified by the 'Directions for the Sick' section in Glasse. Her recipes included a range of broths, puddings and drinks. Out of thirty recipes, nine had mace or nutmeg (or both). For example, broths of mutton, veal or chicken, a 'good

drink' and two caudles were seasoned with mace, while foods like sago pudding and boiled plaice or flounder included nutmeg. Other dominant flavours included carraway (seed water), cloves (isinglass jelly), mint (pectoral drink and 'for a child') or sage (sage drink, 'for a child', 'liquor for a child that has the thrush').⁶⁴ The overlaps among cloves, nutmeg, mace, and carraway are clear. Sage and mint, however, also have a profile that includes menthol or minty and woody or pine-y flavours—and, as common garden herbs, they were easier to acquire than the spices. In terms of medicinal action, there were similarities, too, as both were hot; sage was thought to increase the blood and to treat the cold, while mint would heat, dry and bind.⁶⁵ Although these flavours were not in every sick-dish, as some had no added herbs or spices, they appeared frequently enough to suggest that certain ingredients and flavours were considered most appropriate for invalids.

Certain diseases might also have food associations; during plague outbreaks, for example, rosemary and vinegar were closely connected to the wider sense of social dislocation and liminality. In London during a plague year, the smell of rosemary would have filled the air. It was burned in homes and streets, worn on one's clothes, and included in remedies. The demand was so high that the cost of a normally inexpensive herb went up drastically during outbreaks. Not only was rosemary thought to clean the air, but it was used in many plague remedies or preventatives.⁶⁶ Ruled by the sun, rosemary had warming, comforting and cleansing virtues.⁶⁷ In terms of flavour, it is medicinal (sage, cloves, mint and carraway), mint (mint, mace, nutmeg and cloves), pine (mace, nutmeg, carraway, sage), bitter (mint and sage) and hay (sage).⁶⁸ An ordinarily pleasant herb would have become oppressive, however, for anyone forced to quarantine in their home, locked in with ill and dying family members. The smells of death and sickness would have mixed with the high heat and smoke produced when burning rosemary to purify the air.⁶⁹ The smell of an ordinary food suddenly took on new meanings during isolation.

During an epidemic, the buying and selling of food came with the tang of vinegar. In 1666, the mining town of Eyam isolated itself when an outbreak occurred. The wealthiest families fled, breaking apart the community. The town, moreover, was cut off from its normal food supplies, which had to be left on stones along the town boundaries. Villagers paid with coins that they left in vinegar.⁷⁰ William Defoe's semi-historical account of the 1665-6 plague in London also emphasised the instability of the food supply and fragmented society. Those bringing food into the city remained at the gates, shifting the site of exchange from the marketplace to the perimeter. Customers dropped coins into vinegar bottles and paid with exact change, a description that evokes a smell of acid and metal. Even moving through the city to purchase food had changed, with people walking down the centre of streets to avoid others.⁷¹ Vinegar had another powerful meaning for early modern people: the drink given to Jesus during the crucifixion at Golgotha. There, Jesus wondered why God had forsaken him. In a letter reporting the loss of his wife to the plague, Rev. William Mompesson referred to his town of Eyam as Golgotha, suggesting the depth of his grief and aloneness.⁷² Vinegar, then, evoked vulnerability, social dislocation and despair.

Food was central to the liminality of both illness and epidemics. In the case of epidemics, simply obtaining food could be difficult and, in any case, had to be done in new ways to avoid coming into contact with people. The scents—and the taste—of vinegar and rosemary for purification and medicinal uses would have been pervasive, shaping one's sense of social dislocation and encounters with otherwise ordinary foodstuffs. Cookery for invalids also had a flavour profile, which was similar to grief in that it was warming and stimulating; but the pine-y, woody, bitter and musty flavours also had a hint of menthol. The sick role also brought changed social relationships; the sufferer might not necessarily be alone, but the reduced social contact and lack of activity can also be seen in terms of loneliness.

Imagined Cannibalism

If early modern loneliness came from separation from society, then it is worth considering those individuals who were imagined as rejecting society completely: cannibals. Early modern discussions of imagined cannibalism appear in a wide range of sources, from shipwreck accounts to fairy tales. Let us begin with a story about a Queen who is so monstrous in her desire for human flesh that she was described as an ogre. The version of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ popular in eighteenth-century England was translated from Charles Perrault’s ‘Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.’⁷³ The story begins with the christening of a baby princess and a curse placed on her by a vengeful fairy whom her parents forgot to invite. The curse was that when the princess became a woman, she would prick her finger on a spinning wheel and fall asleep for a century. A fairy godmother countered the spell: that a prince’s kiss would awaken her—and that the entire castle would fall asleep with the princess so she would not be alone. The curse came to pass as foretold, but one day a neighbouring prince discovered the castle and broke the curse by kissing the princess. There the modern version ends.

The Perrault version continues long after marriage. The prince and princess had two children, but lived apart after marriage for several years. The prince had a secret: that his mother, the Queen, was an ogress who ate small children. It was only when he became king that he brought his family to live with him. The joy was short-lived, though, as he had to leave when a war began. While the king was away, his mother had an insatiable desire; she ordered her servant to kill and cook her granddaughter, served with a Sauce Robert. The servant, however, could not kill the girl; he hid her away and prepared lamb instead. Soon the Queen Mother wanted the servant to kill and cook her grandson. As before, the servant hid the boy and this time served baby goat. Still hungry, the Queen Mother planned to eat her daughter-in-law. This time the servant hid the whole family in a house in the woods and

served her venison. The Queen Mother discovered the truth one day while she was walking in the woods and hear the children's voices. Enraged by the perceived betrayal, she planned to throw the family and the servant into a tub filled with vipers and toads. Fortunately, the King came back in time, resulting in his mother committing suicide by diving into the tub instead.

This is a gory tale, but there were many stories about cannibalism in early modern England. Cannibalism as an act of revenge regularly appears in Tudor and Stuart drama, for example, with characters discussing its possibility even if it is never done.⁷⁴ Medicinal cannibalism, in which people ingested parts of dead bodies like moss from a skull or powdered mummy, was common in England—but, drawing on (problematic) travel accounts, early modern people tended to assume that the real cannibals lived in the New World.⁷⁵ Fact and fiction blurred. It did not help that accounts of real cannibalism by shipwrecked sailors were sensationalised, pushing the graphic depictions into people's imaginations and making it hard to identify what was true or not. The initial account of the Nottingham Galley shipwreck, for example, was only eight pages, but other versions were much longer and were being printed into the 1760s.⁷⁶

In December 1710, the Nottingham Galley was shipwrecked on an island near Maine without food for twenty-four days. Boon Island can be seen as a liminal place in which the crew was uncertain of rescue and underwent a transition into cannibalism. The remaining crew survived by eating a raw seagull and bits of food that washed up on shore, but they were increasingly hungry. When the ship's carpenter died after nearly three weeks, they could resist no longer and importuned their captain (who was previously a butcher) to let them eat the deceased man. The captain tried to keep control of the situation, but soon found that the men were becoming 'fierce and barbarous' and he feared that they might begin to feed on the living.⁷⁷ Fortunately, they were rescued before the situation deteriorated. When cannibalism was imagined, it took place elsewhere, beyond regular society in far and lonely places. It

represented the breakdown of society through excessive violence and barbarousness against other humans. In the shipwreck account, the men remained part of a community despite their hardships—until they consumed human flesh. At that point they began to turn on each other, isolated from each other even as they were in close proximity to each other on the desert island.

The stories about cannibalism emphasise that the ultimate form of isolation is to reject society so completely that one develops an insatiable hunger to eat a human. Of course, the accounts of cannibalism, including the real example of the Nottingham Galley, do not tend to describe the taste associated with cannibalism. The notable exception here is ‘Sleeping Beauty.’ The meat was imagined to take on a different flavour according to age, with the cook opting to select a gradually stronger flavoured meat to suit the age of each family member. This is sufficient to trick the Queen Mother. But there is another detail in the story, which appears in both the French and English versions, that suggests how people imagined cannibalism—or the ultimate isolation—might taste beyond the meat itself. The cook served a sauce Robert with each meal, which was comprised of mustard (bitter, earthy, musty, pungent), vinegar and nutmeg (menthol, musty, pine, woody, soapy) in the early modern period.⁷⁸ Rejection of society, then, was envisioned as a tart and bitter flavour, with an overtone of mustiness.

Conclusion

This essay does not offer certainties, but suggestive snapshots to try to identify what loneliness and its relationship to food might have looked like in early modern England. Despite food history’s tendency to focus on sociability, recipe books do have traces of ‘loneliness’ or separation. Our modern feeling of loneliness may not translate directly across historical periods, but early modern people understood that being apart from loved ones or

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society brought feelings of separation and sadness; without society, one might even revert to a bestial state, as with shipwreck cannibalism. By looking at liminal moments, such as grief, illness or epidemics, I have uncovered hints of the emotional significance of separation. Food played an important role in marking moments of separation; recipe books may not address loneliness specifically, but their very creation took place within the context of memory and grief. Liminal moments were also associated with particular foods, meaning that lonely moments of grief, illness and even imagined cannibalism have a taste. The flavour associated with each type of moment is distinct, although they overlap. Grief was mace, nutmeg and cinnamon, while illness was mace, nutmeg and sage; plague was rosemary and vinegar, but cannibalism was nutmeg, mustard and vinegar. There was no comfort food in the taste of early modern loneliness. Dominated by mace, nutmeg and vinegar, the taste of loneliness—like social isolation—was overwhelming: bitter, musty and pungent.

¹ Charles Spence, 'Comfort Food: A Review,' *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science* 9 (2017): 105-109. Pizza was not eaten in early modern England, of course, but pasta—particularly vermicelli and macaroni, appeared regularly in eighteenth-century recipe books.

² Mark Swislocki, *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Susan J. Matt, 'A Hunger for Home: Homesickness and Food in a Global Consumer Society,' *The Journal of American Culture* 30, 1 (2007): 6-17.

³ Amelia Worsley, 'The Poetry of Loneliness: From Romance to Romanticism' (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton University, 2014), 108-112; Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19-20.

⁴ Alberti, *Loneliness*, 20-22.

⁵ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: H. Cripps and E. Wallis, 1660), pp. 85, 88-90. Lonely women in particular were potentially dangerous: Alberti, *Loneliness*, 25.

⁶ Carolyn Kiser Anspach, 'Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688,' *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2, 6 (1934): 376-391, p. 386; Matt, 'Hunger for Home,' 9.

⁷ Burton, *Anatomy*, pp. 87-8.

⁸ Holly Dugan, Marissa Nicosia and Lisa Smith, 'Smelling Contagion: The Sensory Experience of Plague in Seventeenth-Century London and the Covid-19 Pandemic,' *Working Papers in Critical Disaster Studies*, Series 8 (2021), <https://wp.nyu.edu/disasters/wp-content/uploads/sites/16355/2021/09/working-paper-series-dugan-nicosia-smith.pdf>, 7.

⁹ Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960 [1909]); Victor Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas,' in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: AldineTransaction, 2008 [1969]), 94-130; Turner, 'Betwixt and Between'. The 'threshold person' is discussed in Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas'.

¹¹ Burton discusses grief in terms of 'sorrow': *Anatomy*, 96.

¹² Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, 'Introduction,' in Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds. *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014 [1999]), 3-24 (22); Pamela Sharpe, 'Survival Strategies and Stories: Poor Widows and Widowers in Early Industrial England,' in Cavallo and Warner, *Widowhood*, 220-239.

¹³ Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 277-8, 284-86, 288-90; Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000), 289-307 (especially 300-1).

¹⁴ Houlbrooke, *Death*, 231-32, 249-51; Wilson, *Magical*, 300; Sharpe, ‘Survival Strategies,’ 223.

¹⁵ Irina Metzler applies the concept of liminality to medieval disability, which fell between the categories of illness and health – although the sick room and recovery were, arguably, also a liminal state as the recovery was often uncertain in pre-modern health. Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 4-5; Olivia Weisser, *Ill Composed: Sickness, Gender, and Belief in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 104-128; Alun Withey, *Physick and the Family: Health, Medicine and Care in Wales, 1600-1750* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 120-40.

¹⁶ Dugan, Nicosia and Smith, ‘Smelling Contagion’; Claire Turner, ‘Sensing the Past in the Present: Coronavirus and the Bubonic Plague,’ *History Workshop: Histories of the Present*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/sensing-the-past-in-the-present-coronavirus-and-the-bubonic-plague/>.

¹⁷ The most famous of these is chemist Ann Noble’s wine aroma wheel: www.winearomawheel.com, accessed 1 March 2022.

¹⁸ Lydia J.R. Lawless, Annette Hottenstein and John Ellingsworth, ‘The McCormick Spice Wheel: A Systematic and Visual Approach to Sensory Lexicon Development,’ *Journal of Sensory Studies* 27, 1 (2012): 37-47.

¹⁹ William Lewis, *The New Dispensatory*, Book 2 (J. Nourse: London, 1753), 155, 169.

²⁰ Lawless et al., ‘McCormick Spice Wheel,’ 39, 43.

²¹ Menthol’s taste and cooling sensation has been frequently used to mask bitterness in cigarettes and vapes. Hyoshin Kim, et al. ‘Role of sweet and other flavours in liking and disliking of electronic cigarettes,’ *Tobacco Control* 25, supplement 2 (2016): 55-61 (59).

²² For a starting point on recipes as a social currency and the wider context of recipe collecting, see Elaine Leong and Sara Pennell, ‘Recipe Collections and the Currency of Medical Knowledge in the Early Modern ‘Medical Market Place’’, in Mark S.R. Jenner and Patrick Wallis, eds. *Medicine and the Market in England and its Colonies c. 1450-c.1850* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 133-152.

²³ The Johnson family’s recipe book is a good example that included notes and newspaper clippings, MS 3052, Wellcome Collection, London. See also the *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* copy of Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy*, 3rd edition (London: Hannah Glasse, 1748) owned by Lady Innes of Ipswich 1751, which included several handwritten recipes on its pages.

²⁴ Lisa Wynne Smith, ‘Women’s Health Care in England and France (1660-1775)’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 2002), 178; Leong, *Recipes*, pp. 163-167.

²⁵ Alberti, *Loneliness*, 85.

²⁶ Leong and Pennell, ‘Recipe Collections,’ 141-42; Leong, *Recipes*, 21-24.

²⁷ Leong, *Recipes*, 124-46.

²⁸ Johnson Family Book, Wellcome MS 3052, fol. 27v; Leong, *Recipes*, pp. 127.

²⁹ Leong, *Recipes*, pp. 128-9.

³⁰ Wendy Wall, *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern Kitchen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 167-208.

³¹ Lucy Judd, ‘The Value of Domestic Knowledge: Recipes and Receipt Book Manuscripts in the Nottinghamshire Households of the Long Eighteenth Century’ (Ph.D. thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2021), 151-53.

³² Marcy Norton, 'Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics,' *The American Historical Review* 111, 3 (2006): 660-691, pp. 683-688.

4. A recipe for 'good chocolate' collected by the Grenville Family came from Colonel John Belayse, whom they met in Cadiz in 1665. Specific about technique and taste, the recipe hinted at Mesoamerican methods: *Cookery and Medicinal Recipes of the Granville Family*, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, V.a.430, 95. All Folger citations refer to their digitized manuscripts, available in *LUNA: Folger Digital Image Collection*.

³³ Elizabeth Cadogan, Household recipes for making preserves, confectionary, etc., copied 'from Mrs. Earle's Book,' 1711, Add. MS 29739, British Library, London.

³⁴ Cadogan Family, Medical, household, and veterinary recipes; many of the first by Sir Hans Sloane, Bart., M.D. circa 1750, Add. MS 29740, British Library, London.

³⁵ Elizabeth Fuller & others, 1712-1822, MS 2450, Wellcome Collection, London.

³⁶ Cadogan, Add. MS 29739, fols. 59, 57v, 56.

³⁷ Fuller, MS 2450, fol. 23.

³⁸ See Leong's discussion of rough and neat books, for example: *Recipes*, 88-96.

³⁹ Cadogan Family, Add. MS 29740, fols. 8v and 10v; James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 177-8; Margaret DeLacy, *The Germ of an Idea: Contagionism, Religion and Society in Britain 1660-1730* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 127-46.

⁴⁰ E. St. John Brooks, *Sir Hans Sloane: The Great Collector and His Circle* (London: The Batchworth Press, 1954), 158-175.

⁴¹ Leong, *Recipes*, 124.

⁴² Houlbrooke, *Death*, 262-63, 270, 288-89.

⁴³ 'Arvil-supper,' *Encyclopaedia Britannica* vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: 1778); John Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, ed. James Britten (London: W. Satchell, Peyton and Co., 1881), p. 23.

⁴⁴ 'Arvil-bread,' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; Elisha Coles, *An English Dictionary* (London: Peter Parker, 1677); Peter H. Ditchfield, *Old English Customs Extant at the Present Time* (London: George Redway, 1896), 165-66.

⁴⁵ Aubrey, *Remaines*, 35.

⁴⁶ Aubrey, *Remaines*, 23.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, *The pastry-cook's vade-mecum: or, a pocket-companion for cooks, house-keepers, country gentlewomen, &c.* (London: Abel Roper, 1705), 36. This is the funeral bread recipe suggested by food historian, Janet Clarkson: 'Funeral Bread,' *The Old Foodie*, 16 January 2008, <http://www.theoldfoodie.com/2008/01/funeral-bread.html>.

⁴⁸ *Cookery and Medicinal Recipes*, ca. 1688, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, v.a.544 item 2, fol. 12r; Lawless et al. 'McCormick Spice Wheel,' table 1, 39.

⁴⁹ Jean-Louis Flandrin, 'Seasoning, Cooking, and Dietetics in the Late Middle Ages,' in *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean-Louis Flandrin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013 [1996]); Burton, *Anatomy*, 92.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Culpeper, *The English Physician Enlarged* (London, J. Churchill, 1714), 75; Nicholas Culpeper, *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis; or, the London Dispensatory* (Boston: John Allen and John Edwards, 1720), 42, 55.

⁵¹ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Routledge, 1991 [1951]), p. 294.

⁵² Withey, *Physick*, 120-40; Weisser, *Ill Composed*, 104-128.

⁵³ Withey, *Physick*, 126-27.

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- ⁵⁴ Amanda Flather, 'Gender and Home,' 127-146 in *A Cultural History of the Home in the Renaissance*, ed. Amanda Flather (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 145.
- ⁵⁵ Weisser, *Ill Composed*, 106-11.
- ⁵⁶ David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe: Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450-1800* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 9-26; Terence Scully, 'The Sickdish in Early French Recipe Collections,' 132-140 in *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture*, eds. Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall and David Klausner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 134-5. Although Gentilcore suggests that dietetics and cookery separated toward the eighteenth century, with a growing focus on taste, the use of invalid cookery in domestic medicine was much longer lived. Eighteenth-century recipe books in print and manuscript continued to include remedies alongside cookery or sections on invalid foods. See for examples: Johnson Family, Wellcome MS 3052; Glasse, *The Art of Cookery*; William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1781), 198, 219, 249.
- ⁵⁷ Scully, 'Sickdish,' 132.
- ⁵⁸ Glasse, *Art of Cookery*, 118.
- ⁵⁹ Weisser, *Ill Composed*, 112-15.
- ⁶⁰ Nora Bartlett, 'Food in Jane Austen's Fiction,' 113-132 in *Jane Austen: Reflections of a Reader*, ed. Jane Stabler (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021).
- ⁶¹ David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe: Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450-1800* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 57, 59.
- ⁶² Grenville Family, *Cookery and Medicinal Recipes of the Granville family, ca. 1640-1750*, v.a.430, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, 211; Mrs Knight's Receipt Book, 1740, W.b.79, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, 69.
- ⁶³ Hannah Glasse, *Art of Cookery*, 120.
- ⁶⁴ Glasse, *Art of Cookery*, 118-21.
- ⁶⁵ Lawless et al. 'McCormick Spice Wheel,' table 2, 40; Culpeper, *English Physician*, 213-15, 295-97.
- ⁶⁶ Dugan, Nicosia and Smith, 'Smelling Contagion,' 6-10.
- ⁶⁷ Culpeper, *English Physician*, 283.
- ⁶⁸ Lawless, et al. 'McCormick Spice Wheel,' table 2, 40.
- ⁶⁹ Dugan, Nicosia and Smith, 'Smelling Contagion,' 16-17.
- ⁷⁰ Patrick Wallis, 'A Dreadful Heritage: Interpreting Epidemic Disease at Eyam, 1666-2000,' *History Workshop Journal* 61 (2006), 32, 35.
- ⁷¹ Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (New York: Dover Publications Ltd., 2001), 102; Dugan, Nicosia and Smith, 'Smelling Contagion,' 15.
- ⁷² Rev. William Mompesson to John Beilby, 20 November 1666, in *The Christian Correspondent: Letters, Private and Confidential*, ed. James Montgomery, vol. 2 (London: William Ball, 1837), 320-323.
- ⁷³ Charles Perrault, *Tales of Passed Times by Mother Goose with Morals*, trans. R.S. Gent, (London: T. Boosey, 1796), 39-67.
- ⁷⁴ Raymond Rice, 'Cannibalism and the Act of Revenge in Tudor-Stuart Drama,' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 44, 2 (2004): 297-316; Louise Noble, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- ⁷⁵ Noble, *Medicinal Cannibalism*; Richard Sugg, *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires: The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- ⁷⁶ Another account was also published in 1711, but was forty-six pages long: *A true account of the voyage of the Nottingham Galley* (London: S. Popping, 1711).

⁷⁷ *A sad and deplorable, but true account of the dreadful hardships, and sufferings of Capt. John Dean, and his company on board the Nottingham Galley* (London: J. Dutton, 1711), 7.

⁷⁸ Peter Hertzmann, 'Of Unknown Origin: Sauce Robert,' *À La Carte: Ramblings, Thoughts, Comments, Observations and Miscellany*, <http://www.hertzmann.com/articles/2004/robert/>; Lawless et al., 'McCormick Spice Wheel,' table 1, 39.