

From Pottage to Mead

A Regia Anglorum Guide to Food & Drink Authenticity

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A practical reference guide to the foods, drinks and ingredients most appropriate for Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age re-enactment displays. The guide is not intended to be exhaustive, but focuses on well-attested foods, common authenticity pitfalls and practical alternatives suitable for Regia Anglorum members.

Introduction

Food is one of the most visible aspects of any living history display, yet it is also one of the areas where modern assumptions can easily influence interpretation. This guide provides a practical reference to help members select foods and drinks that are appropriate for Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age England, while avoiding some of the more common authenticity pitfalls encountered at events.

It is intended as a starting point rather than a definitive catalogue. Members should always consider the date, location and social status of the interpretation they are portraying and refer to current Regia Anglorum authenticity guidance where appropriate.

Cereals & Bread

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Barley	Common	Bread, pottage, ale	Pearl barley, pot barley	Pearl barley as the only form used	Pot barley where available
Oats	Common	Porridge, gruel, bread	Rolled oats	Steel-cut oats as the default choice	Rolled oats or oat groats
Rye	Common	Bread and baking	Rye flour	Modern light rye breads	Dense wholemeal rye breads
Wheat	Common	Bread and baking	Wholemeal wheat flour	Modern white flour products	Wholemeal wheat flour
Maslin (Mixed Wheat & Rye)	Common	Bread and baking	Mixed wheat and rye flour	Modern white loaves	Mixed wholemeal flours
Bread	Common	Everyday food	Wholemeal breads	Modern sliced white bread	Dense wholemeal loaves
Gruel	Common	Everyday food	Oat or barley gruel	Sweetened breakfast-style porridge	Plain oat or barley gruel

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Spelt	Occasional	Bread and baking	Spelt flour	Assuming it was the dominant grain	Wheat, rye or maslin

Quick Guidance

Common Everyday Foods

- Barley
- Oats
- Rye
- Wheat
- Maslin
- Bread
- Gruel

Occasional

- Spelt

Interpretation Note

Cereals formed the foundation of the Anglo-Saxon diet. Bread, pottage, gruel and ale provided a significant proportion of daily calories for people across all levels of society. While wheat was valued, many households relied on a mixture of grains, particularly barley, oats and rye, depending on local conditions and availability.

Modern re-enactment displays often over-emphasise fine white bread. In practice, most bread would have been made from wholemeal flour and frequently contained a mixture of grains. Maslin bread, made from wheat and rye grown and milled together, is often one of the most appropriate choices for Anglo-Saxon interpretation.

Porridge and gruel were important everyday foods and should not be overlooked in favour of bread alone. Sweetened breakfast-style porridges can give a misleading impression of Anglo-Saxon foodways. Plain barley or oat gruels are usually more appropriate for most displays.

When selecting ingredients, favour whole grains, wholemeal flours and traditional preparations over heavily refined modern products. The aim should be to reflect the central importance of cereals in the Anglo-Saxon diet rather than focusing solely on meat, dairy or feast foods.

Vegetables & Pulses

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Leeks	Common	Pottages, broths, side dishes	Modern leeks	Over-reliance on onions when leeks are available	Young or smaller leeks where available
Onions	Common	Pottages, broths, flavouring	Onions	Large modern brown cooking onions are often over-represented in re-enactment cooking	Spring onions, shallots and wild garlic
Wild Garlic (<i>Ramsons</i>)	Common (Seasonal)	Greens and flavouring	Wild garlic leaves	Fresh leaves are highly seasonal	Fresh seasonal leaves
Garlic	Occasional	Flavouring and medicinal use	Garlic cloves	Garlic-heavy modern recipes	Use sparingly; leeks and onions should remain the primary alliums
Coleworts	Common	Boiled greens, pottages	Kale, spring greens	Modern tight-headed cabbages are very different from early medieval leafy brassicas	Kale, spring greens or other loose-leaf brassicas
Turnips	Common	Boiled, roasted, pottages	White turnips	Swede is often mistaken for a period turnip but is not an appropriate substitute	White turnips
Parsnips	Common	Boiled, roasted, pottages	Modern parsnips	Sweetened modern parsnip dishes	Smaller and less uniform parsnips where available
Carrots	Occasional	Root vegetable	White or yellow carrots	Modern orange and purple carrots	White carrots, yellow carrots or parsnips
Beetroot	Occasional	Root vegetable	Beetroot	Assuming widespread use without evidence	Heritage beetroot varieties where available
Broad Beans	Common	Pottages and side dishes	Fava beans	Modern baked beans	Fresh or dried broad beans
Peas	Common	Pottages and side dishes	Dried peas or marrowfat peas	Garden peas as the only pulse used	Dried peas and broad beans

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Radish	Occasional	Raw or cooked vegetable	Radishes	Modern salad-focused interpretation	Smaller radishes

Quick Guidance

Common Everyday Foods

- Leeks
- Onions
- Wild garlic (*ramsons*)
- Coleworts
- Turnips
- Parsnips
- Broad beans
- Peas
- Nettles
- Sorrel
- Watercress
- Good King Henry

Occasional, Seasonal or Higher-Status Foods

- Garlic
- Carrots
- Beetroot
- Radishes
- Lettuce
- Chard

- Alexanders
- Fennel

Rare or Uncertain

- Lentils

Generally Avoid

- Spinach
- Celery
- Swede used as Turnip

Interpretation Note

Vegetables and pulses formed a substantial part of the Anglo-Saxon diet and were often eaten more frequently than meat. Pottages, broths and stews commonly combined cereals with vegetables, herbs and pulses to create filling and nutritious meals.

Modern re-enactment displays often over-emphasise large modern vegetables that differ significantly from their early medieval counterparts. Where possible, choose smaller and less uniform produce. White turnips, smaller parsnips, loose-leaf brassicas and white or yellow carrots generally provide a more convincing interpretation than heavily bred modern varieties.

Leeks were particularly important and frequently appear in both archaeological and documentary evidence. While onions were also known, modern brown cooking onions are often over-represented in re-enactment cooking. Spring onions and shallots usually provide a closer approximation to what many Anglo-Saxons would have encountered.

Seasonality should also be considered. Wild garlic, nettles, sorrel, watercress and Good King Henry were not available throughout the year unless preserved in some way. Fresh seasonal produce often creates a more authentic display than relying entirely on supermarket vegetables.

Pulses such as peas and broad beans were especially important sources of protein and should feature more prominently in modern interpretations. Lentils may have been known but should not be treated as a common staple. Likewise, spinach should generally be avoided, as it was introduced after the Norman Conquest and is not appropriate for Anglo-Saxon food displays.

Fruits, Nuts & Berries

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Apples	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh, stewed, dried	Cooking apples	Modern dessert apples as the only variety displayed	Tart cooking apples and crab apples
Crab Apples	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh, stewed, preserves	Crab apples	Replacing entirely with sweet dessert apples	Crab apples where available
Pears	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh, stewed, dried	Pears	Modern oversized dessert pears	Smaller, firmer varieties
Damsons	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh, stewed, dried	Damsons	Overlooking them in favour of cultivated plums	Damsons
Sloes	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh, dried, preserves	Sloes	Assuming they were commonly eaten raw	Dried or cooked sloes
Elderberries	Common (Seasonal)	Cooked dishes and preserves	Elderberries	Consuming raw in quantity	Cooked elderberries
Blackberries	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh and cooked	Blackberries	Assuming year-round availability	Seasonal wild blackberries
Hazelnuts	Common (Seasonal)	Fresh, dried, cooking	Hazelnuts	Salted or flavoured snack nuts	Plain hazelnuts
Plums	Occasional (Seasonal)	Fresh, stewed, dried	Plums	Treating cultivated plums as more typical than damsons	Damsons
Cherries	Occasional (Seasonal)	Fresh fruit	Cherries	Assuming widespread everyday use	Orchard, monastic or higher-status interpretations
Raspberries	Occasional (Seasonal)	Fresh fruit	Raspberries	Modern cultivated varieties as a staple fruit	Smaller heritage varieties
Bilberries	Occasional (Seasonal, Regional)	Fresh and cooked	Bilberries	Substituting with imported berries	Bilberries where available
Rose Hips	Occasional (Seasonal)	Preserves and flavourings	Rose hips	Assuming they were commonly eaten raw	Cooked preparations

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Walnuts	Occasional (Seasonal)	Fresh, dried, cooking	Walnuts	Assuming widespread use	Hazelnuts where possible

Quick Guidance

Common Everyday Foods

- Apples
- Crab apples
- Pears
- Damsons
- Sloes
- Elderberries
- Blackberries
- Hazelnuts

Occasional, Seasonal or Regional Foods

- Plums
- Cherries
- Raspberries
- Bilberries
- Rose hips
- Walnuts
- Beech nuts

Rare, Imported or Specialist Foods

- Strawberries
- Sweet chestnuts
- Grapes
- Figs
- Dates
- Raisins

Interpretation Note

Fruit, nuts and berries provided an important seasonal supplement to the Anglo-Saxon diet. Many were gathered from hedgerows, woodland and orchards, while others could be preserved by drying or cooking for use later in the year.

Modern re-enactment displays often over-emphasise imported fruits such as grapes, figs, dates and raisins. While these foods were known in Anglo-Saxon England, they were generally uncommon and are best reserved for specialist, ecclesiastical or higher-status interpretations. Apples, pears, damsons, sloes, elderberries and blackberries usually provide a more representative picture of the fruits available to most people.

Grapes were known in Anglo-Saxon England, but for most interpretations wine is likely to be a more appropriate representation of their use than displaying large bunches of fresh grapes.

Strawberries deserve particular caution. Wild strawberries existed in Anglo-Saxon England, but they were much smaller than modern cultivated varieties. The large garden strawberries commonly seen at re-enactment events are not an appropriate representation of Anglo-Saxon fruit and can give a misleading impression of what was available.

Seasonality should also be considered. Many fruits and berries were only available for a short period each year unless dried or otherwise preserved. Members are encouraged to make use of seasonal and locally available produce wherever possible, rather than relying on imported or out-of-season fruits.

Herbs & Flavourings

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Parsley	Common	Flavouring and garnish	Flat-leaf parsley	Curly parsley used as the default variety	Flat-leaf parsley
Dill	Common	Flavouring and fish dishes	Dill	Overlooking it in favour of more modern herbs	Fresh dill or dill seed
Fennel Seed	Common	Flavouring and seasoning	Fennel seed	Replacing with bulb fennel in recipes	Fennel seed
Mint	Common	Flavouring, drinks and sauces	Mint	Highly processed mint sauces	Fresh mint
Sage	Common	Flavouring and medicinal use	Sage	Assuming it was used in every dish	Fresh sage leaves
Mustard Seed	Common	Seasoning	Yellow mustard seed	Prepared mustard as a direct substitute	Crushed mustard seed
Horseradish	Common	Flavouring	Horseradish	Commercial cream-based sauces	Fresh grated horseradish
Chives	Common	Flavouring	Chives	Overlooking them in favour of onions	Fresh chives
Wild Garlic (<i>Ramsons</i>)	Common (Seasonal)	Flavouring and greens	Wild garlic leaves	Fresh leaves are highly seasonal	Fresh seasonal leaves or dried leaves where appropriate
Sorrel	Common (Seasonal)	Flavouring and greens	Sorrel	Replacing with spinach	Fresh sorrel
Nettle	Common (Seasonal)	Greens and flavouring	Nettles	Assuming year-round availability	Fresh seasonal growth
Watercress	Common (Seasonal)	Greens and flavouring	Watercress	Overlooking it in favour of salad crops	Fresh watercress
Honey	Common	Sweetening, sauces and	Set or runny honey	Routine sweetening of everyday	Use sparingly and where

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Salt	Common	drinks Seasoning and preservation	Salt	foods Treating salt as an unlimited seasoning	appropriate Coarse sea salt or rock salt used in moderation
Ale Vinegar	Common	Flavouring, preservation and pickling	Malt vinegar	Modern flavoured vinegars and balsamic vinegar	Plain malt vinegar
Lovage	Occasional	Flavouring	Lovage	Assuming it was available in every household garden	Better suited to cultivated garden and monastic interpretations
Coriander Seed	Occasional	Imported seasoning	Coriander seed	Routine use in everyday camp cooking	Reserve for higher-status, urban or specialist displays
Celery Seed	Occasional	Flavouring	Celery seed	Modern celery used as a staple flavouring vegetable	Celery seed or lovage
Ground Ivy	Occasional (Seasonal)	Flavouring and brewing	Ground ivy	Difficult to obtain and often overlooked	Fresh ground ivy where available; parsley or dill as practical substitutes
Rosemary	Rare	Medicinal use and specialist interpretations	Rosemary	Better suited to medicinal or specialist displays than routine camp cooking	Parsley, sage, dill or lovage for culinary use
Pepper	Rare	Imported seasoning	Whole black peppercorns	Treating pepper as an everyday seasoning	Reserve for elite, ecclesiastical or specialist displays

Quick Guidance

Common Everyday Flavourings

- Parsley
- Dill
- Fennel seed
- Mint

- Sage
- Mustard seed
- Horseradish
- Chives
- Wild garlic (*Ramsons*)
- Sorrel
- Nettle
- Watercress
- Honey
- Salt
- Ale vinegar

Occasional or Specialist Flavourings

- Lovage
- Coriander seed
- Celery seed
- Ground ivy

Rare Imported or Specialist Flavourings

- Pepper
- Rosemary

Interpretation Note

Anglo-Saxon food was flavoured primarily with locally available herbs, seeds and preserved ingredients rather than imported spices. In most displays, parsley, dill, mint, sage, mustard seed, horseradish and fennel seed are more appropriate choices than imported seasonings.

Evidence for vinegar in Anglo-Saxon England is largely indirect but persuasive. Brewing was widespread, and ale naturally turns sour if left exposed, producing vinegar. Documentary and medical sources demonstrate that vinegar was known and used, while its value in preservation, medicine and food preparation would have made it a practical by-product of everyday brewing. For re-enactment purposes, plain malt vinegar is generally the closest readily available substitute.

Honey and salt were important flavourings, but both represented valuable resources and should not be treated as unlimited everyday ingredients. Imported spices such as pepper and coriander were known in Anglo-Saxon England but should generally be reserved for elite, urban, ecclesiastical or specialist interpretations rather than routine camp cooking.

While rosemary was known in medieval Europe, evidence for its routine culinary use in Anglo-Saxon England is limited. It is generally better suited to medicinal, monastic or specialist interpretations than everyday camp cooking.

Dairy, Eggs & Fats

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Milk	Common (Seasonal)	Drinking, cooking and dairying	Whole milk	Skimmed and flavoured milk products	Whole milk
Buttermilk	Common	Drinking, cooking and baking	Cultured buttermilk	Assuming dairy was always consumed as fresh milk	Buttermilk where available
Soured Milk	Common	Drinking, cooking and dairying	Kefir or naturally soured milk	Assuming all milk was consumed fresh	Buttermilk or naturally soured dairy products
Butter	Common	Cooking, flavouring and preservation	Unsalted butter	Flavoured butters	Plain butter
Fresh Curds & Soft Cheeses	Common	Everyday food	Cottage cheese, soft curd cheese, soft goat's cheese, soft sheep's cheese	Highly processed cream cheeses and heavily flavoured cheeses	Fresh curds, cottage cheese, plain goat's cheese or sheep's cheese
Eggs	Common (Seasonal)	Cooking and eating	Hen's eggs	Assuming year-round abundance	Use seasonally where possible. Smaller eggs, including bantam eggs, can provide a more convincing approximation.
Lard	Common	Cooking fat	Lard	Modern vegetable oils	Lard where appropriate
Beef Dripping	Common	Cooking fat	Beef dripping	Modern vegetable oils	Beef dripping
Suet	Common	Cooking and fat source	Beef or mutton suet	Modern processed cooking fats	Traditional suet
Goose Eggs	Occasional (Seasonal)	Cooking and eating	Goose eggs	Treating as everyday eggs	Useful substitute for chicken eggs, particularly in Scandinavian and Danelaw interpretations
Hard Cheese	Occasional	Travel food, storage,	White farmhouse cheese	Modern coloured	White cheddar, Cheshire,

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
		monastic and wealthier households		cheeses and heavily processed cheeses	Caerphilly, Wensleydale or similar traditional cheeses
Cream	Occasional	Feast foods and richer dishes	Double cream	Routine use in everyday camp cooking	Reserve for feast or high-status displays
Whey	Occasional	Drink and food preparation	Whey	Assuming it was discarded	Use as a by-product of cheesemaking

Quick Guidance

Common Everyday Foods

- Milk
- Buttermilk
- Soured milk
- Butter
- Fresh curds and soft cheeses
- Eggs
- Lard
- Beef dripping
- Suet

Occasional, Seasonal or Higher-Status Foods

- Goose eggs
- Hard cheese
- Cream
- Whey

Interpretation Note

Dairy products were an important part of the Anglo-Saxon diet and often provided a valuable source of nutrition when meat was scarce or reserved for special occasions. Milk, butter, curds, cheese and eggs appear regularly in archaeological, documentary and literary evidence.

Fresh curds and soft cheeses were likely more common in everyday use than the mature hard cheeses familiar to modern consumers. Soft cheeses could be made from cow, sheep or goat milk and are often more appropriate for re-enactment displays than heavily processed modern cheeses. Hard cheeses required additional processing, storage and ageing, making them particularly useful in monastic communities, wealthier households and for travel.

When selecting cheese, favour plain white varieties over brightly coloured modern cheeses. Traditional farmhouse cheeses, curd cheeses and simple soft cheeses are generally more suitable than heavily flavoured or processed alternatives. Soft sheep's and goat's cheeses are particularly useful additions to re-enactment displays and are often under-represented.

For cooking fats, butter, lard, beef dripping and suet are usually preferable to modern vegetable oils. These fats should form the basis of most period cooking rather than modern oils and spreads.

Dairy production was also highly seasonal. Milk yields increased during the spring and summer when animals had access to fresh grazing, but declined significantly during the winter months. As a result, preserving surplus dairy as butter and cheese was an important way of carrying valuable nutrition through the leaner parts of the year. Hard cheeses and salted butter therefore served not only as convenient foods for travel and storage, but also as practical means of extending the benefits of seasonal milk production.

Egg production was similarly tied to natural laying cycles and varied throughout the year. Modern laying hens have been selectively bred to produce large eggs. Smaller eggs, such as those from bantam breeds, often provide a more convincing visual approximation for Anglo-Saxon re-enactment displays. Goose eggs can be particularly useful for Scandinavian and Danelaw interpretations, while fresh curds and soft cheeses often provide a more authentic alternative to modern hard cheeses on re-enactment displays.

Meat

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Pork	Well Attested	Fresh meat, preserved meat and feasting	Pork	Assuming pork dominated all Anglo-Saxon diets	Pork used alongside cereals and vegetables rather than as the centrepiece of every meal
Bacon	Well Attested	Flavouring, preservation and cooking	Unsmoked bacon	Large bacon-heavy meals	Use as a flavouring ingredient rather than the main component
Ham	Well Attested	Preserved meat	Ham	Highly processed supermarket ham	Plain cured ham
Mutton	Well Attested	Fresh meat and stews	Mutton	Replacing entirely with lamb	Mutton where available; older lamb as a substitute
Offal	Well Attested	Everyday food	Liver, heart, kidneys	Ignoring offal in favour of prime cuts	Liver, heart and kidneys
Bone Marrow	Well Attested	Food and cooking	Marrow bones	Discarding marrow during cooking	Use marrow in broths and stews
Beef	Occasional	Fresh meat, stews and feasting	Beef	Overly lean modern cuts	Use stewing cuts and traditional joints where possible
Lamb	Occasional	Fresh meat	Lamb	Over-reliance on lamb in place of mutton	Prefer mutton where possible
Chicken	Occasional	Meat and eggs	Chicken	Routine use as the default camp meat	Older birds where possible
Goose	Occasional (Seasonal)	Meat and feasting	Goose	Assuming widespread everyday consumption	Use in seasonal and higher-status contexts
Duck	Occasional	Meat and feasting	Duck	Treating as a common everyday meat	Use in seasonal or specialist displays
Hare	Occasional	Hunting and food	Hare	Assuming it was a staple	Use in specialist displays

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Wildfowl	Occasional	Hunting and food	Various game birds	meat Assuming year-round abundance	Use in seasonal hunting contexts
Venison	Elite or Specialist	Hunting and elite dining	Venison	Routine use in ordinary camp cooking	Reserve for elite or specialist interpretations
Rabbit	Avoid	—	Rabbit	Introduced after the Norman Conquest	Hare or poultry

Quick Guidance

Well Attested

- Pork
- Bacon
- Ham
- Mutton
- Offal
- Bone marrow

Occasional

- Beef
- Lamb
- Chicken
- Goose
- Duck
- Hare
- Wildfowl

Elite or Specialist

- Venison

Avoid

- Rabbit

Interpretation Note

Meat was an important source of nutrition in Anglo-Saxon England, but it should not be assumed that it formed the basis of every meal. For most people, cereals, vegetables, pulses and dairy products provided the foundation of the diet, with meat often eaten in smaller quantities, used to flavour dishes, preserved for later use or consumed during seasonal feasts and special occasions.

The categories in this table reflect the strength of the evidence and the likely availability of a food rather than how frequently it was eaten. Foods listed as **Well Attested** are strongly evidenced in the archaeological and documentary record, but this should not be taken to mean that they appeared on the table every day.

Pork, bacon and ham are all well attested throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. While archaeological evidence suggests that pork became less dominant in some urban areas during the later Anglo-Saxon period, particularly as farming practices and settlement patterns changed, pigs continued to be raised and eaten across much of England. The evidence points to changing regional preferences rather than the disappearance of pork from the diet.

Sheep were usually valued for wool as well as meat, meaning mutton from older animals was often more common than the young lamb favoured today. Re-enactors are encouraged to consider mutton wherever possible, as modern interpretations often over-represent lamb and chicken.

Cattle provided traction, manure, milk and breeding stock in addition to meat. Beef is well evidenced throughout the Anglo-Saxon period and appears in both archaeological and documentary sources, although many animals would have served multiple purposes during their lives before eventually entering the food chain. Preserved meats such as bacon and ham helped extend food supplies throughout the year and may have been more common than large servings of fresh meat.

Christian law codes and penitentials repeatedly prohibited the consumption of blood and animals that had not been properly bled. While these repeated prohibitions suggest such practices may have persisted in some communities, blood should generally be avoided in Anglo-Saxon food displays.

Specialist Scandinavian pagan interpretations may wish to explore the ritual significance of blood, although the evidence is stronger for ceremonial use than for its routine inclusion in everyday meals.

Members should also consider using offal, marrow and preserved meats more often, as these are frequently under-represented despite being valuable food resources. Venison, game and wildfowl should generally be reserved for elite, specialist or hunting-focused interpretations rather than everyday camp cooking.

Rabbit should be avoided in Anglo-Saxon food displays. Rabbits were introduced to England after the Norman Conquest and were not part of the Anglo-Saxon diet. Hare is the more appropriate period alternative where a small game animal is desired.

Fish & Shellfish

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Eel	Well Attested	Fresh, dried and preserved fish	Eel	Treating eel as unusual or exotic	Eel where available
Pike	Well Attested	Freshwater fish	Pike	Assuming only sea fish were important	Pike where available
Perch	Well Attested	Freshwater fish	Perch	Rarely represented in re-enactment displays	Perch where available
Roach	Well Attested	Freshwater fish	Roach	Ignoring smaller freshwater species	Roach where available
Trout	Well Attested	Freshwater fish	Trout	Overlooking freshwater fish in favour of salmon	Trout
Salmon	Well Attested	Fresh and preserved fish	Salmon	Often over-represented in re-enactment displays because it is readily available today	Display alongside other freshwater fish such as pike, perch, roach, trout or eel
Herring	Well Attested	Fresh, salted and preserved fish	Herring	Assuming all fish was eaten fresh	Salted, dried or smoked herring where appropriate
Mussels	Well Attested (Coastal)	Food and gathering	Mussels	Assuming shellfish were rare	Mussels where available
Oysters	Well Attested (Coastal)	Food and gathering	Oysters	Treating oysters as exclusively luxury food	Oysters in coastal interpretations
Cockles	Well Attested (Coastal)	Food and gathering	Cockles	Under-representing shellfish gathering	Cockles where available
Limpets	Well Attested (Coastal)	Food and gathering	Limpets	Assuming they were not eaten	Use in coastal interpretations
Cod	Occasional	Fresh and preserved fish	Cod	Assuming widespread inland availability	Use in coastal or trade-focused interpretations
Haddock	Occasional	Fresh and	Haddock	Assuming widespread inland availability	Use in coastal or trade-focused

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
		preserved fish			interpretations
Flatfish	Occasional	Coastal fishing	Plaice, flounder	Overlooking local freshwater species	Use in coastal interpretations
Whelks	Occasional (Coastal)	Food and gathering	Whelks	Assuming shellfish gathering was limited to oysters	Whelks where available
Lamprey	Elite or Specialist	Fresh fish and feasting	Lamprey	Treating as a common food fish	Specialist or elite displays
Carp	Avoid	—	Carp	Not established in England until after the Norman Conquest	Pike, perch, roach or trout

Quick Guidance

Well Attested Freshwater Fish

- Eel
- Pike
- Perch
- Roach
- Trout
- Salmon

Well Attested Coastal & Marine Fish

- Herring

Well Attested Coastal Shellfish

- Mussels
- Oysters
- Cockles

- Limpets

Occasional

- Cod
- Haddock
- Flatfish
- Whelks

Elite or Specialist

- Lamprey

Avoid

- Carp

Interpretation Note

Fish formed an important part of the Anglo-Saxon diet and could be eaten fresh, dried, salted or smoked. Access to fish varied considerably according to geography. Communities living beside rivers, lakes and wetlands often had regular access to freshwater fish, while coastal populations could exploit marine fish and shellfish.

Members should consider the location of the interpretation they are portraying. Displays set near major rivers, estuaries, fens or productive fishing grounds should generally include more fish than those representing inland communities with less reliable access to aquatic resources. Fish was not necessarily an everyday food everywhere, but in areas with abundant aquatic resources it could form a significant part of the diet.

Modern re-enactment displays often over-represent salmon while overlooking the wide variety of freshwater fish that were likely more familiar to many people. Salmon was certainly eaten and could be abundant in regions with productive salmon rivers, but it formed only one part of a much broader fishing economy that also included eel, pike, perch, roach, herring and shellfish.

Herring deserves particular attention. It was one of the most important fish species in medieval England and could be eaten fresh, salted or preserved for transport and trade. Its widespread availability means it often makes a more convincing choice for re-enactment displays than many modern assumptions about fish consumption would suggest.

Dried and preserved fish should also be considered when creating food displays. Stockfish, produced by air-drying fish, and various forms of salted fish provided a means of preserving valuable food resources for transport, trade and consumption throughout the year. Dried fish formed an important part of the wider North Sea economy and would not have been unfamiliar in Viking Age England. For re-enactors, dried fish offers a practical and highly authentic display item, requiring no refrigeration and helping to illustrate the importance of food preservation and trade in the early medieval world.

Shellfish were also important food resources, particularly in coastal communities. Mussels, oysters, cockles and limpets should not be regarded as unusual specialist foods, but as practical and readily available sources of protein for many coastal populations.

Lamprey appears in documentary sources and is associated with high-status dining and specialist interpretations. Carp should generally be avoided, as it was introduced to England after the Norman Conquest and is not appropriate for Anglo-Saxon food displays.

Drinks

Food Item	How Common?	Typical Use	Modern Approximation	Avoid or Use With Caution	Recommended Alternative
Water	Well Attested	Everyday drink	Water	Assuming water was never consumed because it was unsafe	Clean water from reliable sources
Ale	Well Attested	Everyday drink	Traditional ale	Assuming all ale was strong	Low-strength ales and small beers
Small Ale	Well Attested	Everyday drink	Low ABV ale	Modern strong craft beers	Low-strength ales (1–3% ABV)
Buttermilk	Well Attested	Drinking and cooking	Cultured buttermilk	Overlooking dairy drinks	Buttermilk where available
Soured Milk	Well Attested	Drinking and cooking	Kefir or naturally soured milk	Assuming all milk was consumed fresh	Naturally soured dairy products
Mead	Occasional	Feasting, hospitality and higher-status contexts	Mead	Treating mead as the default Anglo-Saxon drink	Ale for most interpretations
Wine	Occasional	Ecclesiastical, medicinal and elite use	Wine	Routine use in ordinary camp settings	Ale or water
Cider	Occasional (Regional)	Drinking	Traditional cider	Assuming cider was as widespread as ale throughout England	Ale for most interpretations; cider particularly appropriate in orchard-producing regions
Whey	Occasional	Drinking and food preparation	Whey	Assuming it was always discarded	Use as a by-product of cheesemaking
Herbal Infusions	Occasional	Medicinal and specialist use	Herbal teas	Presenting herbal infusions as everyday beverages	Mint, sage or medicinal herb infusions where appropriate
Perry	Rare (Regional)	Drinking	Perry	Treating as a common medieval drink	Cider in appropriate regions
Tea	Avoid	—	Tea	Post-medieval introduction	Herbal infusions
Coffee	Avoid	—	Coffee	Post-medieval introduction	Ale, water or herbal infusions

Quick Guidance

Well Attested

- Water
- Ale
- Small ale
- Buttermilk
- Soured milk

Occasional

- Mead
- Wine
- Cider
- Whey
- Herbal infusions

Rare

- Perry

Avoid

- Tea
- Coffee

Interpretation Note

Ale was the most important drink in Anglo-Saxon England and was consumed by people of all social backgrounds. However, not all ale was strong. Much everyday ale was likely lower in alcohol than many modern beers and may have been consumed alongside water, milk and other beverages.

A common myth suggests that people drank ale because water was unsafe. There is little evidence to support this idea in Anglo-Saxon England. Clean water was regularly obtained from springs, wells, streams and rivers, and water remained an important everyday drink. While contaminated water could certainly cause illness, Anglo-Saxons were well aware of the value of good water sources. Members should therefore not assume that ale was the only drink consumed in Anglo-Saxon England. A wooden or ceramic cup of water is often just as authentic and appropriate for a living history display.

Mead occupies a prominent place in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture, but it should not be assumed to have been an everyday drink. For most people, ale would have been far more common. Likewise, wine was available through trade and ecclesiastical networks but was generally associated with elite, monastic and religious contexts.

Cider was probably known and consumed in parts of Anglo-Saxon England, particularly where apples were abundant. However, the large-scale cider-producing traditions associated with western England developed more fully during the later medieval period. Ale remained the dominant alcoholic drink across most of England, and cider is best used in regionally appropriate interpretations rather than as a universal Anglo-Saxon beverage.

Milk, buttermilk, soured milk and whey should not be overlooked. Dairy drinks were an important part of life in communities that kept cattle, sheep and goats, and often provide a more authentic alternative to the modern assumption that every Anglo-Saxon was constantly drinking alcohol.

Tea and coffee should be avoided entirely, as both arrived in England many centuries after the Anglo-Saxon period and are among the most obvious anachronisms found in modern living history camps.

Example Early Medieval Lunches

The examples below are not intended to represent definitive Anglo-Saxon meals. Rather, they demonstrate how simple, well-attested foods can be combined to create convincing and practical lunches for living history displays. They are designed to encourage the use of common, everyday ingredients and to help move away from the modern "ploughman's lunch" style display that is often seen at events. **They should be adapted according to season, region and social status.**

Everyday Early Medieval Lunch

A simple meal suitable for many Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age interpretations:

- Maslin, rye or wholemeal wheat bread
- Soft curd cheese or simple white cheese
- Boiled eggs
- A tart cooking apple, crab apple (in season) or dried apple slices
- Hazelnuts
- Leeks, boiled, stewed or served with butter and salt
- Butter
- A small portion of smoked, dried or salted fish
- Preserved vegetables such as fermented turnips, radishes or beetroot
- Water, buttermilk or ale where appropriate

This type of meal is built around ingredients that were widely available and well attested across much of Anglo-Saxon England. While simple, it often provides a more convincing impression of everyday food than larger displays built around rare or imported foods.

Higher-Status Early Medieval Lunch

A somewhat richer meal suitable for wealthier households, merchants or thegnly interpretations:

- Fine wheat bread
- Soft cheese
- Tart apples or pears
- Hazelnuts or walnuts
- Smoked salmon, herring or other fish
- Honey
- Preserved vegetables
- Ale

This remains a relatively simple meal but incorporates ingredients that may have been more readily available to households with greater resources.

Monastic Lunch (Non-Fasting Day)

A simple meal suitable for monastic or ecclesiastical interpretations:

- Barley bread
- Soft cheese
- Boiled eggs
- Boiled leeks with butter and salt

- Apples, dried apple slices or pears
- Water or ale

Monastic meals were often straightforward and practical, emphasising staple foods rather than luxury ingredients. Depending on the season, additional vegetables, herbs or preserved foods might also be included.

A Note on Modern Ploughman's Lunches

Many living history lunches unintentionally resemble a contemporary ploughman's lunch, often including ingredients such as cheddar cheese, celery, grapes, pickled onions, and other foods that either post-date the period or are poorly evidenced for Anglo-Saxon England. While individually some of these foods may have parallels in the medieval world, a display built around bread, simple cheeses, eggs, leeks, apples, nuts, preserved vegetables and preserved fish will usually provide a more convincing impression of early medieval foodways.

Where alcohol is consumed, members should always follow Regia Anglorum event rules and local site requirements. Water remains one of the most authentic drink choices available and is often more appropriate during public opening hours, before combat displays or whenever safety considerations apply.

Final Thoughts

This guide is intended as a practical reference for food and drink displays in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age England. It focuses on ingredients that are well attested in the archaeological and documentary evidence and which are suitable for the majority of re-enactment interpretations.

When planning a display, consider not only whether a food was known, but also how common it was, who might have eaten it, where it was available and whether it was in season. A simple meal of bread, pottage, peas, leeks and water or ale is often a more authentic representation of daily life than a table filled with imported fruits, spices and expensive meats.

Regional variation was an important feature of life in early medieval England. Coastal communities had access to different resources than inland settlements, while monastic, urban and elite households often enjoyed foods unavailable to most people. No single table can represent every person in every place across the period.

Members of Regia are encouraged to build their displays primarily around the ingredients included in this guide. Most represent foods that are widely accepted, well evidenced and appropriate for the majority of interpretations. Before introducing foods not listed here, consider whether there is strong evidence for their use and whether they are suitable for the period, region and social status being portrayed. In many cases, a smaller selection of common foods will create a more convincing display than a larger selection of unusual or exceptional ingredients.

Above all, aim to present food that feels plausible, seasonal and grounded in the evidence. Authenticity is not simply about choosing foods that existed; it is about choosing foods that make sense for the people, place and time being portrayed.

Produced as a practical reference guide for members of Regia Anglorum. This guide is intended to support informed interpretation and should be used alongside current Regia Anglorum authenticity standards and guidance.