

MAGDALENA BATOR (WARSZAWA)

SUGAR AND SPICE AND ALL THINGS NICE – AN ANALYSIS OF THE CULINARY VOCABULARY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

Spices, imported to Europe mainly from India and the Far East, were very popular already in Antiquity (cf. Apicus's collection). However, following Flandrin (1999), at no other period in history did they play as great a role as from the 14th to the 16th centuries. In medieval culinary recipes they were omnipresent. Various reasons for their use were suggested, such as protection from decay (esp. of meat and fish), showing off (spices indicated the social position of the host), medicinal health reasons, or simply their taste. In the medieval times, not only the variety of spices used for cooking changed (comparing to Antiquity), but also the popularity of certain spices. For instance pepper, which was extremely popular in Apicus's collection, lost favour to ginger and the grains of paradise, only to regain its popularity in the 18th c. (Laurioux 1999).

The present study aims at the investigation of the vocabulary for the herbs and spices used in the available Middle English culinary collections. The research will be based on almost 1,300 recipes from the 14th and 15th centuries. First, some general terms, such as *herb*, *spice* and *wort*, all of which are present in the compiled corpus, will be analyzed. Next, lexemes denoting specific herbs and spices will be discussed, not only to show their great variety but also to survey their etymology, meaning, and frequency of occurrence. Special attention will be paid to the relation of native to foreign lexemes (esp. those of French origin), in order to answer such questions as whether there is any relation between the source of a particular ingredient (and/or the origin of its name) and its frequency.

INTRODUCTION

Spices were very popular already in Antiquity, which is evidenced for instance in the collection compiled in the 4th c. by Apicus. They were imported mainly from India and the Far East. In England an enormous influx in the usage of spices took place after the introduction of the Norman cookery. Following Flandrin (1999), at no other period in the history did they play as great a role as from the 14th to the 16th centuries. They were used in a great variety, amount and with a high frequency. Freedman (2007: 50) reports:

Spices were omnipresent in medieval gastronomy. Something on the order of 75% of medieval recipes involves spices. In their updated compendium of medieval dishes adapted to modern techniques, *Pleyn Delit*, Constance Hieatt and Sharon Butler collected 131 medieval

recipes of which 92 involve exotic spices. A Catalan cookbook compiled for the king of Naples in 1500 contains approximately 200 recipes and of these no less than 154 call for sugar. Cinnamon is used in 125 of the recipes and ginger is mentioned in 76.

(Freedman 2007: 50)

Also, the use of particular spices has changed from the times of Apicus, e.g., the most important spice in Apicus's collection, i.e. pepper¹, lost its favour (cf. Laurioux 1985). As Laurioux (1999) suggests, in the Middle Ages it was replaced by such spices as ginger or the grains of paradise, only to regain its popularity in the 18th c.

REASONS FOR THE USE OF SPICES

Various reasons for such popularity of spices were suggested. The most frequently quoted ones are:

- to preserve meat and fish from decay. A common belief is that herbs and spices were to mask the taste of spoiled meat. This, however, has been contradicted by Scully (2005: 84), who argues that, with such a great variety and ease of access to fresh meat and fish throughout the entire year, aristocratic cooks (who used the recipes) had no reason to serve old meat. Additionally, it should be borne in mind that meat and fish if not served fresh were usually salted, dried or smoked. Moreover, there is no indication in any of the recipes that in the case of meat and fish which were fresh enough strong seasoning should be omitted;
- to show the social position. Spices, most of which were imported, were generally very expensive. They were accessible to few. Thus, the more of them were added to dishes, allegedly the better was the financial situation of the host;
- to stay healthy. The medical properties of spices are a convincing factor for their use. Laurioux (1985) claims that spices were first imported as medicine and only later incorporated as seasoning. Herbs and spices were generally thought of as varieties of drugs (Scully 2005: 30) and, among other properties, were believed to enhance digestion. Montanari (2012: 87) writes that “(...) the heat afforded by spiciness (and in particular by spices) was considered a cure-all for enhancing the process of metabolism.”;
- to make food more tasty. This seems to be the most probable of the reasons, it seems hard to believe that the aristocrats would have tolerated too much spices only to show they can afford it if they had not enjoyed the taste;
- to ornament food. E.g., herbs and spices, such as saffron, sanders, and parsley, were used for colouring food;

¹ See: Soyer 2004: 277.

Both the medieval physician and the cook were familiar with the qualities of the particular herbs and spices they used. Moreover, in the aristocratic household the cook often consulted a doctor in terms of what should be used for particular household members. Not necessarily was this caused by sickness but it was often related to the theory of the four humours.

THE THEORY OF THE FOUR HUMOURS²

In medieval times people believed that everything in the world was made of four elements (each of which had specific qualities): fire (hot and dry), earth (cold and dry), air (hot and moist) and water (cold and moist). They might have been combined in a variety of ways, creating the humour (or temperament). The humours, which were considered to be in the form of fluids which flowed in everyone's body, were: choler (yellow bile), melancholy (black bile), blood and phlegm. Everything was considered perfect as long as they were kept in balance. But unfortunately, they were deemed to be combined in different proportions, giving people a different 'complexion', for instance: a choleric person was hot tempered and aggressive; a melancholic person sullen and gloomy. Additionally, everything people ate also had a certain complexion, e.g., fish were cold and moist (since they live in water), vegetables come from the earth, so they were cold and dry, etc.

The cook was supposed to choose dishes in such a way as to balance the eater's condition, as well as to modify the dish in such a way (i.e., to choose such ingredients) as to make the dish of an appropriate nature; this might have been achieved also by adding sauce or seasoning in such a way as to influence the main ingredient of the dish. For instance, adding pepper, which was hot and dry, to fish, which was cold and moist, would complement the qualities of the latter. Apart from particular ingredients, also the way of cooking could have affected the nature of a dish, e.g., frying was good for moist dishes, stewing or simmering for dry ones.

Thus, the choice of particular herbs and spices was often determined by the desired effect they could have had on the eater. For instance, sugar was very often used to increase potency.

THE VARIETY OF MEDIEVAL HERBS AND SPICES

When it comes to taste, medieval cooking involved three main tastes: sweet, sour and pungent. The sweet taste was usually obtained with sugar or honey

² Based on Henisch (2009: 149-151).

(which was a cheaper substitute for sugar), the sour – with vinegar and verjuice³, and the pungent – often achieved by using vegetables of the onion tribe, but also ginger, mustard, etc. Very often opposing flavours were mixed, such as bitter and sweet, e.g., we find mixtures of vinegar and sugar or other sweet ingredients such as raisins or currants, e.g.:

- (1) fry hem [fish] in oyle de oliue; & syþnym vineger & þe þredde perty of sugur & myn-cyd onions smal (...)

(DS_60)

With time, dishes became even sweeter and spicier. The medieval dishes were much spicier than today. The amount of spices added to particular dishes is very often disputed, mainly due to the fact that the recipes are very poor when it comes to any measurements. However, as little as we know about the exact amounts, a quick look at the medieval recipes is enough to say that herbs and spices were definitely used in a great variety, for both foods (see for instance the recipe for a baked custard of eggs and herbs in butter in (2)) and drinks (see for instance the recipe for ‘ypocras’, a sweet, spiced wine, in (3)).

- (2) Take persel, myntes, sauerey & sauge, tansy, veruayn, clarry, rewe, ditayn, fenel, south-renwode; hewe hem & grinde hem smale. (...)

(FC_180)

- (3) Troy vnces de canell & iii vnces de gyngeuer; spikenard de Spayn, le pays dun denerer; garyngale, clowes gylofre, poeure long, noie³ mygade³, ma3io3ame, cardemonii, de chescun i quarter donce; grayne de paradys, flour de queynel, de chescun dm. vnce; de toutes soit fait powdour &c.

(FC_199)

The range of various spices added to medieval food was enormous, to name a few: ginger, cinnamon, cloves, the grains of paradise (seeds of a gingery flavour), various types of pepper (long, black, white), mace, spikenard, saffron, galangale, nutmeg, cumin, sugar⁴, etc. Probably the most expensive, but at the same time one of the most popular spices, which was also used as a colourant, giving a reddish yellow colour to foods, was saffron (cf. for instance Hammond 2005).

Due to the cost of the imported spices, Medieval herb gardens were a much cheaper way of producing aromatics. “Medieval herb gardens were therefore planted with as many of them as could be persuaded to grow in Britain” (Wilson 1991: 288). Many of them were introduced already by the Romans, who were dissatisfied with the native herbs available in Britain. Among the herbs cultivated in Britain, there were: mustard seed, dill, fennel, coriander, peony, aniseed, caraway, liquorice, gromwell (borage), celery, briar, clary, avens, sage, cress, mallow, net-

³ Verjuice, from Fr. ‘green juice’, “is an acid liquid obtained from crab apples, sour grapes, and other unripe fruit” (Davidson 2006: 828).

⁴ Sugar was considered a spice in the Middle Ages.

tles, mint, primrose, thyme, violet, opium poppy, parsley, etc. (Wilson 1991, Moffett 2006). Parsley was probably the most popular herb across medieval Europe, used especially for herb omelettes, green sauces, etc. but also for ornaments (Adamson 2004). Brears (2008: 259) reports that herbs were especially popular for making various pottages made of mixed green herbs. They were usually prepared by parboiling, draining, chopping and then simmering in some liquid, and thus, the strongest tastes were soothed. We also find recipes for salads, e.g., (4).

- (4) Take persel, sawge, grene garlec, chibolles, oynouns, leek, borage, myntes, porrettes, fenel, and toun cressis, rew, rosemarye, purslarye; laue and waische hem clene. Pike hem. Pluk hem small wiþ þyn honde and myng hem wel with rawe oile; lay on vyneger and salt, and serue it forth.

(FC_78)

Even though hardly any amounts are directly stated in the recipes, the medieval cook must have been aware of the fact that too much spice of various kinds may do more harm than good, and so they had to be added with reason and care at their own discretion:

- (5) And if þou seest that hit hath to litull of the vinegre, or salt, or saffron, caste thereto more, after thi discrecion;

(BK_94)

Hardly ever were herbs and spices used separately, since most recipes call for their mixtures. As Scully (2005) suggests, they might have been prepared ahead of time by chopping or grinding in a mortar and stored in leather pouches. For an example of how to make such a mixture, see (6).

- (6) To mak blawnce pouder. Tak a fair morter and make it hote on þe fyre, no3t ouer hote; and make þi pestell hote in þe same manere, but loke it be clene. And put in þi morter a half lb. suger and ii unc gynger, wele paryd, and stampe euermore smertyn wyth þi pestell till it begynne to flye leke mele. And whan it begynnys so to flye, stampe it no more but euermore grynde it wyth 3oure pestell be þe bothum, and whan 3e will wyte whan it is now take þerof a lytell on 3oure tounge, & if it krase betwyxx 3oure tethe þan it is no3t inow, and whan it crase no3t þan it is inow.

(GK_16)

The mixtures might have also been bought ready-made. Some of the examples of such ‘universal mixtures’ are:

- *powdour douce*, i.e., duke’s powder, which consists of cinnamon, sugar, cloves, nutmeg and ginger⁵;
- *powdour fort* (powder fort), which consists mainly of hot spices, such as ginger and pepper, but also of cinnamon, cloves, cubeb, and the grains of paradise;

⁵ The amounts and ingredients might have differed depending on the cook, budget, time and region.

- blank powder, made mainly of sugar and white ginger, sometimes also cinnamon;
- good powder (no instructions for its preparation were found);
- *powdour merchant* (no instructions for its preparation were found).

The first three mixtures were the most popular ones (Wilson 1991: 284). Very often the type of mixture was not specified, the recipes advise to add ‘powders’, and we may suppose that it was the cook’s choice which herbs and spices to use.

THE CORPUS

The present study has been based on three culinary collections from the 14th and 15th centuries, i.e.,

- Hieatt and Butler (1985), which contains 431 recipes (mostly from the 14th c.);
- Austin (2000), with 496 recipes from the 15th c.;
- Hieatt (2008), with 357 recipes (mostly from the 15th c.).

For a detailed list of collections and editions, the number of recipes and dates of the recipes, see the Appendix.

The medieval recipes differed from what we nowadays know as ‘a culinary recipe’. They were much more general in terms of their instructions, especially when it comes to specifying the quantities, temperatures or times. They rather resemble lists of ingredients which should be added in a particular order than detailed instructions guiding the cook step by step on how to prepare a particular dish. This was reflected among others in their length. However, the character of recipes changed with time. The later a recipe, the more detailed it was. Hieatt and Butler (1985: 9) explain the change of recipes over time in such a way: “[a]s these recipes were passed down through succeeding generations, however, there was a tendency to spell out procedures at greater and greater length and to add and/or vary ingredients.”

The analyzed material contains recipes from the 14th and the 15th c. The two corpora differ not only in terms of the length of their recipes but also in their number. The later period was much richer in the available recipes, which has been reflected in the analyzed material. Thus, 431 recipes from the 14th c. and almost twice as many, i.e., 853, from the later century will be analyzed. In order to make the two samples comparable, apart from the absolute frequencies, relative normalized frequencies will be given (per 1,000 words). For details of the recipes see the Appendix.

How popular herbs and spices were, can be seen in the number of recipes which call for them. In the 14th c. out of 431 recipes analyzed, only 29 do not mention any herbs or spices, i.e., only 6.7% of the recipes. Similarly in the 15th c.,

out of 853 recipes, only 57 contain no herbs or spices (i.e., 6.7 %). What is more, the fact that some recipes do not mention any herbs or spices does not mean that the dishes did not contain them. Sometimes one recipe refers to another in terms of spicing or sauce, see for instance the recipe for ‘roasted heron’ under (7), which instead of enumerating spices which should be used, refers to a similar recipe for ‘roasted crane’, in which the spices to be added are ginger, vinegar and mustard.

- (7) Take a heron; (...) And serue him in al poyntes as a crane, (...) and sause him as þe Crane;

(BK_49)

GENERAL TERMS

Before discussing the terminology for various herbs and spices, the general terms found in the corpus should be briefly analyzed. To begin with, the distinction between the two should be explained. Redgrove (1933) differentiates between *spices* and *herbs* by saying that the former are the dried parts of aromatic plants, whilst the latter are the herbaceous parts of the plants. Davidson (2006: 380) suggests that herbs can be used both in dried and fresh form, whilst spices are always dried. Redgrove also defines *condiments* as spices or other flavourings added to food at the table. This term does not occur in the analyzed material, even though the *OED* states it was already in use in the 15th c. and defines them as “anything of pronounced flavour used to season or give relish to food, or to stimulate the appetite” (*OED*: s.v. *condiment*, n.). The general terms found in the analyzed material are as follows:

- a) *herb*: f. OF *erbe*, 13th c.; “a plant of which the stem does not become woody and persistent, but remains more or less soft and succulent, and dies down to the ground after flowering” / “applied to plants of which the leaves, or stem and leaves, are used for food or medicine, or in some way for their scent or flavor” (*OED*: s.v. *herb*, n.);
- b) *spice*: f. OF *espice*, 13th c.; “one or other of various strongly flavoured or aromatic substances of vegetable origin, obtained from tropical plants, commonly used as condiments or employment for other purposes on account of their fragrance and preservative qualities” (*OED*: s.v. *spice*, n.);
- c) *spicery*: f. OF *espicerie*, 13th c.; “spices” (collectively), (*OED*: s.v. *spicery*, n.);
- d) *wort*: f. OE *wyrt* “root, plant”; “a plant, herb, or vegetable, used for food or medicine; often pot-herb” (*OED*: s.v. *wort* n¹.). The term stopped being used commonly after the middle of the 17th c., in the Present Day English it is considered archaic, but it has been retained in a number of plant names, e.g., *colewort*, *liverwort*, etc.;

- e) *powders*: f. AN *pudre*, *podre*, *poudre*, *poudere*, *poure*, *puldre*, and OF *poldre* *puldre*, *pulre*, 14th c.; “a preparation used in food or cooking as a seasoning, flavouring, colouring, preservative, etc.; formerly spec. powdered salt, spice, or other condiment, for seasoning or preserving food” (*OED*: *powder*, n¹: 5b).

In the analyzed material we have found 79 general terms in the 14th c. and 103 in the 15th c. material, i.e., 2.7 and 1.4 per 1,000 words in the respective centuries (for details see Table 1). This shows a decrease in the use of the general terms. Additionally, the aforementioned mixtures of herbs and spices were typical of the 14th c. recipes. They are extremely rare in the 15th c. material (see Table 2).

The decrease in the use of the general terms for herbs and spices, as well as the names of mixtures, accounts for the fact that the recipes became more specific in the 15th c., particular herbs and spices were enumerated in the recipes. Additionally, we may conclude that the ready-made mixtures practically stopped being used.

Table 1. The number of occurrences of the general terms (relative normalized frequencies per 1,000 words have been given in brackets).

general terms:	14th c.	15th c.
herbs	18 [0.6]	28 [0.4]
powders ⁶	20 [0.7]	33 [0.5]
spicery	8 [0.3]	20 [0.3]
spices	31 [1]	7 [0.09]
wort	2 [0.07]	15 [0.2]
TOTAL:	79 [2.7]	103 [1.4]

Table 2. The number of occurrences of various mixtures of herbs and spices (relative normalized frequencies per 1,000 words have been given in brackets).

mixtures:	14th c.	15th c.
Duke's powder	32 [1.1]	1 [0.02]
Powder fort	37 [1.3]	–
Blank powder	7 [0.2]	15 [0.2]
Good powders	20 [0.7]	24 [0.3]
Powder merchant	2 [0.07]	2 [0.03]
TOTAL:	98 [3.4]	42 [0.6]

⁶ Only those occurrences of the term *powder(s)* have been counted which referred to herbs or spices in general, records such as *powder pepper* or *duke's powder* have not been taken into account. For these see further.

SPECIFIC TERMS

Altogether we have found 64 types of herbs and spices, i.e., 1,257 tokens, in the 14th c., and 53 types, i.e., 3,468 tokens, in the 15th c. (RNFs/1,000: 43.3 and 47.9 in the respective centuries). The numbers show a drop in the variety of herbs and spices used, but at the same time a rise in their normalized frequency. The most often occurring⁷ terms together with the number of their records have been shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The most frequently used herbs and spices (relative normalized frequencies per 1,000 words have been given in brackets).

Herb/spice:	14th c.	15th c.
salt	176 [6]	488 [6.7]
sugar	169 [5.8]	407 [5.6]
saffron	162 [5.6]	378 [5.2]
ginger	124 [4.3]	392 [5.4]
pepper	72 [2.5]	256 [3.5]
canel	71 [2.4]	234 [3.2]
vinegar	55 [1.9]	209 [2.9]
cloves	49 [1.7]	180 [2.5]
flowers	43 [1.5]	44 [0.6]
galingale	38 [1.3]	50 [0.7]
parsley	27 [0.9]	151 [2.1]
mace	22 [0.8]	140 [1.9]
sage	22 [0.8]	52 [0.7]
gilofre	21 [0.7]	10 [0.1]
cubeb	18 [0.6]	33 [0.5]
sanders	18 [0.6]	82 [1.1]
verjuice	16 [0.5]	60 [0.8]
mustard	3 [0.1]	22 [0.3]

⁷ Terms which occurred 20 times or more at least in one of the analyzed centuries have been presented in the Table.

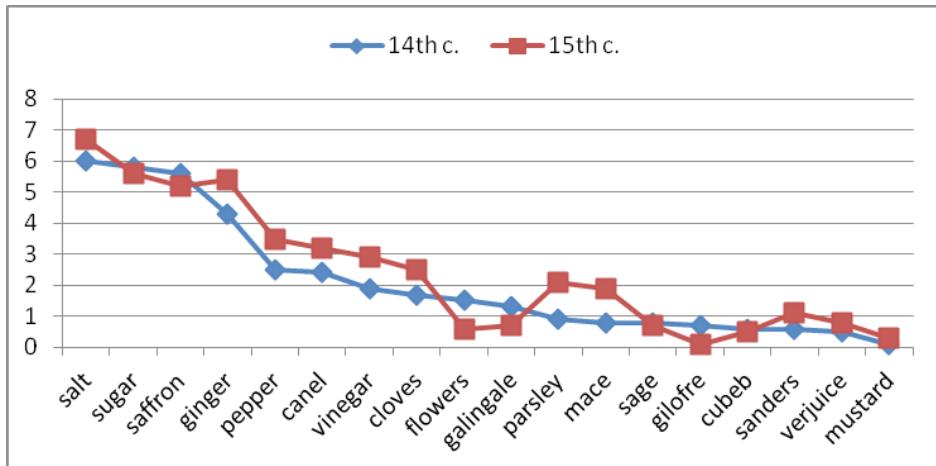


Figure 1. Relative normalized frequency of occurrence of particular lexemes (per 1,000 words).

In the case of the most frequently enumerated herbs and spices, the number of records are similar for both centuries, showing only a slight increase (e.g., salt, ginger, parsley) or decrease (e.g., saffron, galingale), see Figure 1. Additionally, a number of terms were found only in one of the analyzed centuries. For instance, basil, bay leaf, marjoram, and oregano were found only in the 14th c. corpus. In most of such cases, it seems unlikely that the herb or spice was not used in the later period at all. A more probable explanation is that it was simply not mentioned in any of the analyzed recipes. On the other hand, such terms as aloes, betony or thyme appear only in the 15th c. material, which can be accounted for by the fact that most of these terms were introduced into English in the 15th or late 14th c. However, we cannot be sure whether the herbs themselves were known to the 14th c. cook or whether along with the term the ingredient itself was introduced to the medieval kitchen. Sometimes, as in the case of cinnamon, a lexical change can be observed. The term *cinnamon* was introduced into English only in the 15th c. (*OED*) as a synonym of *canel* (present in English from the 13th c.). As a result of a growing popularity of the former, *canel* became obsolete in the 18th c.

Finally, if we compare the most popular medieval herbs and spices to those used most frequently in the Ancient collection of Apicus (cf. Grig, Online), we will find only few similarities, i.e., saffron, ginger, parsley and pepper. There were also a number of herbs and spices used frequently by Apicus but absent from the medieval collections, i.e., dill, celery, capers, shallot, juniper, lovage and sesame.

ETYMOLOGY

Etymologically, the majority of the terms come from French (or Anglo-Norman) or Latin. Sometimes it is not certain whether a word entered English from French or Latin. Only a few terms found in the corpus were native Germanic words. Figure 2 shows the ratio of particular origins of the words analyzed.

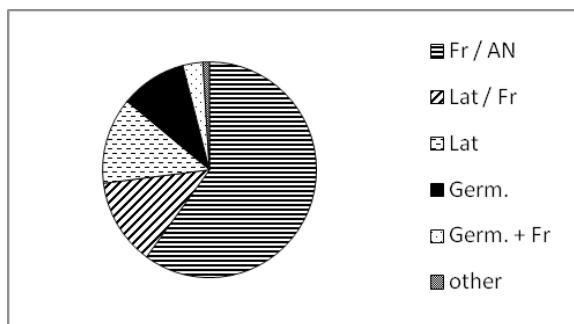


Figure 2. The percentage of etymologies of the analyzed vocabulary.

CONCLUSIONS

The present article has dealt with vocabulary for herbs and spices found in the culinary recipes from the 14th and 15th c. Almost 1,300 recipes were analyzed. Only 86 of them (i.e., 6.7%) did not mention any herbs or spices, which does not necessarily mean that the dish did not contain any such herbs or spices (see example (7) above).

The study has shown that the 15th c. recipes, apart from being longer than those of the 14th c., were much more detailed and more specific. For instance, instead of using general terms (i.e., instead of giving instructions such as ‘add spices and herbs’), particular herbs and spices were enumerated, which resulted in less freedom for the cook. Similarly, hardly any ready-made mixtures of spices were used in the later material (with less than one occurrence per 1,000 words).

In the 15th c. the variety of herbs and spices decreased (fewer types). At the same time, the number of tokens per 1,000 words increased (from 43.3 in the 14th c. to 47.9 in the 15th c.). Thus, their popularity did not lower. The most common herbs and spices from the 14th c. remained frequent in the later period, which proves that it was the minor herbs and spices which disappeared from the 15th c. material (remembering that the number of types decreased in the 15th c.). On the one hand, this could be accounted for by pure chance, since the analyzed recipes differed in the two centuries, but on the other hand, the later recipes were more

detailed and specific, thus it is hardly possible that 23 terms used in the 14th c. (i.e., 1/3 of all the 14th c. terms) were not mentioned at all in the 15th c. material (which contained more and longer recipes). It should also be remembered that 10 new terms were recorded only in the later material, most of them were newly introduced lexemes borrowed from French or Latin (via French).

Etymologically, the majority of vocabulary denoting herbs and spices, used both in the 14th and 15th c., were borrowed from or via French. There is hardly any Germanic element when it comes to the corpus, which proves the great impact that French had on the culinary vocabulary of English.

Finally, comparing the results of the present study with the range of herbs and spices used in the collection of Apicus, one may conclude that only relatively few terms were similarly frequent in both.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF COLLECTIONS AND EDITIONS USED FOR THE RESEARCH

Edition	collection	abbreviation	date¹	Nr of recipes
Austin (2000)	Ashmole	Aus_Ashm	1410	19
	Laud	Aus_Laud	1430	25
	Douce	Aus_Douce	1450	12
	Bake metis	BM	1435	41
	Boke of kokery	BK	1450	182
	Leche viaundez	LV	1435	64
	Pottage diverse	PD	1435	153
Hieatt & Butler (1985)	Forme of Cury	FC	1390	205
	Diversa servisa	DS	1381	92
	Diversa cibaria	DC	1325	63
	Historical menus	Cosin	1397	9
	Utilis coquinario	UC	1395	37
	Goud kokery	GK	1340	2
			1380	7
			1395	9
			1410	1
			1420	1
			1425	1
			1450	3
			1480	1
Hieatt (2008)	Gathering of ME recipes	GR_AshmB	1390	
		GR_Har	1395	2
		GR_Ashm	1410	35
		GR_SI	1420	11
		GR_Whit	1425	6
		GR_Raw	1435	1
		GR_ASC GR_Roy	1445	2
		GR_Rwl GR_Har	1450	85
		GR_TC	1465	7
		GR_WW	1470	19
		GR_SI GR_SA	1480	31
		GR_CUL GR_Pen	1485	111
		GR_TCC GR_Hunt	1490	6
		GR_eMus GR_Hus	1495	36

¹ Dating based on Hieatt (2006).