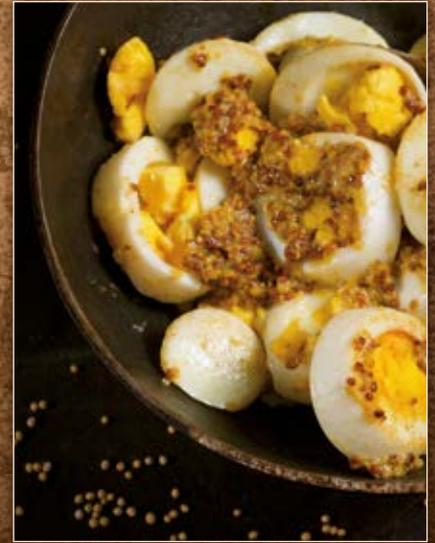


Volker Bach

The Landsknecht Cookbook



Volker Bach
Landsknecht Cookbook
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Landsknecht Foodways

Why this book?

People tend to have a clear idea of Landsknecht soldiers. Aggressive and fiercely masculine in their extravagantly slashed and puffed finery, they were a popular subject of contemporary art. Their image in popular music has helped spread a similar view. Look for them in any number of streaming services, and you will find rousing tunes of battle, of victory or death, male comradeship, and a heroic disdain for soft civilians. Unfortunately—or fortunately, if your interest is serious living history—the traditional view of the Landsknecht is largely detached

from reality. The songs most influential in creating it were mostly written in the early twentieth century, under the impression of the First World War. When Albert Meinhardt published a collection of documented Landsknecht songs from sixteenth-century sources in 1979, they painted a very different picture. The joys and misfortunes of daily life were the most common focus in these tunes. They mention battle and loot, but also cold, hunger, gnawing poverty, and again and again, food and drink: cool wine, roast chickens, pork, eggs, bacon soup,



and the disparaged peasant fare that people joined the Landsknechts to avoid. As one popular ditty had it:

*(In service) with the farmer, I must thresh and eat sour milk
With the king, I carry heavy bottles, with the farmer
coarse clothing.*

This may come as a surprise to some readers, but the sources clearly show that Landsknechts enjoyed good eating. 'A hard bed for good food' (*Hart ligen für gute Speiß*) is used to describe their life in the *Lied von der Kriegsleut Orden* (Meinhardt 9), and a Swiss song celebrating their victory at Dornach in 1499 mocks the Landsknecht enemy for paying more attention to cooking food than posting sentries. The military writer Leonhart Fronsperger (not to be confused with the general Georg von Frundsberg) advises commanders to pay particular attention to adequate supplies. Poorly fed Landsknechts were even more prone to mutiny than usual (Fronsperger CLVII v). This book will look at the Landsknecht soldiers and their world, especially at the food they hoped to earn through their hard and dangerous service.

Much ink has been spilled over the question of what exactly a Landsknecht was and was not. The fine details do not matter much for our purposes. The word was used at the time to describe German (not Swiss) foot soldiers who served for pay on a monthly basis, not as retainers to a lord or city government. Their pay was high, but Landsknecht service was not a stable job. Many returned to civilian employment when 'the war had a hole' and mercenaries were not required. Others spent these periods, especially in winter, begging or stealing. When the recruiters called once again for a muster, Landsknechts showed up more or less fully equipped to join the colours.

More than this, 'Landsknecht' was a group identification. Being a Landsknecht made you part of a world defined by its own rituals, traditions, and laws, not unlike that of sailors. This world was male-dominated (though far from exclusively male) and violent, but it was not anarchic. Landsknecht soldiers were judged in their own courts, and they elected comrades to represent their interests with the authorities. They were well known for being mutinous and not above downing tools ahead of crucial engagements in order to negotiate better pay. The adjective *landsknechtisch* described their attitude to life: their strong ego and touchy pride, the pleasure they took in showing off and taking risks, and a tendency towards excess in clothing, alcohol, and food. The last makes them as interesting a culinary subject as a sartorial one.

This book's focus on Landsknechts does not mean that it deals only with culinary habits exclusive to them. They were always part of a larger world, had families, homes, and civilian occupations whose habits they shared. By and large, the foodways of sixteenth-century Germany were also theirs, and in order to reconstruct what Landsknechts ate, we must also understand their social, cultural, and natural environment. It was one they shared with many others, from princely retainers whose generous food and clothing allowances reflected the status of their employers to a shifting population of vagrants who braved the dangers of the open road alongside them, and, of course, everyone else who was part of their armies: horsemen, gunners, sutlers, army wives, and the despised *Schaufelbauern* recruited to work as sappers. The conditions under which they lived together shaped the culinary habits of the soldiery.

The Landsknecht Army

Military writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have left us many detailed descriptions of the elaborate command structures governing Landsknecht armies. It is uncertain to what extent these reflect wishful thinking rather than reality. Yet, even allowing for a degree of exaggeration, it is clear that an army of such size needed a great deal of organisation. Technically, Landsknechts were independent contractors who provided their own arms and were individually responsible for their own supplies, but the fact that thousands or tens of thousands of them were assembled in one place made a systematic approach to supply management necessary.

Armed with pikes, halberds, arquebuses, and crossbows, the Landsknechts were always only part of an army composed of infantry, cavalry, and artillery. As a body, they served under an *Obrist* who had hired them and paid their wages. The *Obrist* in turn was under contract to the belligerent prince and received monthly payments for the maintenance of his forces. He was served by a staff of senior officers: the *Schultheiß* (the word literally means a magistrate) adjudicating dispute and administering justice, the *Profoss* (provost) who maintained order in camp, and the *Trosswaibel* or *Hurenwaibel* (sergeant of the train or sergeant of whores) in charge of the civilian supply train. Larger armies also had further officers such as *Quartiermeister* and *Proviandmeister* in charge of quartering and supplies. The Landsknecht force itself

was divided into *Fähnlein*, units of several hundred men under a *Hauptmann*. All these officers received generous stipends and pay for a personal retinue that invariably included a personal cook.

Within their *Fähnlein*, the Landsknechts were organised in *Rotten*, units of six to ten men about whose workings we know regrettably little. They were formed and administered independently by the men who joined them and elected their leader, the *Rottmeister*. A *Rotte* was quartered together, sometimes shared sumpter horses or wagons for their baggage, and may even have managed its own food supply jointly. Our sources are largely silent on such arrangements, similar to messes among sailors and soldiers in later armies, but they surely would have made sense. We also know that in garrisons, some rations were issued to the *Rotte*, not the individual soldier.

The Landsknecht soldiers of each *Fähnlein* also elected a *Gemeinwaibel* to represent their interests vis-à-vis the *Hauptmann* and his right hand man, the *Feldwaibel* (a word that has survived to mean a sergeant in the German military today). Such a level of democratic participation and self-organisation in the military is rarely found in any other period of history.

A Landsknecht army never consisted of soldiers alone. To function, it required an extensive civilian supply

Of Tableless Table Manners



Table manners are not the first thing that comes to mind when we envision a Landsknecht eating, and this particular cliché is probably accurate. The age of Luther, as it is known in Germany, has acquired a deeply questionable reputation for poor conduct. The great reformer himself is popularly—and wrongly—quoted today as having said, ‘Why are you not belching and farting, did you not enjoy the meal?’. In reality, a multitude of printed books and broadsheets on the subject suggests that interest in the subject was lively at the time. The rules as such did not differ substantially from those enshrined in late medieval texts. Diners were to wash their hands before sitting down to eat. They were not to annoy their companions by taking up undue space on often tightly packed benches, refrain from taking more than their share of particularly tempting dishes, and not do anything felt to be disgusting. People ate with knives, spoons, and their fingers, a practice that need neither be unappealing nor unhygienic. The medieval custom of sharing cups and plates was increasingly falling into abeyance. A meal at which these rules were followed competently would strike us as unusual, but not off-putting, let alone comically entertaining.

It is very unlikely that Landsknechts followed these rules, though. Nobody had the authority and power to force them, and they had nothing to gain by doing so. Interest in table manners was strongest among the urban burgher class who needed to distinguish themselves from the great unwashed. By contrast, foreign visitors wrote shocked reports of the table

manners the German nobility displayed. Noblemen drank themselves into a stupor, smashed tableware, and spat cherry pits at each other—because they could. Who would stop them? This, of course, is exactly the attitude that *landsknechtisch* exemplifies. These were proud and recalcitrant men fond of display and extravagant performance. Manners that required self-control in order to maintain quiet within a group and affirm hierarchies do not sit well with this character. Our sources agree that quarrelling, brawling, and even armed confrontations were a part of life in Landsknecht armies. An excessive regard for the sensitivities of others cannot have been common in a violent, masculine subculture where status had to be displayed and honour defended at all cost.

Further, many traditional rules of etiquette simply did not apply. Whether in camps or quarters, Landsknechts rarely ate at shared tables. The opportunity to wash their hands was curtailed by the lack of clean water, and it is unlikely that there was more than the minimum of tableware and cutlery. The finer points of handling serving bowls, saucers, voiders, and manchet bread were a moot point under these circumstances. In addition, the ceremony of dining assumed that there was a host or lord who provided the food and headed the table. Soldiers who purchased their portions from *Sudler* cooks or pooled their resources to cook ate as equals. They owed thanks for their food only to God and themselves. Very likely there was a clear hierarchy in relation to wives, camp followers, and servant boys, but we do not know any details about how it was expressed.

CHEESE SOUP

Cheese Soup

Soup—*Suppe*—was a familiar dish on every table and often the main food of the poor. The term covered more-or-less liquid foods served with bread. Soups could range from delicately spiced almond milk served over sugared white toast to simple vegetable soups served with brown bread from stale loaves soaked to make them palatable. Our sources often mention cheese soup as a hearty, warming meal. There are few recipes for many common dishes, but the *Klosterkochbuch* gives a detailed account of how it was made. Cheese is boiled in broth and beaten

into the liquid or passed through a cloth to produce a creamy, viscous consistency.

Pass out cheeses, wash them clean in pure warm water, cut them up small, put them into a pot and set them by the fire with water. Throw in peeled onions, green parsley, the herb and root, and sage leaves. Let that boil well and take care that it does not burn. When it is boiled, pass it through a sieve or cloth and put it back into a clean pot. Make it fat with butter, strew whole caraway on it, salt it, and serve it.

(Klosterkochbuch, IV.33)

30 MINUTES

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4

150 g / 5 oz rich cheese
(e.g., Gouda or Cheddar)
1 parsley root
2 tablespoons chopped parsley
Fresh sage
1 L / 4 cups broth
Salt
Caraway

The cheese can be chosen according to taste. Rich, mature cheeses such as middle-aged Gouda, Cheddar, or Emmental are especially suitable. Processed cheese makes the cooking easier, but is obviously not historically accurate.

Cut the cheese into small pieces or coarsely grind it. Slice the parsley root thinly. Chop the parsley and sage. Bring the broth to a boil and cook the parsley root until soft. Then stir in the parsley and sage and add the cheese. Let everything simmer together for a few minutes, stirring constantly, until the cheese is melted. Pass the soup through a food mill or purée it with an immersion blender. Salt to taste and serve hot, strewn with caraway seeds and accompanied by bread.



VENISON IN PEPPER SAUCE

Wildpfeffer

Meat was often served 'in a Pfeffer' i.e., a pepper sauce, a familiar process rarely described in detail. This unusually precise recipe from Sabina Welser is for venison, but poultry or rabbit was also prepared this way.

To cook venison in a pepper sauce

Boil fresh venison in two parts of water and one part of wine. When it is cooked, cut it in pieces, lay it in a pepper sauce and let it boil in that for a while. Make

the sauce thus: Take rye bread, cut off the hard crust and cut the bread in pieces as thick as a finger and as wide as the loaf itself is. Toast those over a fire until both ends begin turning black. Then lay them in cold water, do not leave it in there long. Then place it in a cauldron, add all the broth in which the venison was boiled, and pass that through a cloth. Chop onions and bacon very small, fry it thoroughly together, and do not add too little to the pepper sauce. Season it well, let it boil down together and add vinegar, thus you have a good pepper sauce.

(Sabina Welser, #4)

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4

750 g / 1½ lbs meat in chunks (e.g., stewing venison)

250 ml / 1 cup wine

Water

2 thick slices dark rye bread, crust removed

100 g / 4 oz bacon

2 onions

Salt

Pepper and other spices as desired

Vinegar

1 HOUR OR MORE

Place the meat in a pot, pour in the wine and add water until covered. Gently simmer until the meat is tender. Depending on the type of meat used, the time needed can vary.

Toast the bread and briefly soak it in cold water. Finely dice the bacon and onions.

Remove the meat from the broth and reserve. Quickly sauté the bacon and onions in a saucepan and add the broth. Then add the bread slices, briefly bring everything to a boil, and purée the sauce. Season to taste with salt, pepper, and vinegar. Similar recipes also mention ginger, saffron, nutmeg, and mace. Add the meat, return to a simmer, and serve hot.



LEEKs IN MILK

Leeks in Milk

Leeks were eaten frequently, and we have several recipes combining them with almond milk. One late medieval recipe collection from Munich includes a similar recipe using plain milk which very likely was by far more common.

Take leeks, greens, and cabbage. Cut them the length of a digit and sauté them in fat. Add water and bring it to a boil. Place it in a sieve, the water drains off. Then lay it in a pot and pour in milk that was passed through a cloth with white bread, and add fat.

(Staatsbibliothek München 384 I, #14)

INGREDIENTS

SIDE DISH FOR 4

50 g dry white bread or breadcrumbs / $\frac{3}{4}$ cup
if cubed bread, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup if breadcrumbs

500 ml / 2 cups milk

1 kg / 2 lbs leeks (mixed with
greens if desired)

Butter

Water

Salt

45 MINUTES

Soak the bread in the milk and purée. Wash the leeks, remove the green parts and slice the white part into 2 cm rounds. Melt a dab of butter in a pot, briefly sauté the leeks and fill up with lightly salted water until just covered. Simmer for 10 minutes, then pour off the water and add the milk. Simmer for a further 15–20 minutes, stirring regularly. The leeks fall apart and the milk reduces to a creamy consistency. Salt to taste.

This goes very well with chicken or pork.





MUSTARD

Mustard

Mustard was an inexpensive, readily available, and popular condiment. The simplest preparation is not detailed anywhere and only briefly mentioned by Marx Rumpolt:

Brown mustard made with clear vinegar is also good.

(Rumpolt, p. CLX r)

This was the mustard that Landsknechts were familiar with and that they likely could buy in camp markets sometimes. Mustard pots belonged in every properly stocked pantry. However, many recipe books also include a sweet honey mustard with various spices. One late fifteenth-century manuscript even includes an instant version:

For a good mustard, take mustard seed, dry it cleanly and grind it very finely in a mortar. Then pass it through a fine cloth. Take cinnamon flower and mix it with the mustard, and then stir it with honey so that it becomes (firm) like wax. And if you wish to eat of it, take a little of the same and grind it with wine, then you have good mustard.

(Staatsbibliothek München Cgm 784 I, #12)

Sabina Welser also includes a recipe for a mustard made with pear electuary to be served with stockfish. There were few limits to luxury.

INGREDIENTS

FOR STORAGE

- 100 g / ½ cup firm honey
- 50 g / ½ cup mustard flour
- Ground cinnamon flower buds or cinnamon
- White wine

10 MINUTES PREPARATION, 2 MINUTES MIXING

Warm the honey in a double boiler until it liquefies. Stir in the mustard flour and season with cinnamon flower to taste. If cinnamon flower is not available, plain cinnamon will do as well. Pour into a glass jar and cool.

To serve, mix one tablespoon of the mixture with a little white wine in a small bowl until a thick liquid results. Let the mustard stand for some time before serving. It is very potent by modern standards.



KRAPFEN

Krapfen

Krapfen referred to all kinds of filled dough dumplings. Most were fried. Fillings could vary widely, and several recipes for different doughs survive. Various sources mention honey and wine, beer, eggs, or plain water paste. Marx Rumpolt uses the same rich yeast dough also used for a cake and suggests cherry sauce (see p. 119) as a filling:

Make a dough with milk, eggs, and fine white flour. Add a little beer yeast to it and make a good dough that is not too stiff, and do not oversalt it. Set it in a warm place so that it rises well. [...]

Take such a dough and roll it out. Wrap cherry sauce in it, cut it off with a pastry wheel, throw it on butter, fry it, and serve it warm. Strew it with white sugar, thus they are good Krapfen of cherry sauce. You can make such Krapfen of all kinds of sauce.

(Rumpolt, p. CLXVIII v)

KRAPFEN DOUGH

2 HOURS

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4

1 cube of fresh yeast (or 2
teaspoons active dry yeast)

150 ml / ½-¾ cup milk

350 g / 2¾ cups all-purpose or
pastry flour

2 eggs

Extra flour to work the dough

Dissolve the yeast in the lukewarm milk and leave to develop for 10 minutes. Work into an elastic dough with the flour and eggs. Knead well, cover, and leave to rise in a warm place for 45 minutes.

Roll out the dough on a floured work surface and cut in any shape you wish. Most *Krapfen* were likely square or circular, but Anna Wecker also describes artistically decorated animal and flower shapes. Place one spoonful of filling in the centre of each *Krapfen*. Wet the edges with water or beaten egg. Fold over and press shut carefully. Allow them to rise again for 10 minutes on a floured surface, taking care that the dough does not stick, otherwise it will tear open on lifting them. Fry in hot fat for 5–7 minutes.

Leavened *Krapfen* can also be baked in an oven, and this was done at the time. Brush them with beaten egg yolk and bake at 180°C / 350°F for 20 minutes.

THE LANDSKNECHT COOKBOOK

Swaggering in their extravagant finery, Landsknecht soldiers are the stereotypical example of daring and rebelliousness, feared and admired in equal measure. Their contemporaries knew them as insatiable drinkers and demanding eaters. Officers were terrified of their anger when food ran short. Surviving songs tell us how they suffered hunger and cold and dreamed of roast chickens and cool wine. But what was actually on their plates?

This book tracks down the facts behind the legend. How were Landsknecht armies supplied? What foods did they know and how did they cook them? Based on a wide range of original sources from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the book presents over 50 recipes for the foods that fed the Landsknechts in good and in lean times. Each recipe includes a translation of the original source text and a tested adaptation for the modern kitchen.



Author bio

Volker Bach studied History in Hamburg and Dublin. He has been active in the Living History scene for over twenty years and is especially fascinated by culinary history. Alongside his work as a language teacher and translator, he publishes on the history of German food and teaches historic cookery classes. His recipe translations and experiments can be found at www.culina-vetus.de.

