

Viking Food, Diet, and Nutrition

Source: William R. Short, *Hurstwic website*

Viking food was based upon and influenced by the land upon which they lived. The vast majority of Norse people lived on small farms. However, the nature of these settlements varied widely from one region to another. In prosperous regions, farms tended to cluster into small villages or hamlets. In less prosperous areas, individual farms were well separated. In Iceland, farms were widely separated, and nothing like villages existed.

Typical farm settlements took the form of a central cluster of buildings enclosed by fences. Outside the fenced areas were the fields used for cultivation or grazing. Each homestead typically consisted of a longhouse and multiple outbuildings.



In general, farm families needed to be self-sufficient. With the exception of some luxury items, and some raw materials, everything needed for farm life was typically grown or manufactured on the farm. Wooden tools were made as needed. Every farm had to have a forge of some kind in order to be able to re-sharpen cutting tools such as scythes; whetting alone was insufficient for keeping frequently used tools sharp. Most large farms had well equipped forges for working iron. Farmers were expected to be competent carpenters and blacksmiths.

Farms throughout the Norse lands were isolated. Farm life in the Viking age was a constant struggle against starvation, cold, and disease. Most people expected to and did work their entire waking hours.

Since there was nothing like a police force to maintain the peace, every farmer had to be prepared to defend his farm and property. A sense of solidarity was expected on a farm, between the farmer and his wife, on one hand, and the servants and farm hands on the other. In exchange for obedience and support, the farmer provided for defense and safety of his entourage. In addition, a farmer would look for support and assistance from people outside the farm: from family members; his chieftain; his neighbors; and others with whom he had made reciprocal arrangements for mutual help and protection.

What Did They Eat?

There is insufficient evidence to determine what Viking-age people ate and how their food was prepared. While the raw materials and the cooking utensils are found in archaeological studies, the ways in which foodstuffs were combined, prepared, and presented are largely unknown. In addition, diet probably varied quite a bit across the Norse lands, depending on climate and available resources.

The best available guess is that Norse people primarily ate agricultural products raised on their own farms: meat from cattle, sheep, horses, pigs, goats, and poultry; cereals, such as barley, rye, oats, and (rarely) wheat; dairy produce, such as milk from cows, sheep, or goats, as well as cheese and butter; vegetables, such as peas, beans, cabbage, onions, and an assortment of herbs;

and wild fruits, such as apples, pears, cherries, and berries. Many foods commonly consumed today were unknown, such as corn (maize), potatoes, and sugar; the only available sweetener was wild honey.

A Modern Recipe For Viking-era Flat Bread

Created and prepared by William R. Short

We routinely make bread at our Viking feasts that is delicious and always well received by guests. We don't really know what sort of bread Viking families made and ate, but this recipe is consistent with the ingredients and techniques that would have been available to Viking era households.

I've modified the recipe several times to improve it. Here is the modified recipe, with American units of measurement, along with metric units. I have not tested the metric version, so please use with caution:

7 cups (900 g) of flour. I use a mixture of wheat, barley, oat, and rye flours. Old-style stone-ground flour is better than modern commercial flour.

3 cups (750 ml) of buttermilk

1 egg

1 dash of salt

¼ to ½ cup (60-100 ml) of honey

½ to 1 cup (100 g) nuts, such as chopped walnuts

Mix and knead the ingredients thoroughly. I use an electric mixer with a dough hook to knead the dough. The dough is thick, moist, and sticky. Caution: a regular, home electric mixer isn't up to the task, unless you make small batches.

Using your hands covered with flour, form the dough into small balls, about 2-3 inches in diameter (5-8 cm). At this point, the dough can be refrigerated or frozen until it is needed.

To bake, press the balls flat, about ½ inch thick (1 cm), and bake on a flat pan greased with butter over the fire. Turn the bread once, to cook on both sides.

When done, the bread is light brown and sounds hollow when tapped, about 2-3 minutes on each side. Eat the bread warm.



Sea birds and their eggs were also a part of the Norse diet. Norsemen harvested both the eggs and the birds from the cliffs on which the birds nested by swinging down from the top of the cliff on ropes. There is, however, no evidence of domesticated birds.

To these foods would be added whatever could be hunted, captured, or gathered. Along coastal regions, and near rivers and lakes, fish were a staple part of the diet. Fish were caught with hook and line from small boats. On lakes or streams, nets were used as well. It's likely that fish was the

most important food wherever there was a concentration of people, such as in trading towns, or at the annual community assembly.

Wild animals were hunted for food, using either spears, or bow and arrow. These include deer, bear, boar, and elk, as well as smaller game such as rabbits. In the far north, seals and walrus were hunted, but not just for the meat. The skins were especially valuable.



Some wild plants were probably consumed because of the medicinal qualities they were known to possess. For instance, the leaves of scurvy-grass were known to help prevent one's teeth from falling out, one of the symptoms of scurvy (vitamin C deficiency). The plant is mentioned in the stories, but its medicinal properties are not, making me wonder if it wasn't until later in the medieval period that the beneficial properties became known. The stories do suggest that scurvy was known to sailors in the Viking age.

----- QUESTIONS -----

- _____ Based on the context clues, what is the definition for **scurvy**:
A. rarely B. maize C. diet D. vitamin C deficiency
- _____ What claim does the author make in this article?
A. We have no idea what Vikings ate and can't even make a good guess at it.
B. We have tremendous evidence that clearly shows what Vikings ate.
C. We don't have enough evidence to be sure, but we can make a pretty good guess as to what Vikings ate.
- _____ How do we know the author's research is sufficient to support the claim?
A. The reasoning behind the claim is sound and supported by accurate historical and cultural data
B. The reasoning behind the claim is proven by overwhelming archaeological evidence
C. The reasoning behind the claim is false because modern-day Vikings don't eat these same foods
- _____ Based on the claim and arguments of the research, which of the following foods would you expect that Vikings **might** have eaten?
A. buffalo wings B. Big Mac C. baked chicken D. dried or smoked fish
- _____ Identify the word in bold italics in the sentence below:
Fish were a staple **part** of the diet.
A. predicate descriptive B. predicate nominative C. predicate adjective
- _____ Identify the word in bold italics in the sentence below:
The skins were especially **valuable**.
A. predicate adjective B. predicate descriptive C. predicate nominative
- _____ What is one important writing component that is missing in this essay?
A. There is no clear introduction to the essay.
B. There is no concluding statement or section to wrap up the information presented.
C. The essay is not organized so the reader can easily follow the flow of ideas.
8. What is the Author's Purpose in writing this article?

