



The Early Modern Elite British Kitchen
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Early modern elite British kitchens, provisioned by global trade networks, were spaces for both food and medicine. Kitchen workers in elite households—some paid, some coerced, and some forced to labor—created gastronomic delights that were intended to satiate hunger and pleasure the senses. But the many concoctions, comfits, and beverages prepared in these spaces also promised good health. The Folger’s collection of recipe books contains formulas for providing relief from a variety of medical conditions, ranging from common flu and diarrhea to preventing miscarriages.

The elite people who supervised these kitchens—many of whom were women—as well as the servants, laborers, and cooks who were responsible for executing the work inside of them, were proficient in handling metal and mineral produce right alongside meat, dairy, fruits, and vegetables. Early modern British kitchens were stocked with gold beaten into thin leaves; bezoar stones taken from goat’s stomachs; precious minerals such as pearls, amber, and coral; and fragrant substances like musk and ambergris. These metal- and mineral-based ingredients were used in ways both culinary and medical: they were thought to impart flavor to dishes and they were imagined to augment the efficacy of cures. Kitchen laborers also understood that their places of work were for the care of humans as well as animals: several Folger recipe books contain instructions for restoring sick animals to health, such as curing horses of “glanders,” a kind of equine infection. As we think about early modern British kitchens, we should imagine that they were akin to scientific laboratories: here, medical and food recipes intermingled, herbs and metals occupied the same pride of place, knowledge systems were produced, and potions for managing all kinds of bodies were concocted.

All sources consulted are from the Folger Shakespeare Library, and include V.b.12; V.a.452; V.b.366; W.b.456; and V.a.389.