A Medieval Food List from the Monastery of Cluny

The rule of Saint Benedict, handed down by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century, places a premium on silence and proscribes speaking at various times, including during meals. If a monk should need to communicate while dining in the refectory, Benedict enjoins him to do so with a sound other than a voice. In keeping with the spirit of this mandate, the monks of Cluny, an extremely wealthy and powerful monastery in southern Burgundy, placed a premium on silence from a very early date. A biography of Abbot Odo (962–1049) relates that when Vikings captured a group of Cluniacs, one of them attempted, without success, to force the clerics to break their vow and speak. According to this account, divine favor for the monks’ steadfast observance was displayed when their tormentor was miraculously struck down. Elsewhere in this same text, we learn that the monks of Cluny were already using hand signals in the tenth century to communicate information during periods of silence, although a precise description is not provided.

The earliest descriptions of the signs used at Cluny were recorded in two of the monastery’s customaries, which were compiled by the monks Ulrich and Bernard during the last quarter of the eleventh century. A host of signals are described, but tellingly, both lists begin with signs for food. Although there were practical reasons for this emphasis—namely the silence mandated in the refectory—it also might evidence the relish with which the monks enjoyed their food. Indeed, the following list suggests that the Cluny monks ate very well.

The present translation of the signs of direct interest to food historians relies on W. Jarecki’s edited Latin text (Arabic numerals to the left of each translation correspond to his notation). Similar lists circulated throughout Europe and generally added to the core vocabulary found in this early enumeration, such as the one compiled by William of Hirsau at the end of the eleventh century. Reminiscences of Cluny’s early sign language are, in fact, found in a gestural language used by Cistercians today.

It seems likely that the Cluny list of 18 signs represents only a skeleton of the sign language used by monks. Because the signals described here are almost exclusively substantives, it would be nearly impossible to communicate any but the most rudimentary thoughts. That entire conversations were possible by means of gestures is suggested by criticisms of monks chattering away with hand signals. An anonymous eleventh-century writer, for example, noted that the monks of Cluny were often so exhausted by the rigors of liturgical performances that they resorted to communicating by signs. For our purposes, this observation would confirm the likely suspicion that the medieval monk enjoyed an even greater variety of foods than is indicated here. Nevertheless, this remarkably detailed list offers a fascinating glimpse into the diet at an important monastery in the early Middle Ages.
1 For the sign of bread
make a circle with the thumb and its two adjacent fingers, because bread is customarily round.

2 For the sign of bread, which is cooked in water and which is better than that served on most days, after making the general sign for bread, place the palm of one hand over the outside of the other as if oiling or wetting.

3 For the sign of marked bread, which is commonly called torta, after making the general sign of bread, make a cross through the middle of the palm, because bread of this type is generally divided into quarters.

4 For the sign of flat cakes, of which over a pound is generally given on the five principal feasts, place the two fingers closest to the thumb diagonally over the same fingers of the other hand.

5 For the sign of beans, place the first joint of the thumb under the index finger and project that same thumb.

6 For the sign of eggs bend one finger with another in the shape of an eggshell.

7 For the sign of food cooked with oil draw one finger over another, as if cutting cooking herbs.

8 For the general sign of a fish move the hand like the tail of a fish in water.

9 For the sign of a cuttlefish separate all fingers alternately and move them, because the cuttlefish seems to have many parts.
10 For the sign of an eel
close both hands, as one holds
and squeezes an eel.

11 For the sign of a lamprey
simulate on the cheek with a finger three or
four stingers, which the lamprey has
under its eyes.

12 For the sign of salmon or sturgeon
in addition to the general sign for fish,
place a hand with an erect thumb under
your chin, by which the dorsal fin is indicated,
because fish of this sort generally have
large dorsal fins.

13 For the sign of a pike
you make the sign for fish quickly with
the hand, because the pike swims faster than
other fish.

14 For the sign of a trout
add this: drag a finger
from one eyebrow to the other
similar to the hair women
wear in this place, because trout are said
to be a feminine species.

15 For the sign of millet
make a circle with a finger in front of
yourself, because millet is turned in oil
with a spoon.

16 For the sign of crispellae or
what others call frigdolae, take the
hair with a hand, as if you wish to make
it curly.

17 For the sign of cheese
bring together both hands diagonally, as if
pressing cheese.

18 For the sign of cheese cakes
in addition to the signs of both bread and
cheese, bend the fingers of one hand and
cover them with the hollow of the other.
19 For the sign of cakes or, as they are called by the Germans, _craphoi_, make the general sign of bread and then with two fingers simulate the little spirals that are formed when the parts of these cakes are folded together in a circular fashion.

20 For the sign of milk press the little finger on the lip because that is how an infant suckles.

21 For the sign of honey make the tongue visible for a short while and apply fingers, as if to lick them.

22 For the sign of apples, by far the worst and most evil sign, enclose the thumb with the other fingers,\(^{13}\) conclude.

23 For the sign of cherries add this: place a finger under an eye.

24 For the sign of uncooked leeks join and extend the thumb and index finger.

25 For the sign of other onions extend a finger against a slightly puffed cheek because of the type of smell which is sensed from these.

26 For the sign of water join all the fingers and move them diagonally.

27 For the sign of wine bend a finger and touch the lip.

28 For the sign of a tinctured drink\(^ {14}\) close the hand and then simulate grinding.

29 For the sign of the drink which is flavored with honey and wormwood, separate two fingers, that is the index and middle, from the rest and move them apart, because wormwood’s leaves are so divided.
30 For the sign of mustard
place the distil joint of the little
finger under the thumb.

31 For the sign of vinegar
rub the throat with a finger, because
it feels acrid in the throat.

32 For the sign of a saucer
extend the hand horizontally.

33 For the sign of the container
which holds the daily measure of wine,
incline the hand downwards and hold the
fingers, considerably bent, in the palm of
the hand.

Pro signo sinapis articulo anteriori
minimi digiti pollicem subpone.

Pro signo aceti frica cum digito
gutur, quia et in guture eius
acrimonia sentitur.

Pro signo scutelle manum latius
extende.

Pro signo cyphi, qui capit cotidianam
vini mensuram, inclina manum
deorsum et ita cavam tene digitis
aliquantulum inflexis.
34 For the sign of the dish from which one drinks, bend three fingers considerably and hold them upwards.

35 For the sign of a glass drinking vessel add this to the previous sign: you place two fingers around the eyes, to signify the splendor of the glass to the eye.

Pro signo patere, ex qua bibitur, tres digitos aliquantulum inflecte et sursum tene.

Pro signo phiale vitree premisso, signo precedente hoc addes, ut duos digitos circa oculum ponas, ut splendore oculi splendor vitri significetur.

NOTES
6. Jarecki, Signa loquendi, 123–141. Jarecki’s edition is based on the following manuscripts: Liège, Bibl. Univ. 1420 (twelfth century); Paris, B.N. lat. 2208.2 (twelfth century); Paris, B.N. lat. 13974 (fourteenth century); Paris, B.N. lat. 17132 (seventeenth century); Paris, B.N. lat. 15777 (seventeenth century); Paris, B.N. lat. 18532.2 (twelfth century); Paris, Bibl. Ste.-Geneviève 1664 (c. 1200). Trier, Stadtbibl. 147 (1728) (sixteenth century). In addition, Jarecki consulted the following printed sources: 1. d’Archery, Spicilegium veterum aliquot scriptorum . . . (Paris, 1661), 4,110ff; M. Hengott, Vetus disciplina monastica (Paris, 1726), 169–173; E. Martène, De antiquis monachorum ritibus (Lyons, 1690), 581ff; J. Antonw, 175:8); 581ff. For a French translation of this list based on a different edition of the text, see G. de Valous, Le monachisme clunisien des origines au xvi siècle: Vie intérieure des monastères et organisation de l’ordre (Paris, 1955), 1:391–396. See also the concordance found in G. van Rijnberk, Le langage par signes chez les moines (Amsterdam, 1957). See also S. Bruce, “Uttering No Human Sound: Silence and Sign Language in Western Medieval Monasticism” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2000). The latter study will appear shortly in book form.
7. A rough contemporary to the early Cluni list is found in a manuscript composed in Anglo-Saxon (London, Brit. Lib. Tiberius A.iii), the signs of which strongly resemble the list translated here. There are, nevertheless, some important differences. For a discussion, transcription, and translation of this text, see D. Banham, Monkerales Indicea: The Anglo-Saxon Monastic Sign Language (Middlesex, Eng., 1991). See also the insightful comments of N. Barley, “Two Anglo-Saxon Sign Systems Compared,” Semiotica 22 (1974): 227–237.
9. The sign for “fish,” for example, is the same in both lists; Robert A. Barakat, Cistercian Sign Language (Kalamazoo, 1975), 147; in Monastic Sign Languages, J. Unruker-Seboek and T.A. Seboek, eds. (New York, 1987), 245. W. Jarecki has recently edited a versified sign list, which he suggests may have its origins at the end of the thirteenth century. “Die ‘Ars signorum cisterciensis’ in Rahmen der metrischen Signa-Listen,” Revue bénédictine 93 (1983): 239–299.
12. Probably a type of pan bread made with herbs and oil.
13. This sign resembles the obscene gesture known as the “fig.”
14. This presumably refers to the practice of grinding herbs to drinks for medicinal purposes.