

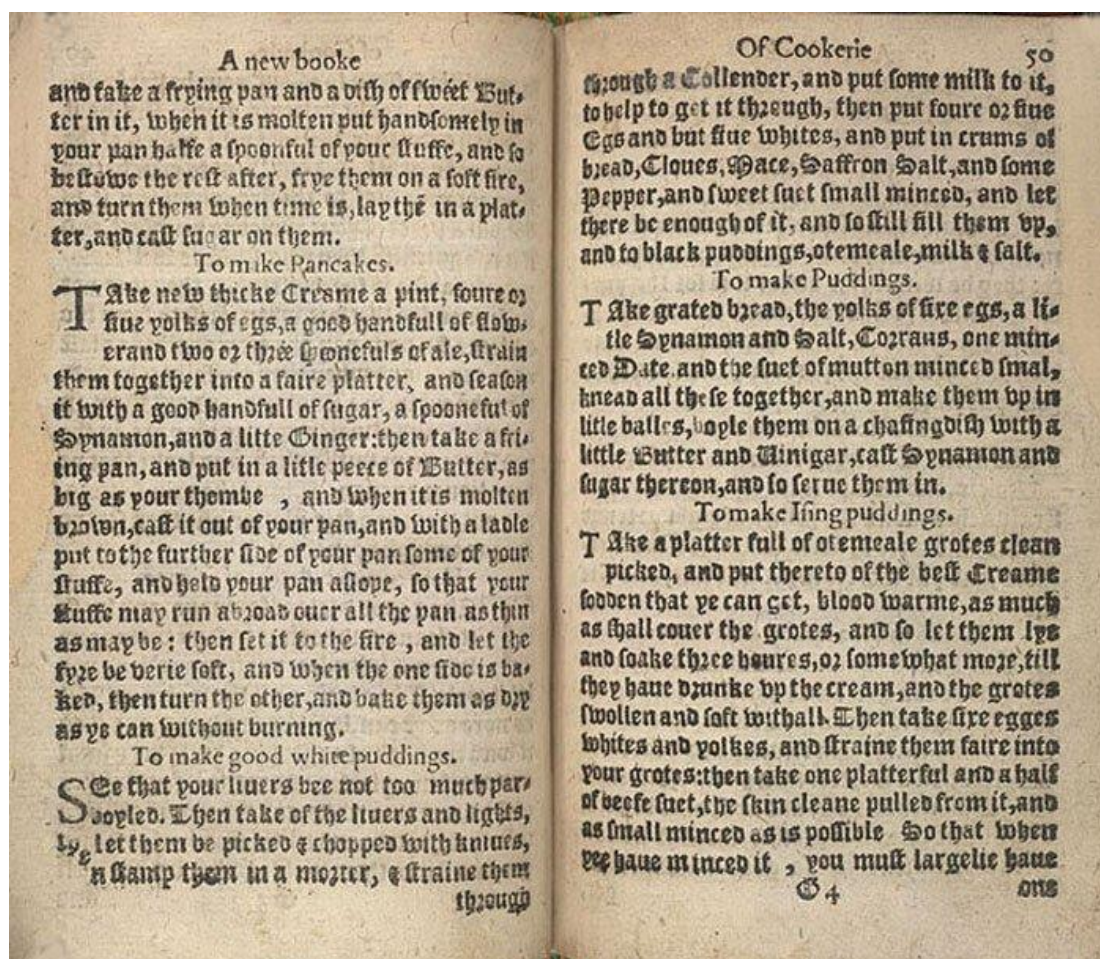
## Pancake Day

Anna Cusack

*And euery man and maide doe take their turne, And tosse their Pancakes vp for feare they burne – Pasquils Palinodia (1619)*

Shrove Tuesday, otherwise known as Pancake Day, is the feast day before Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent in Christian traditions. How did this delicious food come about in the first place and why is the pancake associated with this day?

Pancakes have a very long history. A pancake-like foodstuff has even been found dating from the Stone Age. In Ancient Greece and Rome, recipes for pancake-like food are known. In England, it was in the fifteenth century that the word pancake was coined.<sup>1</sup> Pancakes can be found in recipe books dating back to 1439 and the tradition of 'tossing or flipping them is almost as old'.<sup>2</sup> By the sixteenth century, they were eaten flavoured with spices, rosewater, sherry, and apples.



<sup>1</sup> 'Pancake, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Castelow, [The History of Pancake Day](#)

An example from a sixteenth century cookery book, *The Good Huswives Jewell* (1585), 49-50  
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The three key ingredients of flour, eggs, and milk are well known, although Gervase Markham's *The English Huswife* (1623) used water instead of milk along with spices:

*To make the best Pancakes, take two or three Eggs, and break them into a dish, and beate them well; then adde unto them a pretty quantitie of faire running water, and beate all well together: then put in Cloves, Mace, Cinamon, and a Nutmeg, and season it with Salt: which done, make it as thick as you thinke good with fine Wheat flower: then frie the cakes as thin as may be with sweete Butter, or sweete Seame, and make them browne, and so serve them up with Sugar, strowed upon them. There be some which mixe Pancakes with new Milke or Creame, but that makes them tough, cloying, and not so crispe, pleasant and savorie as running water.<sup>3</sup>*

The tradition of making pancakes on Shrove Tuesday seems to have come about due to the fact that making pancakes was a good way to use up any leftover fat or lard along with eggs, and milk before the Lent fast.

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<sup>3</sup> G. Markham, *Countrie Contentments, or the English Huswife* (1623), 66.





Adriaan de Lelie, *Woman Baking Pancakes*, c. 1790 – c. 1810 (J.B.A.M. Westerwoudt Bequest, Haarlem. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Many other traditions appeared alongside pancakes for Shrove Tuesday. In Olney in Buckinghamshire, they hold a race. The story goes that in 1445 a woman heard the 'shriving bell while she was making pancakes and ran to the church in her apron, still clutching her

frying pan'.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays competitors enter the race wearing an apron and a hat or scarf, they hold a frying pan complete with a pancake and must toss it three times during the race. The person who reaches the church first presents their pancake to the bellringer and receives a kiss in return, thus winning the race. Other areas of England have different traditions. In Scarborough, Yorkshire, people assemble on the promenade to skip. There are long ropes across the road and people skip together, the origins of this practice are sadly lost.

Other popular Shrove Tuesday traditions included cock-fighting and football ('Mob Football'). These games seem to date as far back as the 1300s. The present-day towns that still carry out these huge games or variations of the football are Alwick, Northumberland, Ashbourne, Derbyshire, Atherstone, Warwickshire, Sedgefield, Durham, and St Columb Major, Cornwall.<sup>5</sup> Cock-fighting or rather cock-threshing, was prohibited by the City corporation as early as 1409, yet in 1493 Henry VII paid for cocks to be delivered to the palace for Shrovetide and the tradition persisted, especially during the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>



*Foot Ball, Kingston-upon-Thames, Shrove Tuesday. Feb. 24<sup>th</sup> 1846. (Public Domain)*

So Shrove Tuesday, or Pancake Day, was traditionally the last opportunity for fun before all the restrictions of Lent. The word 'shrove' came from 'shriving' 'or confession of sins and receipt of absolution'.<sup>7</sup> There was a slow decline in the status of Shrovetide by the

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<sup>4</sup> E. Castelow, [The History of Pancake Day](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> R. Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (1996), 153.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 151.



eighteenth century, it was never sanctioned by the church nor an Act of Parliament, yet it and many traditions including pancake eating survived.<sup>8</sup>

The pancake has remained incredibly popular and exists in many forms around the world. The largest pancake ever created was made in Rochdale, Greater Manchester in 1994 by the Co-operative Union Ltd. For the record this giant pancake needed to be flipped with the help of cranes.<sup>9</sup>

Armed now with a little more knowledge about the history of the pancake and Pancake Day, why not give an old recipe a go, taste the past and above all enjoy the pancakes!

### References and Resources:

'Pancake, *n.*', *Oxford English Dictionary*.

E. Castelow, [The History of Pancake Day](#)

K. Albala, *Pancake: A Global History* (2013)

T. Aucoin, '[The Politics of Pancakes](#)' *History Today* 71:2 (2021)

R. Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (1996)

G. Markham, *Countrey Contentments, or the English Huswife* (1623)

*Pasquils Palinodia* (1619)

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>9</sup> This and other pancake world records can be found here: [Pancake Day: Check out these world records - CBBC Newsround](#)