CHAPTER SIX

BITES, NIBBLES, SIPS AND PUFFS:
NEW FOODSTUFFS IN RURAL NORWAY

That slow but significant changes in the material culture of Norwegian households took place in the pre-industrial period is visible in several ways. One example was in housing and furnishings, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Another, which is the focus of this chapter, was in changes of diet, a subject which, until now, has been afforded little attention by Norwegian historians. Another example which, while deserving of thorough study, has had to be left out here, is changes in dress and the increased use of imported textiles which several studies indicate took place.¹

European diets in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were characterised by significant changes. In Norway, especially in rural areas, this is seen in the shift from protein-rich foods like dairy, fish and meat and in most cases self-grown coarser grains, to an emphasis on more carbohydrates from grains such as rye and wheat, as well as potatoes, increasingly purchased from the market. There was also an increase in supplies of new exotic goods such as spirits, tobacco, sugar, coffee and tea. Historic diets are a challenging subject to research since the goods were, so to speak, eaten up. Probate inventories offer little information as food stores were rarely noted. Historic recipes can provide some indications of consumption, but these tend to reflect the upper strata's consumption or food for special occasions. Far less is known about what the majority of the people ate on an everyday basis.² This chapter seeks to understand how changes in the diets of rural Norwegians took shape, and what impact this had on society. The concepts of ‘comfort’ and ‘breakability’ also lie in the background.


of the discussions in this chapter, as does the question of what role market participation played in the spread of the new foods.

This chapter relies largely on customs records and contemporary descriptions of rural people’s diets to help grasp the changes taking place, since few physical traces remain. It focuses first on the shift to more carbohydrates like grain, and then on the spread of exotic goods in Norway. The last section looks closer at the circumstances in which the new foodstuffs were consumed in order to understand how they helped create consumer aspirations motivating increased consumption and market participation.

1. FROM PROTEINS TO CARBOHYDRATES

European diets of the early modern period appear to have been, at least to modern eyes, rather monotonous. Environmental factors dictated a population’s meals and access to food, thus northern Europeans had a more protein rich diet than those in the south. For most households, carbohydrates made up at least 60 percent of the diet, supplemented by eggs and dairy products like cheese and butter for protein. Salted, smoked or dried meat and fish was reserved for special occasions. A marked change nevertheless occurred in the choice of grains and drinks, as well as in the customs surrounding dining.

Two overlapping pre-industrial diets can be identified in Norway; the urban and the rural, each of which influenced the other. As international trade developed the urban diet became more like that of other northern European cities. Depending on wealth and social group, the urban diet tended to be more varied, comprising foreign dishes or foodstuffs such as rice pudding and lemons, as well as more prepared meat.

The rural diet was more traditional and in a sense more ‘primitive’; the raw materials were few and simple, preparation was fast and undemanding, and the utensils, as discussed in the previous chapter, were few and rather basic. The accessibility of finer foods and ingredients was also more restricted than for households in urban areas. In rural areas there were generally four to five meals a day during the summer when there was much work and long days, and only three during the quieter winter days.

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