Stockfish (dried cod) has a long culinary and mercantile history. If one wanted to follow the medieval stockfish recipes and prepare a dish, the handiest tool to start with would be a hammer. It was used to break the fibres of the stockfish, which resembled more a piece of wood than a foodstuff. Hammers were swung in northern Norway, where the stockfish was produced, in Parisian households, with the advice of stretching this exercise to a full hour, in Germany, where the usefulness of a thread wrapped around the battered piece of stockfish was pointed out, and undoubtedly in other places where stockfish was imported. The necessity of soaking the stockfish was stressed in several recipe collections. Thereafter, the stockfish could be prepared in various ways. For instance, it could be boiled, as mentioned in the book of Margery Kempe, stewed with ginger and saffron, with cream, onions and lard, or fried with nuts and almonds. There were also recipes for stockfish skin and stockfish stomachs with rice, honey and mustard, intended to imitate a beef dish in Lent. The medieval recipes show that despite its drab appearance, stockfish could be a multi-faceted foodstuff.

1 I would like to thank Hanno Brand (University of Groningen), Petra van Dam (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) and Christian Keller (University of Oslo) for their comments on the paper. This article is in part based on doctoral research published as Wubs-Mrozewicz (2008).

2 Account of Querini from the first part of the fifteenth century. Amund (1908) 883; Le Menagier vol 2 ([1966]) 195; Mazzoni (2003) 181. The wrapping of the fish was probably advised to prevent it from falling apart. Staindl (1569). This food preparation technique gave also rise to the expression ‘beaten up like a stockfish’, see Grimm (1854–1954) ‘Stockfisch’.


4 Wiswe (1956). See also the section on stockfish recipes in van Winter (2004).
Stockfish found its way to medieval tables in Europe as a result of a large demand for fish and preservable food. The introduction of Christianity had an impact on the European diet. While cereal products, vegetables, fruit and fish could be eaten all year round, religious restrictions were imposed on the consumption of eggs, milk products and meat. The latter could be prohibited for up to 135 days during the year.\(^5\) Even though the definitions of meat could vary from the modern ones and thereby some meats were allowed during fast, the usual alternative was fish.\(^6\) The urbanisation and the increase of population in the Middle Ages prior to the plague seem to have played a role in the increased demand for fish.\(^7\) The limited means of preserving food fostered the demand for and the categorisation of fish. Fresh fish was usually available only at the coast, along waterways and from fishing ponds, otherwise it was perceived as luxury food for the rich. The larger species like pike, salmon, or sturgeon enjoyed such status.\(^8\) For the rest of the populace, dried or salted fish was the only option as a supplement to vegetal foodstuffs and stockfish was not considered luxury or particularly tasteful food.\(^9\) However, the durability of stockfish, with a shelf life of five to seven years, and its high nutritional value, made it a sought-after product.\(^10\) It was also much in use as food on ships and during wars.\(^11\) The demand for stockfish could be matched by supply: from the Middle Ages the dried cod was imported from northern Norway and Iceland, and from the early modern period salted and dried cod could be brought in from the Newfoundland fisheries.\(^12\) Moreover,

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\(^6\) Beavers were qualified as fish, and there could be various interpretations of the rule concerning seals. See Van Dam (2003) 476. Olaus Magnus (1555) 20, 7 on whether seals can be eaten during Lent: ‘if the female, after giving birth on the shore, flees to the woods when the hunter attacks her, then one should refrain from eating the meat during the forbidden period; but if it has been driven into the water, one may eat the meat without any concern.’

\(^7\) Lampen (2000a); Van Dam and Van Winter (2003) 407 and the references there.


\(^9\) Van Dam (2003) 493.

\(^10\) Dried cod consists of up to 80% of protein and almost no fat, see Kurlansky (1998) 34. However, fish in general was considered light food in comparison to meat. Montanari (1994) 82. See also chapter two in this volume.

\(^11\) Lampen (2000a) 287.

\(^12\) Stockfish production is a freeze-dry process, where day temperature has to be slightly above zero, and at night below. These conditions can be found in northern Norway, in the Lofoten and Vesterålen archipelago. On the Newfoundland fisheries and the conditions for conservation there see also Nedkvitne (1983) 360–361.