





DINNER AND A SHOW

by **Tove Danovich**

Photographs by Chris Maggio

It will infuriate devotees of the genre to hear it, but “fantasy” books and movies are basically always set in the same place. Generically European stone walls frame long, torch-lit dining halls where courtly feasts are held.

Outside the fortress walls, bloody battles, festive pageantry, and quests where good triumphs over evil proceed. There is, in general, an Olde English-accented blend of civility and barbarism that forms a romantic image we identify as “medieval.”

The franchise Medieval Times, which first appeared in Florida in 1983, has taken that world and brought it to nine North American locales. For around sixty bucks, you get a pile of meaty, starchy fare served to you while taking in almost two hours of theatrical jousting, horseback riding, and sword fighting, with just a little bit of narrative drizzled in.

Each location is designed to very loosely resemble an eleventh-century Spanish castle, and the “bill of fare” is more a riff than actually medieval. The franchise knows exactly how much medieval-timiness we actually want and gives us just that, the same way Western cowboy dramas or American colonial reenactments tend to leave out the short life expectancy, dysentery, poor

state of dental hygiene, and general grossness of life in simpler times.

Medieval Times is successful because it's make-believe, and it isn't. It is an earnestly executed manifestation of a fantasy about a time that never was.

From the moment you arrive, you are addressed as either “lord” or “lady.”

There are a couple “ye oldes” thrown into announcements that come over the loudspeakers (“Those who wish to partake of cigarettes can do so in ye olde parking lot”). You cheer for one of six knight champions based on which section you are seated in, and are bestowed with a sturdy paper crown in that knight's colors.

On a recent visit, my knight, the black and white, is a “warrior priest,” according to the backstory in the program. (The knights are all handsome young men, mostly with long, flowing locks.) Though he's supposed to be the defender of the Santiago de Compostela shrine, I get the feeling that he hasn't exactly taken a vow of celibacy. He winks a lot.

“Serving wenches” and “serfs” are the actual job titles for male and female servers at Medieval Times, and the way they refer to themselves.

While the knights begin their first “tests of skill”—trying to hook small rings onto the tips of their lances while riding atop their steeds—the wenches and serfs circulate with coffee urns full of tomato soup and hotel pans lined with rows of garlic bread. The king, who sits in an elevated throne box, announces when it's time for the main course, and the food comes out piecemeal: half a crisp-skinned roast chicken, a pork rib slathered in barbecue sauce, and potato wedges. The servers grab trays of each item from the kitchen, where the food's waiting, piping hot and ready to go. While the wenches use serving trays and tongs for the food, guests are not allowed utensils at Medieval Times, ostensibly because people ate with their hands way back when.

In fact, the ancient Egyptians used spoons, the Chinese were using proto-chopsticks in 5,000 BCE, and the knife was one of the first tools ever made by our human ancestors, predating even our *Homo sapiens* species. Still, there we were, eating with our hands—all part of cultivating the illusion.

Though soup was common in the medieval era, tomatoes didn't make their way to Europe until the sixteenth century. Instead, you would have been

more likely to find sorrel soup with figs and dates. Medieval diners were familiar with roast chicken, usually coated in spices or stuffed with pork and eggs.

Medieval scholar Madeleine Pelner Cosman lived and breathed the era—her obituary lists playing the lute and singing madrigals among her hobbies. In her book *Fabulous Feasts*, she painted a more realistic portrait of the food of the medieval courts. The “four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie” we know from the nursery rhyme was a grisly delicacy: live birds were tethered inside baked pies, and then (some—how still alive) flew out to “sing” when the crust was cut open. Medieval chefs also created the “cockatrice,” an edible Frankenstein's monster combining “the uppers of a baked chicken with the nethers of a pig.” Peacocks were plucked, roasted, and served with their feathers put back in place. According to Cosman, jellies made from hooves were made into “edible seascapes with cooked ‘live’ fish swimming” inside. The value of entertainment was not lost on diners of the era—jugglers and acrobats hid inside giant puddings, then leapt out and performed for royal guests—but jousting matches were unlikely dinner amusement.

The kitchen at a Medieval Times comprises six cooks, three eight-foot-tall industrial ovens, and seven electric food warmers. Ryan Hinson, a former knight who is now a kitchen manager for Medieval Times of Hanover, Maryland, says, “You could fit ninety people in the kitchen, though I'm not going to say that's comfortably.” There's a walk-in freezer (“you could probably fit forty people in there”) and dry storage areas—all necessary for storing and prepping thousands of chickens and potatoes every week. Though the kitchen relies on modern technology, Hinson insists that they make everything fresh and from scratch.

Standing in a long line for the restroom after the show ended, I listened in on some of the guests'



impressions. Some liked the food, some found it greasy. I went in with alarmingly low expectations but found the meal comforting, like a Midwestern potluck, and filling enough that I barely needed to eat the next day. A group of teenage girls lamented that there was “too much wasted food.”

While the franchise imbues a spirit of extravagance by serving more food than any person could possibly eat, in the real medieval times, extra food always fed someone or something. Instead of plates, guests often ate off of bread trenchers that sopped up food and flavor and were given to animals or peasants when the evening was over. When menus featured ten or more dishes, Cosman writes, it simply meant those foods were available to taste—not that each person had a full serving of them. “The long orders of courses and numbers of dishes within them suggest extravagant eating and gluttonous excess,” Cosman writes, but “choice was more significant than food quantity.”

Medieval Times owner and founder, Jose Montaner, is actually Spanish royalty himself: his mother is the Countess of Peralada, a village in Catalonia.¹

In the sixties and seventies, Montaner’s family owned a successful barbecue restaurant in Son Termens, Spain. By 1973, Jose combined food, entertainment, and his particular interest in medieval history into a dinner show. He based the show script off of the movie *El Cid* starring Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren, which itself was a fictionalized depiction of the eleventh-century Spanish knight Don Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. The concept was refined over the course of a decade’s worth of shows in Spain until, finally,

¹The franchise has rarely talked about its origins and certainly doesn’t put them in the brochures. But when they filed for bankruptcy in 1996 (after being hit with back taxes to the tune of \$10 million), the full story became part of public record.

Montaner and other Spaniards in the restaurant industry formed a restaurant group that brought the spectacle that is Medieval Times to just outside of Orlando.

For the opening of the first American Medieval Times in Kissimmee, Florida, in 1983, Montaner and his business partner hired Tino Brana, one of the movie’s stuntmen, as an original knight. They toyed with the idea of naming the American show *El Cid* and hiring Heston for the opening of the first U.S. location. Ultimately, it was too expensive.

Up until 1986, when Medieval Times opened a castle in Buena Park, California, the show was still based on a ten-page outline rather than a proper script. Today the stories are redone every three to five years. Past plots include newlywed royalty from rival kingdoms, kidnapped princes, and always a tournament to showcase the skills of six champion knights.

The story on the evening I attended goes like this: His Majesty Don Carlos and his daughter, Princess Catalina, have invited a group of guests, you among them, to a tournament and feast in their castle. As an opening act, trained Andalusian horses (Medieval Times keeps a breeding and training ranch in Sanger, Texas) perform advanced

dressage: kneeling down on their front legs, fancy footwork, and dramatic rearing in the air. The king’s falconer flies a real falcon around the castle–stadium.² During the tournament, the winning knights, gifted carnations from the princess, throw the flowers with deadly accuracy at ladies in their sections, who are delighted to catch them.

The narrative tension comes in the form of an evil, fur-clad herald who serves “Ulrick, the king of the North.” He comes to threaten all-out war if he is not given the princess’s hand in marriage. He wears an eye patch and speaks in a permanent sneer. In the end, he’s defeated by the valiant champion knight of the evening.

² In Buena Park, the birds are the charges of falconer Kevin Williams, who started training for the position in 2002 and has worked at it ever since, only taking a one-year hiatus after his daughter was born. Williams says that many guests have never seen a predatory bird before, either up close or in flight. “People come back ten or twelve years later and say that it was the most memorable part.”

The falcons, as it turns out, may also be the most authentic part of Medieval Times. Williams says, “A lot of the practices in falconry are thousands of years old and have virtually remained unchanged, down to the construction of the braces on their legs, or the hoods we put on their heads.” Though it’s still “a modern performance paying homage to a past era,” as Williams describes it, a falconer from the year 1100 would likely be able to talk shop with his modern counterparts on stage.



The overall makeup of adult guests at Medieval Times seems to waver between those who just want to shout and drink at a staged interpretation of an old-fashioned sporting event and those who wish they'd been born into another era (or the fantastic, disease-free version of it).³

The front row is loud and rowdy—liberated, it seems, by the beer from Medieval Times's full bar. A group of about ten friends in matching colors coordinate their cheers, shouting "Black and white! Black and white!" in unison. They scream insults at the other knights: "I can see your vagina!" Of course, the fighting is all staged, the winning knight decided in advance (the night I was there, the green knight

³ Thirty-plus years in, Medieval Times has superfans. Though most lords and ladies arrive wearing jeans and T-shirts, there are a few nonemployees in the crowd who sport chain mail or medieval-style dresses. Katelyn Smith, a twenty-six-year-old Medieval Times fan from Dallas, grew up reading mythologies and books about the medieval era. In addition to making numerous visits to Medieval Times, she also attends renaissance fairs. For her, the food was never as much of a draw as the knights on horseback, although she sees eating with her hands at Medieval Times as akin to forgoing utensils at an Ethiopian restaurant. "I like to take part in the culture I'm currently in," she says.

won). But it doesn't seem to matter.

Suzy Morris, a serving wench at the castle in Hanover, Maryland, has gotten twelve phone numbers from male guests in the last four months. "One guy wrote his number on a five dollar bill and gave it to me," she says. She believes that servers are as large a part of the show's success as the knights. "If the server isn't having fun or isn't in character," she says, "the guests won't have fun either."

It's not uncommon for employees to stay on for many years—especially knights and other costumed employees. Chase Patterson, now retired from medieval employment, worked as a knight at the Maryland Medieval Times for three and a half years. Like the other knights, he started as a squire to get comfortable with the horses and learn humility. As a squire, Patterson was essentially a stagehand; his main duty was to assist while staying out of the spotlight. But like all medieval squires, he dreamed of becoming a knight.

During his squireship, Patterson practiced horseback riding and jousting, and got used to wearing armor.

"Riding with a helmet on is one of the most frustrating things, because you have a two-inch-slit field of vision," he says. "You have to be able to feel the horse more than see what you're doing."

The knights of Medieval Times are proud of what they do, and share a sort of brotherhood. Patterson believes he and his fellow knights will be close friends for the rest of his life. He wistfully describes his knighthood as "unlike anything I'll ever do again."

Medieval Times has survived because the historical blunders aren't accidental, but calculated. They leave out the bad parts, throw in some romance, and stage the battles between the clear-cut forces of good and evil. We don't want birds flying out of our pies on strings, and we want our champion knight to triumph over evil Ulrick of the North, or whoever the villain du jour is. At the end of the day, the show's basic illusion is that a simpler, more heroic time, when chivalry and honor reigned supreme, ever existed at all. As the wenches sashay by with their stainless-steel trays of food, one can't help but be lulled back to better, medieval times. **LP**



