

The Sweetest of Smiles

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The sixteenth century, a time of expanding worldliness and exploration, brought an ever increasing variety of exotic foods to the tables of aristocratic diners. "Love apples" (tomatoes) and turkeys came from Mexico, kidney beans from Peru, potatoes from Chile. None of these new delicacies grew in popularity as quickly as did sugar.

While England had long been importing some amounts of sugar from Morocco and the Barbary coast, new sources in the New World were being established. Sugar from the Spanish and Portuguese plantations in the West Indies was finding its way into the English market. Lowering the cost even further was the opening of a sugar refinery in London in the 1540s, enabling the English to import the cheaper, closer-to-raw material rather than the costly finished product. White, crystalline sugar was turned out of this refinery in the form of cones, some weighing up to fourteen pounds.

Historians have calculated that annual English consumption of refined sugar was no more than a pound a head at this time, but one must take into consideration that not every head in England could afford this luxury! The overwhelming majority of sugar sold was being eaten by a small aristocracy, as a favorite new flavor enhancing seasoning for meat, fish and vegetable dishes as well as the more obvious sweetmeats, subtleties, crystallized fruits, preserves and syrups. Before long, the rich and famous were recognizable by their advanced cases of tooth decay- even Queen Elizabeth's teeth were black, as observed by Paul Hentzer, "a defect the English seem subject to, from their too great use of sugar."

Naturally, they noticed this occurring, and came up with a few remedies and treatments. In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the character Clown recognizes "A great man ... by the picking on's teeth," referring to the use of elaborate toothpicks made of precious metals, often worn in the hat for decoration. The beginnings of preventive dentistry are apparent in the practice of rubbing ashes of rosemary leaves or powdered alabaster over the teeth with the finger, which seemed to prevent tooth decay, and early cosmetic dentistry sought to restore damaged teeth by engaging a barber to use metal instruments to scrape the teeth, then apply aqua fortis (nitric acid) to bleach them to whiteness. As Sir Hugh Platt warned, this treatment could be disastrous, for after a few applications, a lady may "be forced to borrow a ranke of teeth to eate her dinner, unless her gums doe help her the better."

Dare we suppose that Shakespeare, as the century wore on, turned from writing comedies to tragedies because he could no longer bear to see his audiences smile?

Bibliography

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