

# English Horse-bread, 1590–1800

*First therefore you shall understand that the principal food whereupon a running horse is to be fed most; as the very strength and chief substance of his life must be bread, for it is of all other foods most strong, clean, healthful, of best digesting, and breed the best blood.*

Gervase Markham, *Cavalrice or the English Horseman*, 1607<sup>1</sup>

IN THE SUMMER OF 1415, the Aragonese ambassadors on their way to the court of Henry V purchased horse-bread every day, spending more on horse-bread than on practically anything else. Don Quixote bragged to an innkeeper that his horse was the finest that ever ate bread. Thomas Nugent, writing about pumpnickel in 1768, relied upon his readers' association of horse-bread with travel to introduce the still-repeated absurdity that the name was coined by a Frenchman at an inn who complained that Westphalian black bread was unsuitable for himself, though "qu'il étoit bon pour Nicole," his horse; and the writers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, when they published the letter h in the closing years of the nineteenth century, appended to their definition of "horse-bread" the factual statement, "Horse-bread is still in use in many parts of Europe."<sup>2</sup>

More refined than hay or raw grains, and thus a denser source of calories and protein, horse-breads enabled tired horses to rebound from their exertions. As an early eighteenth-century writer put it, horses "cannot so soon recover with Hay or Grass, as with Horse-breads."<sup>3</sup> For centuries, in addition to being a feed supplement for tired horses, these breads helped feed the countryside during famines and were eaten by the poor, even in times of plenty. They therefore provide a rare glimpse into the cuisine of English poverty.

In the late sixteenth century Gervase Markham (1568–1637) initiated reforms in the training of hunting and racing horses that made him famous during his lifetime and long afterwards. He was most noted for the refined leavened breads that formed a key part of his training regimen. Markham's elite horse-breads were based on the breads of the affluent; and

so, in a sense, separate from their nutritional role in a training program for equine athletes, his leavened horse-breads can be understood as elite breads for elite animals. Markham's era was a period when the English were taking a renewed interest in the bloodlines of their elite horses. The lithe Arabian began entering English bloodlines around this time, and so these more refined breads were matched with horses whose profiles were becoming increasingly aristocratic.

In our own day Markham is well known among culinary historians for the bread recipes he published in *The English Housewife* (1615).<sup>4</sup> These recipes stand out in the early English bread literature for their unusual clarity and specificity. The explanation for Markham's evident expertise as an author of bread recipes is simple: by the time he wrote *The English Housewife* he had had twenty-two years' experience writing bread recipes for an unusually demanding audience—the owners and trainers of expensive horses.

The recipes for elite horse-breads developed by Markham and his followers between 1593 and 1800 provide insights into the birth of modern ideas about nutrition and veterinary medicine.<sup>5</sup> They also provide insights into aspects of the breads served to the English elite that are not found in the regular cookbook literature. For example, the elite horse-bread literature suggests that people who could afford a choice in breads viewed bread as both a food and a medicine and decided what bread should be put on the table, at least in part, by considering the consistency of their stool.<sup>6</sup> During the early modern period the bread literature devoted to horses far exceeded in quantity and nuanced detail the literature devoted to breads for English bipeds. It is a literature with a wealth of information for artisan bakers, culinary historians, historians of material culture, and students of manners.

The best general introduction to "common baker's horse-bread"<sup>7</sup>—the breads fed to horses involved in transportation—is found in material Markham contributed to the 1616 edition of *Maison Rustique*, a general work on country life.