**KITCHEN AND MEALS, or a Balanced Diet, or rather its Absence.**

For sailors, the kitchen was one of the most important rooms. On small ships, Eugeniusz Kaczorowski placed it just behind the foremast, while on large ones, it was situated near the mainmast. The maritime menu for the most ordinary crew members, on whose shoulders the main physical labor rested, regardless of the waters sailed, was usually composed of several basic ingredients:

* ship's biscuit, also called hardtack
* dried or pickled beef
* dried or pickled pork
* dried and smoked fish
* various types of grains and legumes (such as peas and beans)
* cheeses and various types of fats (lard in the north, olive oil in the south)
* wine and beer.

At first glance, the above list looks quite decent and suggests that meals prepared from these products were hearty and nutritious. Nothing could be further from the truth. Daily food rations were calculated based on fresh products, which shrank during cooking, reducing portions sometimes by half, such as beef, which could lose up to 45% of its volume during cooking.

Pork shrank slightly less, but the quality of both meats was always poor. Sailors called them carrion or even garbage. Barrels of pickled meat sometimes did not contain meat at all, as dishonest suppliers added special ingredients such as rags, pieces of wood, or metal to the food. Horseshoes were often found. It was important that the weight of the barrel matched. The meat delivered to the ships was usually in a state of decay – soft and rotting. Eugeniusz Kaczorowski mentions that sometimes its slices were so hard and black that they could only be cut with a saw. Sailors made good use of such a product, crafting ship models, ashtrays, or snuffboxes, among other things. Sometimes such meat had to be consumed, but even prolonged cooking did not restore any of its edible properties. It was then added to soups and other dishes, grated on a cheese grater.

Cases where 25-year-old meat was taken out of Royal Navy warehouses and cooked were not uncommon. Unfortunately, it acquired the consistency of carpenter's glue and was thus called by sailors. Problems with storing meat on ships and vessels were an integral part of sailors' lives until the mid-19th century. Although Nicolas Appert discovered a method of preservation as early as 1804, it was expensive, and it wasn't until 1847 that meat in cans began to be supplied to the Royal Navy.

Sailors tried to supplement the deficiencies in meat by catching seagulls, but from their accounts, it seems that they were not fit for immediate consumption. After catching them, the birds had to be fed with flour for a long time to make their meat stop tasting and smelling like cod liver oil. One of the British cadets wrote in a letter about the sailors' diet (reprint in: "Morze", 1970): "(...) we are fed with beef, which has been in a barrel for ten years, and biscuits, which cool our throats during eating, as they contain worms, which are very cold when eaten. They are like jelly from the feet, but more greasy… We drink water, which has the color of pears and is full of life, and wine, which is a mixture of cow's blood and sawdust."

The hardtack described by the unfortunate cadet is another component of the sailor's diet, which was produced in many port cities, including Gdańsk. Their hardness shortly after baking could be compared to roofing tiles. States involved in wars at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries had huge warehouses where vast quantities of hardtack were stored, sometimes for several years, making them as hard as stone.

Moisture added its own effects, and storage conditions attracted vermin – the hardtacks were infested with weevils and other crawling creatures. Eugeniusz Kaczorowski describes an interesting way of fighting them: a fish was placed on bags of hardtack, preferably freshly caught. Over time, worms would infest it, and then the whole thing would be thrown overboard. Sometimes bags of hardtack were immersed in salty, sea water, which also effectively drove away unwanted creatures.

Other food products supplied to the ship were of similar quality, often contaminated with rat droppings and ubiquitous worms. Sometimes, a hammer was needed to crack peas because – despite cooking for over eight hours – they were "hard as rifle bullets" (quoted by J.R. Hutchinson).

Cheeses, under the influence of temperature, eventually formed spontaneous ecosystems similar to Sardinian casu marzu. While the latter is intentionally spiked with fly larvae, those appearing in cheese products on board were not appreciated by sailors. They often suffered from stomach ailments, sometimes preventing them from fulfilling their duties, and sometimes even leading to death.

On some units, provisions were issued in the form of semi-finished products, and sailors had to prepare their own meals because not every ship had its own cook. If there was a cook, he served the meal in one large pot, and the sailors sat around the pot and picked out the best pieces. Of course, this ritual generated conflicts and quarrels. It is worth mentioning that the crew had only spoons and knives; forks along with plates appeared in the mess quite late, although officers freely used them at the beginning of the 19th century.

British and Dutch ships and vessels were famous for their simple diet, but it was no better in the French fleet. The contribution of the nation of gourmets to the sailor's menu can be reduced to a dish called potage, which was prepared from leftovers from the previous day. Residual fat, for example, lard, along with leftover hardtacks or bread crusts, if available, pieces of cheese, peas, meat scraps, and vegetables were mixed and cooked into soup.

Interestingly, while sailors willingly ate boiled vegetables, the water in which they were cooked was inedible to them and was called vegetable water. Lew Kaltenbergh writes that even today in many countries of Europe and America, such broth is poured into sewers as completely useless.

Water is essential for life, and sailors' beverages consisted of water, beer, and sometimes some stronger alcohol. It is worth quoting Lew Kaltenbergh here: "The drinking water on the ships of these two disastrous centuries always contained large amounts of the animal world of a very diverse, albeit highly unattractive appearance." People in high decision-making positions in various fleets promised huge sums to anyone who could improve its quality on board. Many tricks were tried; for example, strange substances were added to the water tanks, they were sealed with various natural resins, but to no avail.

After some time, sludge and water appeared in the barrels (and it was hardly possible to call this liquid water anymore), sometimes the liquid turned yellow or green regardless of the animal fauna living in it. This lasted until wooden tanks and barrels were replaced with metal ones. Only James Cook's actions revolutionized the lives of sailors. This deserving sailor and explorer was the first to show that seawater could be distilled using special equipment, making it suitable for drinking. However, superstitious sailors did not want to drink such a devilish invention. Cook did not invent anything new, as distillation was known in the Middle Ages, but even then it was considered a diabolical trick because only alchemists practiced it.

Beer, which was stored similarly to water, spoiled just as quickly. Sometimes, in barrels on ships, any other liquid was loaded instead of beer. Suppliers had to sign a statement that the beer sent to the ship definitely contained malt and hops, but after a week at sea, the drink smelled "like an old, stinking dog" – at least that's what sailors claimed. In taste, it resembled "a stinking, sour soup."

Water was essential during long voyages.