

CONSIDER THE ORANGE

Devouring Nell Gwynn

The historical Nell Gwynn provoked great fascination during her life, forming the subject of poems, pamphlets, and popular ballads, from the scurrilous to the rapturous to the just plain gossipy. While the immediate focus of that attention was upon Gwynn's sexual power, images of and references to food also played a large role in describing her unique magnetism.

Perhaps the single most potent symbol associated with her—one that echoed her extremes of sordidness and glamour, of Englishness and exoticism—was the orange. As part of *Before 'Farm to Table': Early Modern Foodways and Cultures*, the Folger's first Mellon initiative in collaborative research, we set out to consider how food helped shape both Nell Gwynn's life and how we think about her today.

We don't know exactly how Nell Gwynn got her professional start, but from an early age she probably engaged in food service. She once reportedly told a fellow actor that as a child she served liquor at a bawdy house (possibly the one run by her mother), and a contemporary source describes Nell as hawking herring, oysters, or turnips on the London streets. She entered the world of the London theater as an orange seller, under the employment of Mary Meggs, a former prostitute known as "Orange Moll."



*Detail from Hieronymi Tragi, De stirpium... 1552.
Folger Shakespeare Library.*

The Restoration theater was a vibrant, noisy place, where gallants and commoners mixed, talked, fought, drank, ate, and enjoyed the show. Meggs was granted an exclusive concession to sell "oranges, lemons, fruit,

sweetmeats and all manner of fruiterers and confectioners wares” at the King’s Company’s theater. She hired Nell and her younger sister, Rose, to do it for her. That a lowly orange girl at the base of the stage might make the leap to the boards themselves might seem unlikely, but in fact female criers were renowned for their strong and expressive voices, and they made their way as sympathetic characters into plays, such as Lady Conscience in Robert Wilson’s *Three Ladies of London* (1596), long before they appeared there as actors.

Oranges, like Gwynn herself, held a curious fascination for Restoration England. Originating in tropical Asia, bitter oranges arrived in the Mediterranean with Arab traders in the Middle Ages, with sweet oranges following by the early 16th century. The English developed a taste for these imports from exotic, often hostile lands, and by Shakespeare’s time they were arriving by the boatload—a single ship from Spain delivered 40,000 oranges to English shores in 1568. The first English orangeries were established a dozen years later, and soon became a fashionable must-have for aristocratic gardeners. By the Restoration, oranges, especially those grown by England’s old enemy Spain, were treasured. The memoirist Ann, Lady Fanshawe recorded in 1665 a gift of Spanish “orange water, which is reputed the best in the world.”

Just as oranges became the darlings of the wealthy, they were also becoming accessible to any theatergoing commoner. And their very sweetness and exoticism also opened them to charges of decadence and deceit. In Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio accuses his lover, Hero, of infidelity, calling her “this rotten orange.” By the time Nell Gwynn got through with them, oranges would become so thoroughly associated with prostitution that Claudio’s slur in *Much Ado* would be dropped from most productions of the play from the 18th century to the 20th—the line was seen as simply too racy for a genteel audience. The orange’s oscillation between aristocratic icon and emblem of unruly female sexuality was embodied in the person of Nell Gwynn, the Restoration heroine who personified both.

—David B. Goldstein, Co-Director
Before ‘Farm to Table’: Early Modern Foodways and Cultures

The Folger explores interconnections among theater offering, exhibition, and commissioned art through collaborative conversations sparked by Before ‘Farm to Table’: Early Modern Foodways and Cultures, the inaugural project in an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation initiative in collaborative research. Convened by the Folger Institute, the project touches on oranges in the Restoration theater, sugar production in the Caribbean, consumption in the aristocratic homes of England, and the professional cooks who began to leave a mark in the public consciousness.