

**TRICK FOR
GRILLING FISH**

Grilling fish can be tricky, especially if you're trying to grill it whole, but there are a few tricks to make it easier. For one thing, it helps to leave the head on. There's also a recipe for Whole Grilled Fish With Fresh Herbs and Garlic that works with just about any kind of fish.

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The rap on



Canterbury Tales

Medieval scholar and rapper to perform his modern-day interpretation of Chaucer classic



By Laura T. Ryan
Staff writer

What do 14th-century medieval literature and 21st-century freestyle rap have in common?

Baba Brinkman, that's what.

Brinkman is a 28-year-old rap artist from Vancouver, who also holds a master's degree in medieval literature. He bridges the divide between his two passions with a rap version of Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales," which evolved out of his master's thesis, comparing Chaucer's pilgrimage to a freestyle rap

battle. Brinkman has been performing the rap almost nonstop since 2004, traveling to Edinburgh, Belfast, Prague, all over England, Australia, Canada — and, now, Syracuse.

Reached last week at the University of Puerto Rico — another stop on his tour — Brinkman answered questions about his unusual twin pursuits, the book they spawned ("The Rap Canterbury Tales," published this fall by Talonbooks) and how he hopes his performances continue to bring fresh eyes to Chaucer and new ears to rap.

In addition to the book, Brinkman has produced two full-length rap CDs and expects to release the third, "Lit Hop," before the end of the year.

Born Dirk Brinkman, but known as Baba since childhood, the young musician first picked up on the parallels between literary poetry and rap music in college — although he has been a fan of hip-hop since he was 11.

"I really thought that what was happening with rap was significant from a theory perspective and that it really ought to be studied," he explains. "And so I started looking for parallels, to see who in literary history had done things that were resonating with what was going on with rap right now. And then I came across 'The Canterbury Tales' and it just seemed like there was a lot going on in (the tales) that was just like what I was seeing at the shows I was

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Excerpt from The Tale of the Wyf of Bath

In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
Of which that Britons spoken greet honour,
All was this land fulfillid of Fayerye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede;

This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of lymytours, and othere hooly freres;

That serchen every lond and every streem
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes,

This maketh that ther been no Fayeryes.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf,
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself
In undermeles and in morvenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges

As he gooth in his lymytacioun.
When King Arthur made his mark,
In every bush or under every tree
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

—Reprinted from "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer

Excerpt from The Wife of Bath's Tale

Back in the days of the dark ages,
When King Arthur made his mark, and courageous
Knights — with tight young pages — embarked
On outrageous quests and fought for ladies' hearts,
The shady parts among the hills and knolls
Were filled with fairies, elves, and trolls,
And dwarves were known to dwell in holes,
And nymphs to succour willing souls.
These thrilling folds, in time, emerged as
Baldy out of line with churches,
Which cursed all fairy-kind and purged us,
To cleanse us of our primal urges.
To try and discourage us from growing tense,
The hills were filled with "holy men,"
And now women could lie alone, content
Without the old incubi, only them.

—Reprinted from "The Rap Canterbury Tales" by Baba Brinkman (Talonbooks, 2006) with the author's permission



Courtesy of Talonbooks

BABA BRINKMAN has been touring the world performing his rap version of Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales," a 14th-century collection of classic literature. He'll bring his show to Syracuse on Monday.

Crib sheet

THE TEXT: Written in Middle English during the twilight of the 14th century, Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" presents the story of 30 travelers embarking on an annual pilgrimage to St. Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury. Along the way, the voyagers take part in a story-telling contest to pass the time. Because Chaucer never completed the project, only 24 tales were written.
THE LANGUAGE: Middle English is what blokes (and lasses) spoke in England from the time the Normans invaded in 1066 until the mid-15th century.

Sources: Encyclopedia Britannica, Benets Reader's Encyclopedia Third Edition.

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Rapper puts Chaucer in a whole new light

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going to. So I ended up writing my thesis, comparing the competition in Chaucer's pilgrimage with a freestyle battle, like in (the Eminem movie) '8-Mile.' "

As in those rap battles, the characters in Chaucer's tales compete by trying to outdo each other's storytelling prowess.

"And then what happens is it's supposed to be a religious pilgrimage that they're on, right?" Brinkman says. "This sacred journey. But then this idea of a competition takes over, and all the pilgrims start to use their tales as insult vehicles for the other pilgrims. . . . And they get into these rivalries where they roast each other using their stories, basically. And the other pilgrims who are listening, they constitute the crowd or the audience, and they give feedback on the tale.

"So some of the tales are well-received and other ones get really strong negative reactions, just like in freestyle battles where a bad rapper gets on stage," Brinkman continues. "The crowd doesn't just politely listen, they actively boo or cheer if they like or dislike what they're hearing. So that idea of having a really populist art form, where there aren't highly qualified professional judges — you gotta win the crowd. . . . That's the concept behind freestyle battling, too. Bring it back to the people and let the people choose."

None of which Brinkman needs to explain to his audiences when he takes the stage. Instead, he simply plays the part of the narrator — Chaucer's role — but

with a modern twist.

"The general approach Chaucer takes is he has this really ingenuous, innocent, honest attitude. He's the narrator, right? And then he's just along for the ride, and he's supposedly telling you what he heard all these pilgrims say," Brinkman says. "So what I do is I tell the story about me, this kind of wide-eyed, white rap fan. And I go to a rap show and I sneak onto the tour bus after the show and I accidentally stow away with the rappers and witness them having battles between shows to pass the time. So it's the same kind of pilgrimage motif, only it's on a tour bus, and the personalities of the pilgrims are paralleled in the personalities of these rappers."

But why go to all the trouble?

Two reasons, Brinkman says. To create a new audience for Chaucer, and to strip away some persistent fallacies about rap music.

"The best reaction I get and what keeps me going is when people say, 'Oh my God, I never really liked rap, and now I get it. It's storytelling. It's oral tradition alive today,'" Brinkman says. "When people look at rap through new eyes that's very rewarding for me because I really see rap as a very rich and poetic form. And most people think of it as misogynist pop music. . . . I'm kind of on a mission. I feel like I've taken two things, both of which are surrounded by a lot of misconceptions, and I'm trying to make them more interesting and put them in a new light."

Although the novelty of his act gets him in the door, Brink-

Listen online

To listen to audio clips from "The Rap Canterbury Tales" by Baba Brinkman, visit his Web site at

www.babasword.com/index/audio.html

man says he then has to prove himself to the skeptics. "People know that I could take this so far, even if it was awful," he says. "People wonder if I'm doing that, if I'm just coasting on a gimmick. Or whether it's something that's actually got merit on its own. And a lot of people are initially very skeptical. Part of my drive is, like, dispelling that skepticism. Because it's actually really good and funny. And people always come up to me afterward and say, 'Oh my God, I can't believe how cool that was. I thought it was gonna be no good. I mean, no offense.' "

He also wants to prove his mettle to Chaucer scholars and rap artists.

"When I was writing (the book), I felt a lot of pressure for accountability," Brinkman says. "Because the people who make their living around Chaucer and who have dedicated their lives to studying Chaucer, like scholars, they feel really strongly about it not being bastardized or whatever. So I wanted to make sure that people who knew Chaucer as well as I did, when they came to the show would know that I had really done my homework and I was being true to the spirit of the original."

"Now, on the other hand, people who are really into rap can be real purists, too," he continues. "Rappers are really jaded about their culture being stolen, right? So I wanted to feel like I was accountable to rappers, too."