

# **A Look at Digbie's Spice Closet:**

An Examination of His Initial Recipes

Calontir Cooks Symposium: A Temperance of Cooks

Barony of Forgotten Sea

Shire of Lost Moor

A.S. XLII

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## **Introduction**

Many Cooks are known by the spices in their case. What did they prefer? What did they use in unison? How many different spices did they use? This class will look at the first 100 (or so) recipes in The Closet Of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Kt. Opened: Whereby is Discovered Several Ways for Making of Metheglin, Sider, Cherry-Wine, etc. to see what the venerable cook employed.

## **Dedication**

This class is dedicated to His Grace, Duke Gyrth Oldcastle of Ravenspur, may his memory be eternal. His class, “Making Mead”, inspired me to develop this cursory class on spices.

## **Background**

To cooks and brewers alike, The Closet Of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Kt. Opened: Whereby is Discovered Several Ways for Making of Metheglin, Sider, Cherry-Wine, etc. is a treasure trove information. Commonly referred to as The Closet Opened, the 1669 volume documents many of the drinks and dishes of Sir Digbie’s day—though definitely post-period, its significance cannot be understated.

When Duke Gyrth first prepared his paper, “Making Mead”, the variety of spices was noted but their breadth was relegated to an appendix. As brewer and cook, I was staggered by the sheer number of spices. When I pressed for how he knew ginger was called for 66 times, he grinned and handed me his annotated copy of Digbie and a stack of 3”x5” index cards...and the database was born.

## **Scope**

The Closet Opened, first brought to the SCA by His Grace Cariadoc of the Bow, is a rather large document to decompose and translate into a database—even when restricted to spices. As such, this class focuses on the first 110 pages of Sir Digbie’s work. This encompasses the preponderance of his brewing recipes, which number 247 unique recipes when variations are taken into consideration (per Digbie’s notes).

## Overview

The variety of additives is staggering—some 135 different items. I will gladly note that some additives were ale or eggs but those are rarities. For your consideration, a summary of the additives in these first 110 pages are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Additives (sorted by name)

Additives	#	Additives	#	Additives	#	Additives	#	Additives	#
Agrimony	15	Cherries	4	Hypericon	2	Parietary	1	Sugar	8
Ale	1	Cherries (black)	1	Hyssop	6	Parsley	18	Sweet oak	1
Ale (small)	3	Cherries (morello)	1	Jerusalem oak	1	Pauls betony	1	Tamarisk	2
Ale (strong)	1	Cinnamon	53	Jujubes	1	Pellitory-of-the-wall	3	Thyme	49
Alexander	1	Clove gillyflowers	8	Juniper	1	Pennyroyal	8	Tormentil	1
Ambergris	4	Cloves	71	Ladies mantle	1	Pepper	2	Violet	10
Angelica	10	Clowns-all-heal	1	Lemon	32	Philipendula	2	Wall flowers	1
Anise	3	Coltsfoot	2	Licorice	3	Primrose	2	Watercress	5
Apples	4	Comfrey	1	Lily-of-the-valley	1	Raisins	9	Whitewort	1
Apples (pippins)	2	Coriander	4	Liverwort	17	Raspberries	1	Woodbine	1
Aqua vitae	1	Cowslip	9	Lungwort	1	Ribwort	4	Wormwood	1
Ash tree	3	Currants	2	Mace	34	Rosemary	78	Wormwood (roman)	2
Asparagus	1	Currants (black)	2	Maiden-hair	7	Rue	1	Wormwood (sea)	2
Avens	2	Dock	1	Mallow	1	Sack	2	Yarrow	1
Balm	18	Eggs	1	Malt	5	Sage	12	Yellow saunders	1
Bay	22	Eglantine	51	Marigold	3	Sanicle	5		
Betony	16	Elder	11	Marjoram	42	Sassafras	4		
Bistort	1	Elecampane	2	Marshmallow	6	Savory	8		
Bittersweet	1	Eringo	10	Meadsweet	1	Saxifrage	2		
Bloodwort	1	Eyebright	11	Mint	5	Scabious	12		
Blue buttons	3	Fennel	18	Mouse ear	1	Scurvy grass	2		
Borage	14	Fern	1	Muscovy	3	Selfheal	1		
Brown sugar	1	Ginger	93	Musk	5	Sorrel	4		
Bugle	1	Ground ivy	1	Mustard	4	Spices(?)	7		
Bugloss	9	Groundsel	1	Nettles	1	Spikenard	1		
Burnet	4	Grumel	1	Nettles (red)	2	Spleenwort	1		
Caraway	3	Harts tongue	9	Nutmeg	51	St. John's wort	1		
Cardamom	6	Honey	2	Orange	6	Strawberries	1		
Carrot	1	Hops	12	Organ	4	Strawberry	12		
Carvi	1	Horehound	1	Orris	2	Succory	1		
									Total: 135

As you can see, an extraordinary variety of herbs, spices, etc., being used at the time. Review of the table also shows that many of these items are identified only once or twice throughout this portion of The Closet Opened.

I believe those used with some regularity is more significant. A closer look at those with a frequency of 6 or more yields a much smaller set, which is given in Table 2. The top 10 additives are identified in *bold italics*. (A sorted version of Table 1 is attached to the end with all additives included.)

Table 2. Most Common Additives

<b>Additives</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Additives</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Additives</b>	<b>#</b>
<i>Ginger</i>	93	Liverwort	17	Cowslip	9
<i>Rosemary</i>	78	Betony	16	Harts tongue	9
<i>Cloves</i>	71	Agrimony	15	Raisins	9
<i>Cinnamon</i>	53	Borage	14	Clove gillyflowers	8
<i>Eglantine</i>	51	Hops	12	Pennyroyal	8
<i>Nutmeg</i>	51	Sage	12	Savory	8
<i>Thyme</i>	49	Scabious	12	Sugar	8
<i>Marjoram</i>	42	Strawberry	12	Maiden-hair	7
<i>Mace</i>	34	Elder	11	Spices(?)	7
<i>Lemon</i>	32	Eyebright	11	Cardamom	6
Bay	22	Angelica	10	Hyssop	6
Balm	18	Eringo	10	Marshmallow	6
Fennel	18	Violet	10	Orange	6
Parsley	18	Bugloss	9		

### Conclusion

Most of the Top Ten are easily identifiable—except for Eglantine (also known as Sweet Bryar). For example, consider the several uses of flowers: violet and clover gillyflowers (carnations).

Again, this is a preliminary work to view the variety and frequency of herbs, spices, etc., within the timeframe of Sir Kenelm Digbie. I leave it to for the class to consider the reasons. Were they for flavor? Were they medicinal?

It remains to the cook to now go to the kitchen and play—and pass it on!

Attachment. Summary of Additives (sorted by count)

Additives	#	Additives	#	Additives	#	Additives	#	Additives	#
Ginger	93	Raisins	9	Caraway	3	Bittersweet	1	Rue	1
Rosemary	78	Clove gillyflowers	8	Licorice	3	Bloodwort	1	Selfheal	1
Cloves	71	Pennyroyal	8	Marigold	3	Brown sugar	1	Spikenard	1
Cinnamon	53	Savory	8	Muscovy	3	Bugle	1	Spleenwort	1
Eglantine	51	Sugar	8	Pellitory-of-the-wall	3	Carrot	1	St. John's wort	1
Nutmeg	51	Maiden-hair	7	Apples (pippins)	2	Carvi	1	Strawberries	1
Thyme	49	Spices(?)	7	Avens	2	Cherries (black)	1	Succory	1
Marjoram	42	Cardamom	6	Coltsfoot	2	Cherries (morello)	1	Sweet oak	1
Mace	34	Hyssop	6	Currants	2	Clowns-all-heal	1	Tormentil	1
Lemon	32	Marshmallow	6	Currants (black)	2	Comfrey	1	Wall flowers	1
Bay	22	Orange	6	Elecampane	2	Dock	1	Whitewort	1
Balm	18	Malt	5	Honey	2	Eggs	1	Woodbine	1
Fennel	18	Mint	5	Hypericon	2	Fern	1	Wormwood	1
Parsley	18	Musk	5	Nettles (red)	2	Ground ivy	1	Yarrow	1
Liverwort	17	Sanicle	5	Orris	2	Groundsel	1	Yellow saunders	1
Betony	16	Watercress	5	Pepper	2	Grumel	1		
Agrimony	15	Ambergris	4	Philipendula	2	Horehound	1		
Borage	14	Apples	4	Primrose	2	Jerusalem oak	1		
Hops	12	Burnet	4	Sack	2	Jujubes	1		
Sage	12	Cherries	4	Saxifrage	2	Juniper	1		
Scabious	12	Coriander	4	Scurvy grass	2	Ladies mantle	1		
Strawberry	12	Mustard	4	Tamarisk	2	Lily-of-the-valley	1		
Elder	11	Organ	4	Wormwood (roman)	2	Lungwort	1		
Eyebright	11	Ribwort	4	Wormwood (sea)	2	Mallow	1		
Angelica	10	Sassafras	4	Ale	1	Meadsweet	1		
Eringo	10	Sorrel	4	Ale (strong)	1	Mouse ear	1		
Violet	10	Ale (small)	3	Alexander	1	Nettles	1		
Bugloss	9	Anise	3	Aqua vitae	1	Parietary	1		
Cowslip	9	Ash tree	3	Asparagus	1	Pauls betony	1		
Harts tongue	9	Blue buttons	3	Bistort	1	Raspberries	1		