

Marzipan and Hais: Two Easy Medieval Sweets

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Introduction to medieval sweets

Candy and sweets served several functions in medieval cooking. In addition to their more widely recognized role as a subtlety, sweets were also important as both a means of food preservation (Troy) and as a source of nutrition while traveling (Plat; Fleming). Although it is true that sweet dishes would appear during multiple courses in a grand feast, candy was a popular final course (see for example the dinners in the Menagier; this custom reached its fullest expression with Elizabethan sweets banquets [Fleming]). It is likely that this practice grew out of the belief that spices, including sugar, aid digestion (Santich).

Why make medieval sweets?

Period candy is a wonderful way to explore the history of food and cooking. You can get a taste of history (wakka wakka) without committing to a whole dinner or even a whole entree.

Medieval candy is:

- Tasty. Really, really tasty.
- Arguably healthier than modern candy – nuts and fruit are good for you, and the higher cost of sugar in period means less of it.
- An interesting food project. Challenging, but not too challenging – there are many surviving candy recipes from Elizabethan cookbooks, which are often easier to follow if you're new to period cooking.
- Excellent for events, especially camping events. Candy keeps well without refrigeration, so period sweets are a nice thing to bring along as a quick and authentic snack.
- A tool for making new friends.

A note on ingredients

Probably the most common question I get asked about medieval cooking is where to buy ingredients. I buy my medieval food the same place I buy my modern food: the grocery store. No, really. While it's true that you sometimes need to hunt for specialty ingredients (like spices, rosewater, verjuice, etc.), I do my shopping at Trader Joe's, New Seasons, Winco, and Costco. The trick is to learn what you need to look for, and that just comes from practice. Keep your eyes open; you might be surprised at what your grocery store carries that you've never noticed or never thought about. Look in the ethnic foods aisles, or, if there is one, the bulk section. I've included an appendix with more details on shopping at the end of this handout.

Marzipan

"To make a Marchpane: Take two pounds of Almonds being blanched and dried in a sieve over a fire: beat them in a stone mortar; and when they bee small, mix with them two pounds of sugar being finely beaten, adding 2 or 3 spoonfuls of Rose-water, and that will keeps your almonds from oyling. When your paste is

beaten fine, drive it thin with a rowling ping, and so lay it on a bottom of wafers: then raise up a little edge on the side, and so bake it: then yce it with Rose-water and sugar: then put it into the oven once again, and when you see your yce is rise up, & dry, then take it out of the oven, & garnish it with pretty conceits, as birds and beasts, being cast out of standing moulds. Stick long comfits upright in it: cast biskets and carrowaies on it, and so serve it: gild it before you serve it: you may also print off this Marchpane paste in your molds for banquetting dishes: and of this paste our comfitmakers at this day make their letters, knots, Arms, Escocheons, beasts, birds, and other fancies."

Plat, *Delightes for Ladies*. 1609, English.

For the purposes of this class, we're not going to bake this.

2 lbs almonds (blanched and slivered)

2 lbs sugar

Lots of rose water

Can be decorated with: cardamom pods, cloves, cubebs, grains of paradise, caraway seeds, fennel, anise, any other tasty seed. Candied seeds, candied citrus peel, or candied ginger. Bay leaves. Gold leaf. Medieval food dyes, such as saffron and saunders.

Grind the almonds as fine as you can. Blend together the almonds and sugar, adding enough rose water to form a paste.

Sculpt and decorate however suits your fancy:



Variations: You don't have to use rosewater as your liquid. Try fruit juice or alcohol. Experiment with powdered spices. I made a very tasty marzipan once with cinnamon, lemon and orange juice, and brandy.

Notes: I usually use a spice grinder to powder the almonds, but you can also use a food processor or a mortar and pestle. I tried to do this with my meat grinder attachment on my KitchenAid and it ended badly. I've always had to use much more rosewater than period recipes call for, which makes me think I'm doing something wrong.

Hais

" Hais: "Take fine dry bread, or biscuit, and grind up well. Take a ratl of this, and three quarters of a ratl of fresh or preserved dates with the stones removed, together with three uqiya of ground almonds and pistachios. Knead all together very well with the hands. Refine two uqiya of sesame-oil, and pour over, working with the hand until it is mixed in. Make into cabobs, and dust with fine-ground sugar. If desired, instead of sesame-oil use butter. This is excellent for travellers."

al-Baghdadi: A Bagdad Cookery Book

(This recipe can be found in Cariadoc's Miscellany – see sources)

The Miscellany gives this translation as well as a redaction. I did not follow the proportions given in the redaction; I do not know (although I suspect) that they are close to the measurements specified in the text. However, I think my version is pretty tasty.

1 c pistachios (unsalted)
1 c blanched slivered almonds
1 lb dates
2 c breadcrumbs
1 stick butter (melted and cooled slightly)
Sugar

When I was shopping for dates the first time I did this, I couldn't find pitted ones. I discovered that pitting dates is stupidly easy, and I'm never going to pay extra for pitted dates again. I also think that the ones with their pits taste better.

Easy way: Put everything in the food processor and blend, pulsing. If you have no food processor: I ground the nuts in my spice (coffee) grinder, then blended everything together with my Kitchen Aid. Period way: once again it's time for our good friend, the mortar and pestle; grind the nuts in batches, transfer to a bowl, add the dates, breadcrumbs, and butter, and knead.

Roll into small balls, and roll each ball in granulated sugar (or sesame seeds).

Appendix: Shopping

Works cited and suggestions for further reading

Citations:

Fleming, Elise (SKA Dame Alys Katherine): "Of Sugar and Confections" and "About Marzipan". These and other articles are at <http://home.netcom.com/~alysk/articles.html>

Friedman, David and Cook, Elizabeth: *Cariadoc's Miscellany*:
<http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/cariadoc/miscellany.html>.
The hais recipe is at <http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/cariadoc/desserts.html#1>

Plat, Hugh: *Delightes for Ladies: To adorne their Persons, Tables, Closets and Distillatories: with Beauties, Banquets, Perfumes and Waters*. 1609. Partial text (transcribed by Katherine Rowberd) available at: <http://katrowberd.elizabethangeek.com/texts/delights.mhtml>

Santich, Barbara: *The Original Mediterranean Cuisine: Medieval Recipes for Today*. ©1995 Chicago Review Press, Inc.

Troy, Phil: "A Pilgrim's Picnic Basket." <http://www.ostgardr.org/cooking/ppb.html>

Books you should have on hand:

Gates, Stefan. *Gastronaut: Adventures in food for the romantic, the foolhardy, and the brave*. ©2005 Harcourt Inc.

(Although not a book on historical cooking, this is a must for anyone who would wish to be a historical cook. Gates' philosophy – reckless abandon, cooking without fear, elevating food to a higher plane – is perfect. Plus, Gates does use history to spice up his cooking projects. The chapter on hosting a Bacchanalian orgy is particularly inspiring.)

Bittman, Mark. *How to Cook Everything: Simple Recipes for Great Food*.

(As the blurb on the back will tell you, this is like *The Joy of Cooking* only more hip. Whether you choose this or *Joy*, you should have a comprehensive modern cookbook on hand.)

Medieval cookbooks to get you started:

All of these include notes, period recipes, and modern versions.

Scully, D. Eleanor and Scully, Terrence. *Early French Cookery: Sources, History, Original Recipes, and Modern Adaptations*. ©1995 University of Michigan.

Redon, Odile; Sabban, Françoise; and Serventi, Silvano. *The Medieval Kitchen: Recipes from France and Italy*. ©1998 University of Chicago.

Santich, Barbara: *The Original Mediterranean Cuisine* (see above)

Websites I find useful

Matterer, James L.: "Gode Cookery." <http://www.godecookery.com/>
(It is not possible to say enough about how wonderful of a website this is.)

Olver, Lynne: "The Food Timeline" <http://www.foodtimeline.org>.

My SCA cooking pages: <http://www.geocities.com/shadowdryad/SCA/food.html>

Mestra Rafaella D'Allemejo: <http://www.fridayvalentine.com/>

"Rob Peter to Feed Paul" <http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/recipes/rprf.sca.feasts.html>
(This is a nice page to get you started with cooking seasonally)

"Medieval Preserving of Foods" <http://lemur.cit.cornell.edu/~jules/preserving.html>

Hinson, Janet: *Le Menagier de Paris*. Full text available at:
http://www.daviddfriedman.com/Medieval/Cookbooks/Menagier/Menagier_Content.html