

Mustard Sauce

“I send you a kaffis of mustard seed, that you may taste and acknowledge the bitterness of my victory.” – Alexander the Great

by Euriol of Lothian

Mustard is a spice that has been available in Europe since pre-historic times. Being one of the few spices native to Europe, it was of great importance to cuisines in Antiquity as well as the Middle Ages. There are several references to mustard in manuscripts from antiquity. One manuscript, *Daily Conversation*, which was created for educational purposes, states “We’ll have pork shoulder and ham and some mustard.” Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 250-184 BC) describes mustard as “stuff so fierce it makes their own eyes water before they’ve finished grinding it.” Lucius Junius Columella (c 4 – 70 AD) in the twelfth book of his treatise *De re rustica* has a recipe for a simple mustard sauce using mustard seed and vinegar.

There are three species of mustard plant that provides the seeds that are native to Europe and used in mustard sauces: white or yellow (*Sinapis alba*), black or brown (*Brassica nigra*), and wild mustard or charlock (*Sinapis arvensis*).

White mustards seed was the preferred mustard seed to use for sauces. In Platina’s *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, it is noted “The best grows in Egypt” in reference to mustard. Lucius Junius Columella in his recipe for mustard sauce speaks of it being white to be served at banquet by grinding it with almonds and pine nuts. The preference for white mustard is further supported by Gernot Ketzer who writes “White mustard seeds are mostly used for the preparation of mustard pastes, for which purpose they are superior to black mustard, because their pungent principle is non-volatile and stable to hydrolysis in acidic environment.” Today, white mustard seed can be more expensive than black mustard seed.

There are recipes for mustard sauce in many of the extant manuscripts surviving Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Mustard is said to be “warm and dry in the fourth degree” so was typically served with food that would have a “cold and wet” nature. Mustard was also used as a remedy for “it dries up the gross, moist humors of the head and stomach, especially in those people in whom they are cold.”

According to D. Eleanor & Terence Scully, in their book *Early French Cookery*, sauces were originally created to stimulate the appetite. By the time of the sixteenth century, the humor theory of foods was highly developed and sauces were used to balance out the humors of the foods they were served with.

Preparing the Sauce

There are two approaches to making a mustard sauce. The first approach is to grind dry mustard seeds into a powder and then adding an liquid to the powder in order to make the sauce. The second approach is to soak the mustard seeds in a liquid and then grind them into the sauce.

It would have been typical to grind the mustard seeds in a mortar with a pestle, regardless of the approach being used in making the sauce. Experimenting with three different types of mortars and pestles with soaked mustard seeds, I found a stone mortar best for the initial grinding of the seed. Then transferring the roughly ground mustard seed to an unglazed porcelain mortar allowed for a finer grind.

For modern convenience, a food processor or blender can be used to make the sauce if you are working with soaked mustard seeds. A spice or coffee grinder can be used with the dry mustard seeds.

It is important to note that the pungent flavor found in mustard sauce is due to a chemical reaction when the enzyme *myrosin* found in the seeds is exposed to water. An acidic liquid, such as vinegar or verjuice, halts this reaction and stabilizes the pungency of the sauce. The longer the mustard crushed mustard seed is exposed to water before the vinegar is added, the hotter the mustard sauce that is created.

Since vinegar and verjuice are considered cold and dry in nature, the mustard sauce would then have less of a warm or hot quality and be primarily dry in nature. The amount of heat in the sauce is determined not just by the amount of vinegar (as the theory of humors would explain) but also when in the process the vinegar is introduced to the recipe (as modern science validates).

In the great households of the Middle Ages it was the job of the Saucer to create sauces. The cook would take the sauces prepared by the Saucer and pare them with the appropriate meats or fish. There were many considerations that needed to be made in the preparation of mustard sauce by both the Saucer and the Cook. Such considerations included: the health of the individual being served the sauce, the age of the person, the time of year and the time of day.

Selected Recipes

Mustard Sauce (Roman)

This recipe was found in *De re rustica libri XIII*, a 1st century treatise on Roman agriculture.

Sinapim quemadmodum facias: Semen sinapis diligenter purgato et cribrato: deinde aqua frigid eluito et cum fuerit bene lotum, duabus horis in aqua sinito: postea tollito, et minibus expressum in mortarium novum aut bene emundatum conicito et pistillis conterito: cum contritum fuerit, totam intritam ad medium mortarium contrahito et comprimito manu plana: deinde cum compresseris, scarificato et imositis paucis carbonibus vivis aquam nitratam suffundito, ut omnem amaritudinem eius et pallorem exsaniet: deinde statim mortarium erigito, ut omnis humor eliquetur: post hoc album acre acetum adicito et pistillo permisceto colatoque. Hoc ius ad rapa condienda optime facit.

Caeterum si veils ad usum conviviorum praeparare, cum exsaniaveris, sinapi nucleos pineos quam recentissimos et amygdalam adicito, diligenterque conterito infuse aceto. Caetera, ut supra dixi, facito. Hoc sinapi ad embammata non solum idoneo, sed etiam specioso uteris nam est candoris eximii, si sit curiose factum.

English Translation

How to prepare mustard: Carefully clean mustard seed and put it through a sieve. Then wash it with cold water and, when it is thoroughly clean, soak it for two hours in water. Afterward remove it, squeeze it by hand, put it in a mortar that is new or very clean, and grind it with a pestle. When it is ground, gather all of it in the middle of the mortar and flatten it out with an open hand. When you have flattened it, score the surface, put in a few glowing coals, and pour water with natron over, so that all the bitterness and pallid color are remedied. Lift up the mortar immediately to pur off all the liquid; after this add strong white vinegar, mix with the pestle, and strain. This sauce is very good for seasoning turnips.

If instead you want to prepare it for use in banquets, after you have remedied it, add to the mustard very fresh pine nuts and almonds, grind together thoroughly, and pour vinegar over. Do the rest as I have stated above. This mustard is not only good for sauces, but if it is made well, it also makes a beautiful impression with its excellent white color.

Mustard Sauce (French)

This recipe was found in *Le Viander de Taillevent*, a 14th century collection of French recipes.

et se vous la voulez faire bonne et à loisir, mettez le senevé tremper par une nuit en bon vinaigre, puis le faites bien broyer au moulin, et bien petit à petit destremper de vinaigre: et se vous aves des espices qui soient de remenant de gelée, de claré, d'ypocras ou de saulces, si soient broyées avec et après la laissier parer.

English Translation

Soak the mustard seed overnight in good vinegar, grind it in a mill, and then moisten it little by little with vinegar. If you have any spices left over from Hippocras or sauces, grind them with it.

Mustard Sauce (Danish)

This recipe was found in *Libellus de Arte Coquinaria*, a 13th – 15th century collection of Danish, Germanic & Icelandic recipes.

Mal aftær sinup oc lat til thrithi deld hunugh oc tyndæ del aniz oc slika tu kaniæl, oc mal hænnæ mæth goth ædikæ oc lat I læghæl. Thæt ær got thre manæth.

English Translation

Next grind mustard [seeds] and add a third part of honey, and a tenth part of anise and twice as much cinnamon. And grind it with good vinegar and put it in a cask. It is good for three months.

Red or Violet Mustard Sauce (Italian)

This recipe was found in Libro de arte coquinaria, a 15th century collection of Italian recipes.

Mostarda roscia o pavonaza.

Piglia la senapa, et falla pistare molto bene et piglia dell'uva passa, et pistala etiamdio bene quanto più poi. Et habi un pocho di pane bruschulato et un pochi di sandali, et di cannella, et con un pocho di agresto, o aceto, et sapa distemperarai questa compositione; et passarala per la stamegnia.

English Translation

Red or Violet Mustard

Take the charlock and crush well; and take some raisins and crush them also, as well as you can. Take a bit of toasted bread and a little sandalwood extract and some, cinnamon, and a little verjuice or vinegar, and sodden wine, and thin this mixture; and pass through a stamine.

Lumbard Mustard Sauce (English)

This recipe was found in Forme of Cury, a 14th century collection of English recipes.

Lumbard mustard. Take mustard seed and waisshe it, & drye it in an oven. Grynde it drye; sarse it thurgh a sarse. Clarifie hony with wyne & vyneger, & stere it wel togedre and make it thikke ynow; & whan þou wilt spende þerof make it thynne with wyne.

English Translation

Lumbard mustard. Take mustard seed and wash it and dry it in an oven. Grind it dry; sieve it through a sieve. Clarify honey with wine and vinegar, and stir it well together and make it thick enough; and when you will use make it thin with wine.

Euriol's French Mustard Sauce

Ingredients

1 ½ cups mustard seeds	1 ¾ cups white wine vinegar
1 tsp cinnamon	½ tsp ginger
¼ tsp grains of paradise	pinch nutmeg
pinch galingale	2 tsp sugar

Soak mustard seeds overnight. Place all ingredients in blender or food processor and process. Add water until desired consistency is reached.

Euriol's Danish Mustard Sauce

Ingredients

28 oz. mustard seeds	2 cups Apple Cider Vinegar
9 oz. honey	1 oz. True (Ceylon) Cinnamon
3 oz. Anise	1 oz Cassia

Soak mustard seeds overnight. Place all ingredients in blender or food processor and process. Add water until desired consistency is reached.

Final Thoughts

Mustard sauce is one of the few sauces that not only survived from Antiquity into the Middle Ages, but it has survived to the modern day. The basic ingredients have not changed, and the recipes I have presented show a wide variety of additional flavorings were in use.

Mustard sauce is easy to make. It stores extremely well as both of the main ingredients are natural preservatives. I hope I have inspired you to make some mustard sauce of your own.

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