

Take a Quayle, and Sle Him

A Beginner's Guide to Redacting Medieval Recipes

Introduction

It may seem very daunting to many to take the transliteration¹ or translation² from an extant medieval manuscript and create a unique culinary dish to enjoy for oneself or to share with others. Over the years I have redacted³ recipes from many sources, and I have developed my own method on how I approach redacting recipes. This guide will take you step by step through the process on how to redact a recipe from the multitude of extant sources that are now at our disposal.

1. Find a Good Source

Wait! What is this... wouldn't the first step be to find a recipe? Well you want to be able to choose a recipe that comes from a reliable source. There are both good sources and poor sources for finding transliterations or translations of medieval recipes. There are a few simple ways to determine if a source is good.

- Does the source include a transliteration of the recipe in its original language?
- Does the source reference what manuscript the recipe came from?
- If the recipe is not available in its original language, is a translation into English (or your native language) provided?
- Can you find a second source that supports the transliteration?
- Can you find a second source that supports the translation?
- Does the source have a bibliography or works cited section⁴?

You may not be able to find a source that you can answer “Yes” to all these questions, but the more the better.

You can find a list of sources at <http://medievalcuisine.madpage.com/>⁵ under the “Research Recipes” section.

For the purpose of this guide, the source I have chosen is Two Fifteenth Century Cookery Books⁶ as edited by Thomas Austin.

¹ A transliteration is the copy of an original piece in its original language. There are many transliterations available in both book form and online.

² A translation is the copy of a work from one language into another language. Translations can and do make adjustments for differences in grammar as well as the specific words. A translation is also the copy of a work from one version of a language into another version (i.e. Middle English into Modern American English).

³ To redact a recipe is to provide a personal interpretation of a recipe that is described from a chosen source.

⁴ A Bibliography or Works Cited section is an excellent means to find additional sources for research.

⁵ [Medievalcuisine.madpage.com](http://medievalcuisine.madpage.com/) is my personal website. It has links to online books and other online bibliographies that evaluate various books. A copy of this handout is available for download on this website.

2. Pick a Recipe

Now that you have your source in hand (or online) take some time to enjoy browsing through it. Read casually through some of the recipes until you find one that strikes you. Or you may be looking for a recipe with a primary ingredient, such as quail⁷. Or you may be looking for a recipe with a primary purpose, such as a sauce. The recipe I have chosen for our example is as follows:

[Guisseþ]. ¶ Take faire capon broth, or of beef, And sette hit ouer the fire, and caste þerto myced sauge, parcelly, and saffron, And lete boile; And streyn the white and þe yolke of egges thorgh a streynour, and caste there-to faire grated brede, and medle hit togidre with thi honde, And caste the stuff to the broth into þe þañ; and stirre it faire and softe til hit come togidre, and crudded; And þeñ serue it forth hote.

With the extensive glossary that is available at the end of Two Fifteenth Century Cookery Books, the above recipe can be translated into Modern American English (or British English, if so desired).⁸ My translation into Modern American English of this recipe is as follows:

[Savory Bread Pudding]⁹ Take fair capon broth, or of beef, and sit it over the fire. Add to it minced sage, parsley and saffron. Let it boil. Strain the white and the yolk of eggs through a strainer, and add to it fine grated bread, and mix it together with the hand. Add the stuff to the broth into the pan and stir it gently until it comes together, and curded. Then serve it forth hot.¹⁰

3. Breakdown the Recipe

Before getting into the detail work of drafting your redaction, it is best to get a solid idea of what the resulting dish is being described in the recipe. The breakdown of the recipe

6 Austin, Thomas, ed. 1888 (Unaltered Reprint 1996). Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books. Suffolk, England. Oxford University Press.

⁷ For those that are curious about the title of this handout, there is an amusing anecdote about why I chose it. The very first cooking competition that I won was for Roasted Quail or “Quayle rosted”. The first source I had for Two Fifteenth Century Cookery Books was a photocopy of an old photocopy and very hard to read at times. As I was reading the recipe what I thought I saw was it to say “Take a Quayle, and ale him”. I spoke to one of my friends and asked “Does this mean I marinade the bird in ale?” and he thought that I should. In the meantime I had ordered a copy of this book which was just reprinted in England. It took a few weeks for it to arrive, but it did so a few days before the competition. I quickly found the location of the recipe in the glossary and index and much to my surprise it said “Take a Quayle, and sle him”, *sle* is the Middle English word for slay. I’m sure that little quail didn’t want to be roasted alive. One little letter that I had misread change the meaning of both my translation and redaction.

⁸ I would encourage anyone to attempt a translation from a transliteration if possible. For myself, however, I do not know any language, other than English, strong enough to translate and must depend on translations published by others.

⁹ Savory Bread Pudding is not a translation for Guisseþ, instead it is what I find to best describe the dish in words appropriate to the medieval treatment of the recipe. The two other recipes that are referenced by this word seem to indicate a thick paste that is still pourable in the middle of the process, but that is thicken up enough to “come together” as an indication of when it is done. The word “Guisseþ” appears to derive its name from the French (and Latin) word for broth “Juselle” (Juscellum).

¹⁰ I intentionally left out some extraneous words, such as “And”. I added the word “it” in a couple of places to clarify the grammar.

consists of two parts: identifying the cooking method and identifying the ingredients. My break down of the recipe is as follows:

- Broth (chicken or beef) is boiled with herbs & spices (sage, parsley & saffron).
- Eggs (whites & yolks) are combined and mixed with bread crumbs by hand.
- The egg & bread mixture is added to the broth and stirred gently until it binds together.
- Serve the dish hot.

What is your first impression of the type of recipe this is?¹¹

I would like to point out a couple of things that are not mentioned in the recipe that can make a significant difference on your redaction. The recipe does not indicate if the grated bread is fresh or dry. Fresh bread crumbs are more likely to dissolve into the broth, giving a smoother texture to the dish. Dry bread crumbs would tend to absorb the broth and retain most of their original texture, just softer. The recipe also did not indicate if the herbs were fresh or dried.

You may have noticed that there is no quantity for any of the ingredients listed. Manuscripts of recipes during the Middle Ages were not generally written down to instruct someone how to cook. In fact most of these manuscripts were created as a show of wealth.¹² They did provide one practical means in the fact the stewards of the great houses of Europe could ensure that the food stuffs needed for a feast were at hand should the need arise.

4. Create a Draft of Redaction

Now that you have a good idea of the cooking method and the ingredients, now you should have most of the information you need to draft a redaction of the recipe. If you are uncertain what quantities to use, I recommend using a modern day cook book (i.e. The Joy of Cooking) in order to get a guideline of quantities and ratios.¹³ It is a good practice to put a section for any specific notes you have about your redaction. This is a good place to put down your thoughts as well as to explain the choices that you have made in creating this redaction. My redaction of the recipe is as follows:

Ingredients

2 cups Chicken Broth	1 Tbsp. dried parsley
4 cups dry bread crumbs	1 ½ tsp. dried sage
2 large eggs (or 3 medium eggs)	1 pinch saffron

Instructions

¹¹ When I first was reading this recipe many years ago, I had to read it over a couple of times as my first impression I thought “It couldn’t be *that!*” Then I started to giggle. I was asked “What’s so funny?” I showed the recipe and proclaimed “It’s Stove Top Stuffing!”

¹² Scully, Terence. 1995. *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*. Suffolk, England. The Boydell Press (Pg 5)

¹³ Some recipes are much more sensitive to the ratio of ingredients than others. The recipes that are sensitive, such as Baking, reflect more upon the Science of cooking as opposed to the Art of cooking.

Place Chicken broth into a large sauce pan with parsley, sage & saffron and let it come to a boil over medium heat. In the mean time, beat the eggs with a fork until the yolk is well incorporated with the egg white. Toss bread crumbs into egg mixture to coat. When the broth has come to a boil, gently stir in the egg & bread mixture until all liquid from the broth is absorbed. Cover the pot and remove from the heat. Let rest about 5 minutes to set up before serving.

Notes

- I confess I adore “stuffing” and have since I can remember. I chose to interpret this as a stove top styled stuffing because it is one of my favorite dishes. The quantity of the ingredients has been chosen in order to give this dish a “stuffing” characteristic.
- I chose to use dried herbs instead of fresh herbs because they may be at hand more readily at any given time of year.
- Potential variants can include using fresh bread crumbs and/or fresh herbs.
- Instead of straining the eggs through a strainer, I feel that beating the eggs with a fork gives a better incorporation of the egg white to the egg yolk and is quicker and easier to do.
- This recipe was made with home made bread and chicken broth.

5. Test your Redaction

Now that you have a draft of your redaction together, it is time to head off to the kitchen (or to the market if you need to purchase ingredients). Prepare the recipe just as you’ve written it. Some people like to taste test along the way, and if you do make adjustments during this initial cooking, make a note of it and why. Share it with a few friends and get their impressions on the dish as well. Is there too much of one ingredient? Not enough of another? Do you like it?

6. Finalize the Redaction

Updating your redaction and test cooking it can be repeated as many times as you want. Variations of the dish can also be done and noted in your redaction. The important thing is to record all that you’ve done in some fashion so you can recreate the dish at a future time or share it with others.

Enjoy!

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