

Fine Cakes, Good Huswives Jewell, 1596

January 2019, 12th Night Wooden Spoon
Strata of Ottersdam (srchalup@gmail.com)

Technique

I worked primarily from the GodeCookery recipe (included in Sources below), but with some important changes. I chose the ingredient proportions from the GodeCookery recipe, and the process from the MedievalCookery recipe.

1. **Substitute a tablespoon of yeast foam for the hartshorn (bakers' ammonia).** I was persuaded by several sources that "God's Good" referred to barm (yeasted beer starter) rather than hartshorn. One very respected source (David Friedman) mentioned that he could not find documentation for hartshorn being used for baking before the 17th century, which is well after this recipe was documented.
2. **Don't cream the butter and sugar together. Rub the butter into the flour, then put all the wet ingredients in a well in the dry ingredients, and mix all at once.** I was persuaded by both the MedievalCookery recipe and the Gastronomic Archaeology article cited below to treat the recipe as more bread or pie crust like rather than a modern cake. Creaming the butter and sugar would result in a lighter, fluffy, more modern type of cake. The recipe itself says that the fine cakes are better after three or four days, which to me argues against a light fluffy texture. I also searched online and could not find mention of creaming the butter and sugar together as a medieval technique-- it is second nature to modern cooks, but I can't find when/where it was introduced.
3. **Soak the saffron in the water to better permeate the dough.** This was suggested by the Gastronomic Archaeology article and seemed like a good idea to me.
4. **Dilute the rosewater with water.** It was alleged (though not backed up by cites) by the Gastronomic Archaeology author that modern rosewater is much stronger than its medieval counterpart, so I used half water, half modern rosewater.

Sources

Medieval Cookery website: <http://www.medievalcookery.com/notes/ghj1596.txt>

To make fine Cakes.

Take fine flowre and good Samaske water you must haue no other liquour but that, then take sweet butter, two or three yolkes of egges and a good quantity of Suger, and a few cloues, and mace, as your Cookes mouth shall serue him, and a lyttle saffron, and a little Gods good about a sponfull if you put in too much they shall arise, cutte them in squares lyke vnto trenchers, and pricke them well, and let your ouen be

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well swept and lay them vppon papers and so set them into the ouen, do not burne them if they be three or foure dayes olde they bee the better.

<http://medievalcookery.com/recipes/finecakes.html>

1 cup flour
1/2 cup sugar
4 Tbsp. butter, softened
pinch cloves
pinch mace
1/4 tsp. salt
pinch saffron
2 egg yolks
2 Tbsp. rosewater
1 Tbsp. yeast

Method

If using dry yeast, activate it by placing it in a small bowl with 1/2 tsp. of sugar and 2 Tbsp. of water.

Put flour, sugar, and spices into a bowl and mix well. Cut in butter until it forms small crumbs. In a separate bowl, beat egg yolks well with the rosewater and 1 Tbsp. of the foam that forms on the top of the yeast. Add the egg mixture to the dry ingredients and mix until it forms a soft dough. If mixture is too dry add a little water. If too wet, knead in a little flour.

Roll or press dough on a floured surface into a thin sheet - about 1/4 inch thick. Cut into rectangles, transfer to a baking sheet, and bake at 350°F until golden brown - about 15 minutes.

GodeCookery website: <http://www.godecookery.com/goderec/grec86.html>

3 Tbs. butter, softened
1/4 heaping cup sugar
3 egg yolks
1/2 tsp. hartshorn or baker's ammonia, dissolved in 1 tsp. of hot water
1 Tbs. rosewater
1/4 tsp. each salt, cloves and mace
pinch saffron
1 1/4 cup sifted all-purpose flour

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Cream together the butter & sugar until smooth; beat in the egg yolks. Blend in the dissolved hartshorn or ammonia and the rosewater, then the salt & spices. Stir in the flour and work until a ball of dough is formed. Knead gently until smooth, working in more flour if necessary.

Roll out the dough on a floured surface to a 1/4 " thickness. With a floured butter knife, cut the dough into small squares or rectangles. Make decorative vent holes on the cakes by pricking with a fork, then place them on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Bake in a preheated 300° F oven for 14-15 minutes until just done. Be sure that they do not brown on the bottom. Cool on a wire rack and store in an air-tight container.

GodeCookery Facebook Discussion Group, David Friedman,

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/132904653575089/permalink/710823915783157/>

The Gode Cookery web site has a recipe which interprets "godsgood" as hartshorn. Does anyone here have any evidence to support that interpretation? The OED says it is yeast and provides a 15th century cite in support of that. The more general meaning of Gods good seems to be something that God gives us for free, which describes yeast and does not describe hartshorn. ... The 15th c. text identifies godsgood with berm. I don't know of dried yeast being used back then, but the active ingredient in beer wort is yeast. Sourdough is a mix of yeast and, I think, lactobacilli, both of which function as leaveners.

Stefan's Florilegium, post by Katja <katjaorlova at yahoo.com>:

<http://www.florilegium.org/files/FOOD-BREADS/leavening-msg.rtf>

While perusing Dawson's fine cakes recipe from The good huswives lewell, I noticed the instruction "and a little Gods good about a sponfull if you put in too much they shall arise..."

Curious, I looked up the phrase "God's good" in the OED and discovered that one of the archaic meanings of the phrase is barm or yeast.

Gastronomy Archaeology website:

<https://gastronomyarchaeology.wordpress.com/tag/the-good-huswives-jewell/>

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... early modern cakes were more of a “fancy bread” than the sponge cakes we eat today. There is also a clue in the fact that the bread is cut into squares before being baked – clearly this is a kind of dough and not the thick batter that a modern recipe would produce. ...

Although this cake can't really be described as a bread, there is some yeast in this recipe – that's what the “God's good” is. The etymology is quite interesting. According to the OED, “God's good” was also used to refer to “property or possessions belonging to God (applied esp. to Church property); also, worldly possessions, food, etc., viewed as the good gift of God”. I would assume that perhaps yeast came to be associated particularly with this as it is a naturally occurring substance, it comes not from man's intervention but from the “good gift of God”. Whatever the reason, there is yeast in this recipe, but curiously the recipe does not seem to want the cakes to “arise”.

*I started by **activating some yeast in a small cup.** ...*

*I then added a pinch of ground cloves and mace, and then **a tablespoon of the foam from the top of the yeast.** Sadly I couldn't get hold of **saffron**, if you are using it I'd advise **steeping it in the tablespoonful of water and then adding it with the rosewater at the beginning.***

Middle English Dictionary

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED18945>

Entry 4c contains: *goddes god, God's gift, yeast;*