

Blanc Manger Recipes: A survey across Western Europe from the earliest medieval cookbooks to 1500

A COOK they hadde with hem for the nones,
To boille the chiknes with the marybones,
And poudre-marchant tart and galyngale.
Wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale.
He koude rooste and sethe and broille and frye,
Máken mortreux and wel bake a pye.
But greet harm was it, as it thoughte me,
That on his shyne a mormal hadde he.
For **blankmanger**, that made he with the beste.
- Geoffrey Chaucer, General Prologue [to the *Canterbury Tales*]¹

What is blanc manger?

What was this blankmanger (blanc manger) that wraps up the portrait of the Cook in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*? It is "one of the oldest and most common preparations on the medieval board. Recipes for it are found in virtually every collection".² We find it from the earliest post-Classical collections in the late 13th and early 14th centuries right through the medieval and renaissance period, from Scandianvia to Spain, from England to Italy. Just about every medieval cookbook has a recipe for blanc manger and many have several. What are the characteristics of blanc manger and how did they vary across space and time? These are the questions this paper will attempt to answer.

What constitutes a blanc manger recipe? How much can change and have it still be the same dish? If two recipes have the same name but completely different ingredients and methods, are they still the same recipe? If two recipes have the same ingredients and methods, but their names are completely unrelated, are *they* the same recipe? These are questions that Constance Heiatt grapples with in "Sorting through the Titles of Medieval Dishes: What Is or Is Not, a 'Blanc manger'". She looks at recipes for "cullis" and "blanc desiree" and finds them very similar in ingredients and methods to blanc manger³. She concludes:

Is "blanc desiree" then, another name for "blanc manger"? In the very earliest English collections—those in the Anglo-Norman and the earliest translations into Middle English—only the former title appears. It is possible that the name "blanc manger" came, in England, to mean only the versions not catering specifically to invalids. In any case, studies of the evolution of "blanc manger" should probably take the "blanc desiree" family of recipes into consideration, as well as the "cullis" group. And note that some of these recipes have wandered a long way from what seems to be the original type....⁴

It is a good suggestion that Heiatt proposes, but one that is difficult to put into practice. The challenge of calling recipes with unrelated names part of the same evolution, based on their other characteristics, is the variation of recipes within the same recipe name. As Heiatt points out, "[t]he fact of the matter is that medieval cooks, like their modern counterparts, constantly changed and adapted recipes."⁵ Which variation do we want to call normative that we can then compare others to and say whether or not they are the same dish? We need a clear understanding of the main line of a recipe's evolution before we can look at other strands and see how they relate. This paper will work towards that initial understanding, focusing on recipes named with some variant of "blanc manger" (or its translation into another language) and leave the "cullis" and "blanc desiree" recipes for future research.

So, what is blanc manger? After examining 62 recipes from the late 12th/early 13th centuries to the end of the 15th century, certain common characteristics seem to emerge. None of these is common across all recipes, but all occur commonly in most of them. The foundations of blanc manger are rice, chicken, and almonds. Generally this takes the form of rice or rice flour boiled in almond milk with ground or shredded cooked chicken. Sugar is the most common seasoning, or sugar and salt. Sometimes other spices are added, either in the preparation or as a garnish before serving. It is also often garnished with almonds.

Blanc manger was considered a very healthy food according to medieval European humoral theories and is often listed among the foods that are good for invalids:

Based on almonds, considered by physicians to possess natural characteristics of warmth and moisture that closely approximate the human temperament, the whitedish [blanc manger] is universally viewed as a food which can be consumed safely and beneficially by any person, sick or well.⁶

There is much speculation as to the origin of blanc manger, both the name and its recipe. Most culinary historians assume that it derives from “white dish”. Scully sees an additional possibility that it derived from “bland dish”. He notes:

Originally the qualification *blanc* may well have been the word *blant*, qualifying a dish whose blandness— that is, a dish whose humoral properties did not extend to a dangerous degree toward the dry, moist, warm or cool—made it readily digestible. By the thirteenth century neither final consonant, *t* or *c*, in those words was sounded in standard French. With the common incorporation of such ingredients as the dark meat from chickens and a variety of spices with pronounced hues, it is difficult to understand otherwise who such a name as *blanc* (“white”) *mengier* could have been retained by early cooks.⁷

It clearly predates our earliest manuscripts. As Heiatt notes, “literary and other records going back at least to the twelfth century refer to dishes we find again and again in fifteenth century collections. We thus know that many recipes had long been in use before they were recorded in extant manuscripts.”⁸ The origin of the blanc manger recipe had long been assumed to be Arabic, due to the associations of almonds and rice with that cuisine. But Heiatt asserts, ‘we now know that a dish containing rice and almond milk is not necessarily of Arabic origin: no known Arabic culinary text of the period has anything corresponding to the European “blanc manger”’.⁹ However, Perry does see a potential correspondence, in the dish *Isfīdhabāj*. He says:

Both dishes bear names meaning, roughly, ‘white food’ and both consist of meat stewed in almond milk. There are differences to be sure – the Arabic recipe includes chickpeas and has eggs broken over it – but the similarities are dazzling.¹⁰

Nevertheless, by the end of his article he concludes, “It was too good to be true. There seems no reason to believe the European *blancmanger* descended from the Perso-Arab *isfīdhabāj*.”¹¹ Whatever the origin, by the time of our recipe collections, it is clear that blanc manger had strayed from them in a variety of directions. It is these variations that this paper will examine.

Blanc manger variations

So far, we have seen the common blanc manger. What types of variation were there? There were variations in all aspects of the recipe. While rice is commonly called for (whole or ground to flour), other starches were used. Bread, bread crusts or breadcrumbs and amidon (wheat starch) are seen several times, either as alternatives to rice or instead of it. Of course, fish and shellfish are fast day alternatives to chicken, but they aren’t the only alternatives. The whites of leeks appear in a couple of recipes instead of the chicken, and bacon or fried pork back appear alongside the chicken in a couple of other recipes. In addition to “almond milk”, sometimes the recipes are more

specific, calling for ground almonds to be added to various kinds of poultry or meat broths or water, or other milks are used (sheep or goat), or other nut milks are offered as alternatives. As mentioned above, sugar and salt are the most common seasonings, but flavour is also added through cooking fats (lard or white grease, almond or olive oils, fish oils); verjuice, orange juice or rosewater; spices: most often ginger, but also grains of paradise; and colourings like saffron, alkanet, orchil or turnsole, parsley or herb bennet. From the first recipes we have, the blanc manger or “white dish” is no longer always white. While almonds (often sugared and/or fried) and strewn sugar are the most common garnishes, pomegranate seeds and anise in confit show up more than once, as do spices and even, once, pieces of apple!

That gives a sense of the range of possibilities. But the main question that this research is attempting to answer is whether there are patterns in the variation over space and time. Were all variations sprinkled evenly across the countries and period, or were certain variations more indicative of specific times and places? To determine this the 62 recipes were laid out in a table, with one row for each recipe, and columns for the different areas of variation, where the table cells included which variation was used in that particular recipe. That informed another set of tables, one for each area of variation. In these tables, rows contained countries and columns contained the dates of the recipe collections. This allowed me to see at a glance the variations used at a particular time and place and commonalities within a country or time period, or how things evolved within a country or how widespread they were at a particular time place. One challenge I faced within this methodology is that not all of the recipe collections were dated with precision. Many were only dated within a range. And the (probably) earliest, *Libellus de Arte Coquinaria*, had no date at all associated with it (although food historians generally seem to suggest it dates from the early 13th century). For collections with a range, I located them in the tables at the mid-point of their range. *Libellus*, I just put at the beginning as, while it doesn't have a determined date, it is generally regarded by historians as the earliest of the collections.

The tables can be viewed at:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1sUAYs6PzuYzch8qAd0WZf9xVrJqG4uzQJ4GTTOWWSoE/edit?usp=sharing>

From these, I derived these conclusions:

Rice

England had a definite preference for whole rice, although rice flour was not unknown.

Amidon as an alternative or substitute to rice is characteristic of France.

Germany, the Netherlands and Spain went for rice flour, although with one data point each, it is hard to say how reliable that is.

Rice flour was also preferred in Italy, although in the 15thC we often see bread as a substitute.

Bread also shows up in the earliest Northern European cookbook (*Libellus*) as a substitute.

Almonds/Liquid

England generally used almond milk without saying how it was made (whether with water or broth or something else) but there are a few recipes that call for particular broths (capon or beef broth) and one in which the almond milk was made with sugar water.

In French recipes broths (capon, chicken, beef, mutton) are more commonly specified

In Italy, you more frequently see other milk alternatives or substitutions: either sheep or goat's milk or other nut milks. Goat milk shows up in the earliest and latest collections. Pea broth also shows up as a possibility in a later 15thC recipe.

In the Netherlands, the meat day recipe specifies making the almond milk with rice milk and ground almonds. The fish day recipe just says “almond milk”.

In Spain, the almond milk is made with chicken broth.

In the earliest, Northern European, recipe, no almonds are involved, just fresh milk.

Protein

England: hen or capon, perch or lobster most frequent, but other alternative birds or fish in some recipes. ground or beaten small, or, in one recipe, gobbets in 14thC; in the 15thC teased small.

France: mostly ground capon, but more variety in the earlier collections

Italy: chicken (hen or capon) shredded (except one collection with ground chicken towards the end of the period studied), accompanied with pork in some of the early recipes; pike or other fish for fast days (or frogs in one recipe).

The whites of leeks appear in a late 15thC English collection and a 14thC Italian collection, so there doesn't appear to be a pattern there.

The earliest recipe, from Northern Europe, has no chicken but eggs instead.

Seasonings and Colourings

The earliest recipes included just sugar and/or colourings like saffron. Sometimes pork or lard was also included in these early recipes. Sometimes salt is mentioned. Towards the end of the 14thC we start to get the first mentions of spices like ginger and grains of paradise. It isn't until the 15thC that ingredients like verjuice and rosewater start to be included in blanc manger recipes.

Colouring was rare in English versions of the dish, but was found in a few, including in the earliest English recipe collection. Most common throughout were just sugar and salt. Fats were included in some earlier recipes, and ginger in one 15thC recipe. One of the 15thC recipes included pine nuts or almonds, quartered and fried in grease, added during preparation rather than at the end as a garnish.

In France, colouring was more common, although not included in the Menagier's 14thC recipe. Chiquart's 15thC collection includes a number of particoloured versions. As mentioned above, ginger and/or grains of paradise show up in French recipes starting in the late 14thC.

Colourings were also common in the German versions of the dish (violet, alkanet, orchil, azure, parsley, herb bennet, or saffron), as was bacon grease or lard. There is one version of the recipe with no seasonings mentioned, not even sugar or salt.

It is the Italians who introduced verjuice and rose water to the recipe in the 15th century.

Colouring (and particolouring) appear in 15thC recipes, as does ginger.

Portugal and Spain are simpler in their seasoning with just sugar (Portugal) or sugar and salt (Spain). The Netherlands adds pork fat to the sugar.

The earliest recipe, from Northern Europe, just has saffron to colour, without even sugar.

Garnishes

Looking at the garnishes, it is harder to detect patterns. Unlike, for example, the use of verjuice and rose water (exclusively 15thC Italy), the various garnishes are strewn across the table. One thing that is clear is that England, France, and Italy, from whence we have more recipe collections and more recipes, show a much greater use of and variety of garnishes. We see only almonds with sugar in the Netherlands, only sugar in Portugal, and no garnishes at all listed in Germany, Spain, or the Northern European collection.

Using the Analysis

Now that we have looked at all of these recipes and seen all of this variation, either patterned or idiosyncratic, what can we do with the knowledge? We can be creative and construct our own variation, informed by knowledge of what was done in a place and time. If a 14thC English version is desired, in addition to strictly following existing recipes from specific collections, we can construct our own, from the variations used in that period in that country. The sample recipe below is such an effort. Alternatively, if there is something that we find that we prefer in a blanc manger, we can have a good idea where to find it. If a blanc manger with rose water or verjuice is sought, we know such recipes will be found in the 15thC Italian collections. On the other hand, if a recipe with whole rice and shredded chicken is sought, we know that the English cookbooks are a good place to look.

Sample recipe

For this recipe, I was looking to make a late 14thC English blanc manger. It combines a number of elements common to English recipes from this period (whole rice, shredded chicken, sugar and salt as seasonings) with some that are specific to individual recipes of the period (broth from Blank Maunger in *Forme of Cury* and garnish from Blomanger in *Diuersa Servisa*).

1 chicken or 2 chicken breasts, split in half or leftovers from a roast capon and possibly 3 cups of chicken stock, if leftovers are used and capon bones are not available to make broth

1 cup raw rice

1/2 cup ground blanched almonds

1 tsp each salt, or to taste

1 Tbsp sugar, or to taste

1 tbsp butter (or other cooking fat)

2-4 tbsp halved, sliced or slivered almonds, lightly browned in a little butter or oil

Poudre Blanche : white sugar, ginger, a pinch of mace and nutmeg)

Cover capon bones or chicken with a quart or so of salted water and simmer about 1 hour. Cover rice with cold water and leave to soak. Meanwhile, strain broth, skim off fat, and measure three cups of broth into a pan. If you only had leftover capon meat and no bones with which to make broth you can substitute the 3 cups of stock at this point. Stir in almonds; cover and leave to steep about 15 minutes. Then drain water from the rice and stir into the almond broth; bring to a simmer, cover, and cook over low heat for 15 minutes. Remove skin and bones from chicken and cut or tear the meat into small pieces. Stir into the rice along with butter or fat and salt and sugar. Cover again and leave to cook over low heat for 5-10 minutes. Serve in the casserole in which it was cooked or mounded on a serving platter. Garnish with sautéed almonds and Poudre Blanche.

Endnotes

1. Chaucer, p.29
2. Scully in Taillevent (1988) footnote 9.1 on p.133
3. An analysis of exactly what constitutes *cullis* or *blanc desirree* (or *blanc desire*), as we are doing with *blanc manger* is beyond the scope of this paper. But to give an sense of the recipes, we can turn to *The Culinary Recipes of Medieval England* (Heiatt, 2013). This book “addresses the corpus [of medieval English culinary manuscripts] as a whole and abstracts from it paradigm recipes for every medieval dish we know about.” The recipes it provides for these are:
Cullis: “Take chickens and scald them well and boil them afterwards; and take the flesh and chop it small, and grind it with oats in a mortar along with white bread, and mix it with the broth. Take the large bones and grind them all to dust and put them in the broth, and strain it through a cloth, and boil it and serve it forth.”, noting “Later versions may omit the ground bones and add seasonings. A fish-day adaptation calls for fish and almond milk.” pp. 54-55
Blancdesire “Take blanched almonds; grind them and mix them with white wine, on a flesh day with broth, and put in rice flour or amydon [wheat starch], and mix that in. Add ground chicken, sugar, and salt, and decorate it with white anis on comfit. Put in saffron through a colander, and serve forth.”, noting “Other versions omit saffron (logically, for a ‘white’ dish). Some recipes call for fish on a fish day, but one meatless version calls for toasted almonds rather than chicken and there are also meatless, non-Lenten versions using boiled eggs. Alternative garnishes use pomegranate seeds, red anis in comfit and white (spice) powder.” p.48. All of the alternative garnishes mentioned for *blancdesire* also show up in *blanc manger* recipes.
4. Heiatt (1995), p.37
5. *ibid.*, p.26
6. Scully, in Taillevent (1988) footnote 9.1 on p.133

7. *ibid.* Scully discusses this theory at much greater length in *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages* (Scully, 1995) pp. 207-211
8. Heiatt (1995), p.32
9. *ibid.*, p. 26
10. Perry (2001), p.263. Perry rejects the connection because, he says, "The essence of the European dish was whiteness; the essence of the Near Eastern one seems to have been simplicity." (also p.263) If one accepts Scully's etymology, there may indeed be a connection.
11. *ibid.*, p.266

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Blanc mengier party (Particoloured White Dish), recipe 199, p. 301

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Blanc mengier en caresme (Fricassee in Lent), p. T-3

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Liber de Coquina in *Liber de Coquina: The Book of Good Cooking*. 1300. Italy

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