

Documentation and Redaction for:

The Lord Verney's Usquebath

as made known to us in Martha Washington's Booke of Sweetmeats



by

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Sources:

The following recipe is drawn from Martha Washington's Booke of Sweetmeats, which along with its companion manuscript, Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery, is a collection of recipes that was kept by Martha Washington from the time of her marriage to Daniel Custis in 1749 until she presented it to her granddaughter, Nelly Custis, on the occasion of her wedding. While the manuscript is most famous for having been in Martha Washington's keeping, its contents are far older, with the recipes dating between circa 1550 and 1625 (Hess 5).

I am using the version of Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery and Booke of Sweetmeats transcribed by Karen Hess and published by Columbia University Press in 1995. In transcribing the original Manuscript Karen Hess endeavored to stay as true to the original as possible, making only minor alterations for the sake of readability, and most of these in the area of punctuation. In the case of the following recipe, glossing was not necessary.

I also have access to Cindy Renfrow's version of the recipe published in A Sip Through Time. Her text is identical word for word as that presented by Karen Hess. Renfrow does have some useful notes on the recipe which I will reference below.

Original Recipe:

“282. To Make The Lord Verneys Usquebath”

“To a pottle of aquevity, take a pound of raysons of ye sun; & A pritty quantety of licorish, scraped & slyced; 6 dates, & 10 figgs slyced; two ounces of cinnamon, A little bruised. Let all these lie in ye Aquavite 10 dayes, stir it every day 2 or 3 times, and then strayne it & bottle it for your use.”

(Hess 410-411).

Redaction:

Ingredients:

1.5 liters of 80 proof vodka
1 lb. raisins
10 figs
6 dates
2 ounces Ceylon Cinnamon sticks
6 sticks licorice root (approx. 1 ounce)

Method:

Slice figs and dates in to medium size slices (removing date pits). "Bruise" the cinnamon sticks by placing them in a bag and rubbing vigorously so that the sticks scrape against one another and break up the outer surface. Split the licorice root to expose the inner surface. Add all ingredients to a container

with a tight fitting lid. Mix well. Let stand for ten days, stirring the mixture two to three times a day. Rack to remove sediment (may take multiple rackings) and bottle.

Interpretation:

While redacting the period recipe is fairly straightforward as the description does not leave a lot of ambiguity, there are a number of minor decisions that need to be made in redacting the recipe into a modern format. I will address each of the decisions I made in turn below.

Ingredients:

Base Spirit:

The original recipe calls for “a pottle of aquevity” as the base spirit for the recipe. In The Description of England, published by William Harrison in 1577 and so of the same general time and place as the recipe’s origin, a pottle is defined as 48 ounces or 4 pounds. However the pounds being referenced are Troy pounds (Harrison 458). Harrison doesn’t specify pounds of what liquid, but the logical assumption is water. 4 troy pounds is equivalent to 3.29 modern US pounds (hereafter just “pounds”). Since a modern gallon of water weighs 8.3 pounds at room temperature we can convert 3.29 pounds to equal about 0.40 gallons or approximately 1.51 liters. For my purposes I rounded down to 1.5 liters since this is a volume alcohol is sold in commercially.

“Aquavite” originally referred to the product of the first distillation, but very early on came to refer to any strong spirits (Hess 397). In her redaction of the recipe, Cindy Renfrow suggests that grain alcohol is what is wanted (221). I have elected to use Vodka as it is readily available and its lack of flavor is similar to what one would get with a newly distilled grain spirit. The lack of flavor to the vodka also allows the other flavoring components to come out more strongly.

Fruits:

The fruits being called for, raisins, figs, and dates are rather straightforward. I used dried figs and dates as these are what were readily available to me. It is worth noting that the date pits need to be removed as they are both bitter and poisonous.

I used raisins from red grapes as I prefer their flavor. In The Description of England Harrison notes that for measuring solids by weight, troy pounds are not used and instead avoirdupois pounds are used (457). Avoirdupois pounds are almost identical to modern pounds and so I have used one modern pound of raisins.

Spices:

The recipe simply calls for “cinnamon” however the cinnamon that was reaching Europe at this time was not the Casia Cinnamon we are all familiar with from the grocery store. Casia Cinnamon is native to Sumatra, which in the time of the recipe (1550 to 1625) was not a major source of Cinnamon. At the time most Cinnamon was being brought from Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka). The difference between the two is relatively minor, with Ceylon Cinnamon having a milder flavor and more crumbly texture. Since I have Ceylon Cinnamon available I elected to use it. As noted above the weight given is in avoirdupois ounces. These are nearly identical to modern ounces and so I have used them one for one.

Licorice Root can be somewhat difficult to find in its natural state, however shops at Colonial Williamsburg sell whole Licorice Root as a breath freshener to those tourists who enjoy chewing on a

stick. The recipe calls for the root to be “scraped & slyced.” As the roots are woody, slicing them is near impossible; instead I split them like firewood to expose the inner surface to the liquid. No quantity of licorice root is specified. I elected to use approximately one ounce as this allows the licorice flavor to play a more subtle role in the flavor, rather than overpowering the other ingredients.

Method:

Overall the method is fairly straightforward and simple. I followed the procedures to the letter, preparing the ingredients as described and allowing to steep for 10 days total, stirring twice daily. I then strained out the solids. Before bottling I took the additional step of racking multiple times to remove as many particulates as possible. While racking is not specified in the recipe this results in a beverage that has more eye appeal.

Results:

Anyone who is expecting this “cordial” to be sweet will be sorely disappointed. As Karen Hess indicates in her notes on the recipe, its intent is entirely medicinal (Hess 395). The name “Usquebath” can also be somewhat misleading to the modern reader. It translates from Gaelic as “the water of life” and is pronounced “**uhs-kwi-baw**.” This is the root of the modern word whiskey (which did not appear until the 18th century according to the Oxford English Dictionary). However any resemblance between this usquebath and modern whiskey is purely coincidental (Hess 411). The resulting beverage has a thick mouth feel and strong spice notes that complement the flavors of the raisons figs and dates. While many who are accustomed to sweet drinks will find it unpalatable, those who enjoy modern herbal beverages such as Jagermeister will find it more to their taste. I find it to be a pleasant and warming drink for cold weather. While I doubt it has any truly medicinal properties, it does have the property of improving the mood and lifting the spirit. Enjoy.

Sources:

Harrison, William. *The Description of England: The Classical Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*. New York, NY: Dover Publications Inc, 1994. Print.

Hess, Karen. *Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery and Booke of Sweetmeats*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995. Print

Renfrow, Cindy. *A Sip Through Time: A Collection of Old Brewing Recipes*. Self Published, 1994. Print.