

Excellent Small Cakes Revisited

Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665) collected recipes of cookery, meads, and other drinks during his lifetime. His book is a masterpiece of English Renaissance literature which has detailed and accurate descriptions. One of Sir Digby's recipes that is often used in Society feasts is his 'Excellent Small Cakes.'

I have been cooking and working in many kitchens since I joined the Society in 1992. I have used Duke Cariadoc's redactions for many of my menu items. However, when I tried His Grace's redaction of Digby, it did not work well. So I found a copy of Digby and experimented with the original recipe. I also was curious about the reference Digby made about Barnet and what role in history occurred there. Further, I am also curious about the use of spices in medieval foods. I think my redaction works well. I have made many dozens of these cakes in the past few years. At a recent northern 12th Night feast and these little cakes were avidly devoured. Digby cakes were a favorite sweet during the reign of Stephan and Niobe. I brought many dozen to the recent Coronation of Amalric and Caia for use at the peerage vigil sites. I took none home with me!

Barnet is located North of London and is the gateway to the Midlands and the North. It covers an area of over 30 square miles, ideally placed for business, motorways and roads - the M1 and M25, A1 and A406 run through the Borough giving easy access to all areas. It is seven miles to the City of London, one hundred and ten miles to Birmingham and four hundred and five miles from Glasgow.

The London Borough of Barnet is one of the 32 London Boroughs created in 1965. It contains the former urban districts of Chipping Barnet and East Barnet, both previously in Hertfordshire and the urban district of Friern Barnet and boroughs of Finchley and Hendon, previously in Middlesex.

So large and diverse a borough has a fascinating range of history. Although it only became a suburb during the 20th century, it has always been influenced by its proximity to London. It is crossed by three main roads from London to the north. On the western boundary, the Edgware Road, Watling Street, or A5, is part of a major Roman route. The main medieval route was put through further east and runs through Finchley, Whetstone, Chipping Barnet and Hadley. It was the Great North Road, or A1, but after a bypass was built in the 1920s it became the A1000. The M1, the next generation of main roads, also opened through the borough in 1966. Archaeological finds of various periods have been made in many areas. Most of the Roman finds have been along Watling Street and elsewhere in Hendon.

Chipping Barnet was founded around 1100 to take advantage of the new main road. It was granted a market in 1199 (chipping means market) and a fair in 1588. The fair became so famous that 'Barnet' became cockney rhyming slang for hair (Barnet Fair = Hair). In 1471 Hadley Green was the center of the Battle of Barnet, an important turning point in the Wars of the Roses. The Yorkists under Edward IV defeated the Lancastrians and killed the Earl of Warwick. A commemorative obelisk was built at Hadley Highstone in 1740 at the spot where "Warwick the Kingmaker" was supposed to have fallen.

Nutmeg is found in many recipes used in ancient and medieval times. Nutmeg is a spice that is reputed to have healing properties. Platina, in his On Right Pleasure, Book III, writes about nutmeg

(muscata) as a helper for the human body by sharpening weak vision and it induces a person's appetite by soothing the stomach and liver. Similarly, Terence Scully's many food treatises discuss the medieval idea of nutmeg being a spice to promote wellness. Nutmeg found its way into vegetable dishes, sweet dishes, and mulled drinks.

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On page 185 of The Closet of Sir Kenelm Digby Opened, (edited by Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, Prospect Books:Wiltshire:1997), we find the recipe for these excellent small cakes:

Take three pound of very fine flower well dried by the fire, and put to it a pound and a half of loaf Sugar sifted in a very fine sieve and dried; Three pounds of Currants well washed, and dried in a cloth and set by the fire; When your flower is well mixed with the Sugar and Currants, you must put in it a pound and a half of unmelted butter, ten spoonfuls of Cream, with the yolks of three new-laid Eggs beat with it, one Nutmeg; and if you please, three spoonfuls of Sack. When you have wrought your paste well, you must put it in a cloth, and set it in a dish before the fire, till it be through warm. Then make them up in little cakes, and prick them full of holes; you must bake them in a quick oven unclosed. Afterwards Ice them over with Sugar. The Cakes should be about the bigness of a hand breadth and thin; of the cise of the Sugar Cakes sold at Barnet.

Duke Cariadoc published his redaction of this recipe in Cariadoc's Miscellany. The Miscellany is by David Friedman and Elizabeth Cook. To see it over the Internet, look at this link:
<http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/cariadoc/desserts.html>

3 c flour
3/4 c sugar
3/4 lb currants = about 2 1/2 c
3/8 lb butter = 1 1/2 sticks
2 1/2 T cream
1 egg yolk
1/4 t nutmeg
2 t sack (we used sherry)

(All of this assumes that "spoonful" = T)

Cut butter into the flour as one would for piecrust. Bake cakes about 20 minutes at 350 degrees. Icing: about 1/3 c sugar and enough water so you can spread it.

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When I first used His Grace's redaction, the mix of ingredients were too dry and the 'paste' would not roll out to make a dough moist enough for making cakes. I experimented with the original Digby recipe and with Cariadoc's redaction. As I don't have access to Duke Cariadoc's notes, I took the original Digby recipe and itemized the list of items:

3 pounds flour
1 1/2 pounds sugar
3 pounds currants
1 1/2 pounds butter

10 T cream
3 egg yolks
1 nutmeg
3 t sack

I then converted these items into standard weights. Dry weights usually means that 1 pound will equal 3.5 cups. Liquid weights are different. Butter is 16 ounces to a pound; this is 4 sticks or 2 cups. I used these weights in converting Digby's recipe to:

10 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour
3 cups sugar
6 cups currants
6 sticks butter
10 T cream
3 egg yolks
1 ground nutmeg (approximately 2 ounces if you use a whole nutmeg)
3 t sack

Most people buy ground nutmeg at their local grocer. Sir Digby didn't have this convenience. My research showed that you can grind one nut into 2 ounces. An ounce is equivalent to 2 Tablespoons.

It seems that His Grace's redaction is slightly less than 1/3 of Digby.

Through a few trial batches, I found that I needed to increase the table cream to 4 tablespoons (.5 cup) so I could make the ingredients mix into a dough. I increased the ground nutmeg to 1 tablespoon so there was a distinct "nutty" taste to the cakes. I also have substituted baking raisins for the currants as currants are not always available at the grocer's. I also used dry sherry since a bottle of sack is about \$30. When I make these cakes, I used a lightly floured flat surface and roll out the dough or 'paste' to the "handsbreath thickness". To produce uniform sized cakes, I use an ale glass to cut out the cakes. I found that I got a better cake when I would bake them for 25 minutes at 350 degrees. The time is dependent upon each cook's individual oven.

My redaction of Digby has more liquids than Duke Cariadoc's:

3 c flour
 $\frac{3}{4}$ c sugar
3 c currants or baking raisins
1 $\frac{3}{4}$ sticks butter
4 T cream
1 egg yolk
1 T nutmeg
2 t sherry

For icing the cakes, I also experimented with Duke Cariadoc's redaction. I changed it from 1/3 c of sugar to use $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of powdered sugar and enough water so you can spread it on the cakes as soon

as they come out of the oven. Powdered sugar will dissolve faster in warm water. A pastry brush is good for painting each cake with the sugar glaze.

-Tirloch of Tallaght