

Tart in ymbre day

This is a modern redaction and preparation of a 14th Century English dish for a specific fast-day: a cheese quiche containing herbs, onions, spices, and dried fruit.

It would have been served on an “Ember Day,” one of three days¹ of fasting and prayer observed four times a year (one three-day fasting period each season)² in England since 1095.³ Unlike Lent and other fast-days, which forbade both meat and dairy, Ember Day meals included recipes containing cheese, milk, and eggs. Tarts (tartes, tortes, or pasties) are commonly listed in menus of this period, such as the feasts of King Richard II⁴ and in “meat dinners” in *Le Ménagier de Paris*.⁵

This particular recipe is very common throughout the SCA since it is easy to make, can be served hot or cold, and is a tasty vegetarian protein dish. Although it is not a complex or difficult dish to prepare, I chose to make it for this competition because it is an excellent example of typical Medieval cuisine... and because I wanted to make something that the judges would find tasty and safe to eat at room temperature without the aid of obviously modern equipment! Plus, I think it's fun to delve into deceptively simple recipes and really look at the ingredients.

Original Recipe

#173. *Tart in ymbre day. Take and perboile oynouns & erbis & presse out þe water & hewe hem smale. Take grene chese & bray it in a mortar, and temper it vp with ayren. Do þerto butter, safroun & salt, & raisouns courans, & a litel sugur with powdour douce, & bake it in a trap, & serue it forth. (Forme of Cury)*⁶

My Translation

Parboil onions and herbs, press out the water, and mince them. Take fresh (unpressed/non-aged) cheese and grind it finely in a mortar, then blend it with an egg. Add to the mixture butter, saffron, salt, currants, and a little sugar with sweet powder, then bake it in a pie pan and serve it forth.

My Redaction

Herb-Onion Quiche

1 C freshly made soft cheese (or ricotta or pot cheese), drained
(made with 1 qt. whole milk, 1/2 qt. heavy cream, 2 Tb. cider vinegar, pinch salt)

¹ These three days would be Wednesday, the Friday that immediately follows, and the Saturday afterward. Pg. 505, *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 1996.

² "Ember days (corruption from Lat. Quatuor Tempora, four times) are the days at the beginning of the seasons ordered by the Church as days of fast and abstinence. They were definitely arranged and prescribed for the entire Church by Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) for the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday after 13 December (S. Lucia), after Ash Wednesday, after Whitsunday, and after 14 September (Exaltation of the Cross)." *Online Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05399b.htm>

³ Pg. 505, *OED*.

⁴ Feast for Richard II by the Bishop of Durham, at Durham House, London, on Sept. 23, 1387. Pg. 336, *Take A Thousand Eggs or More, Vol II*, Cindy Renfrow, Fourth Printing, 1995.

⁵ Pg. 226-236, *The Goodman of Paris*, 1393, edited by G.G. Coulton and Eileen Power, 1928, and Janet Hinson translation, <http://www.davidfriedman.com/Medieval/Cookbooks/Menagier/Menagier.html>.

⁶ *Part IV, Curye on Inglysch: English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century (including the Forme of Cury)*, Edited by Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, published for The Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, London, 1985. Please note that I've included the thorn (þ) from the original English text, which should be read as a "th."

1/4 C freshly made butter, soft (1 pt heavy cream, pinch salt)
2 white onions, quartered
3 large eggs, beaten
pinch saffron
1/4 C currants
2 cloves garlic, minced
1/2 bunch parsley
10 leaves fresh mint
8 leaves fresh sage
1 tsp. fresh rosemary
1/4 tsp. dittany of crete, ground in a mortar
1/4 tsp. savory, ground in a mortar
1/4 tsp. fennel seeds, ground in a mortar
1/4 tsp. sugar, scraped from sugar loaf
1/4 tsp. poudre douce (ginger, cinnamon, mace, cloves, nutmeg, galangale, grains of paradise, cubebs, and saffron)

pie crust

1 C white whole wheat flour
1/2 C freshly made butter, cool
1 medium egg yolk
pinch saffron
1/8 C cold water

1. Steep the saffron in the water. Prepare a pie crust by working the butter into the flour, then adding the egg, and finally enough water to make a dough. Chill it so that it is easier to work with, then roll it out thinly and press it into a 9" tart pan and trim the crust.
2. Blanch the onion quarters and whole fresh herbs, drain them, and press them in a sieve to remove all excess water. Mince all together very finely with a knife on a chopping block. Drain the cheese and break up the curds in a large mortar – or a large bowl with a wooden spoon. Blend in the eggs, one at a time. Add the butter and blend that in, then add the onion-herb mixture, the garlic, the ground seasonings, and finally the currants. Mix well.
3. Scrape the mixture into the prepared crust and bake at 350 degrees for roughly 35 minutes. Sprinkle more poudre douce over the top in a decorative design while it is still warm. Serves 8 people.

Research & Redaction Notes

It's always a good idea to compare similar period recipes when doing a redaction, to help "fill in the blanks" when something seems quirky. So, I found this tart in a slightly later (early 15th Century) cookbook⁷:

Tart on Ember-Day: Parboyle onions, and sauge, and parsel, and hew hem small, then take gode fatte chese, and bray hit, and do therto egges, and tempur hit up therwith,

⁷ *Ancient Cookery* (also in *Curye on Inglysch: English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century (including the Forme of Cury)*, Edited by Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, published for The Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, London, 1985.

and do therto butter and sugur, and raisynges of corance, and poudere of ginger, and of cannell, medel all this well togedur, and do hit in a coffyn, and bake it uncoveret, and serve hit forthe.

The later recipe is virtually identical, other than requiring “fatte” cheese rather than “grene” cheese, and a “coffyn” rather than a “trap.” Okay, onto the research.

1. Let’s look at the cheese first. “Grene” means fresh, unripe, soft cheese that has not been aged or pressed into a mold.⁸ According to Terence Scully, milk needed to dealt with in some fashion (to avoid wasting precious foodstuffs) during the warm months when dairy animals were generating large amounts on a daily basis.⁹

Besides churning it into butter and pressing it into hard rounds of cheese to be set aside and aged, one of the most common solutions to the daily gallons of milk was to make a soft cottage-like cheese by hanging the curds in a linen bag for several hours while the whey dripped out.¹⁰ I could not find a contemporary 14th Century source to support this form of cheesemaking, so I will have to make due with a just-past-period source, which describes making such a soft “cheeslep bagge or Runnet.”¹¹

Therefore, the most logical cheese to use for this dish is not cheddar, havarti, or other modern “fatte,” rich, semi-firm cheeses that are commonly used in redactions of this recipe.

I believe what the recipe refers to was something more like pot cheese or cheese curds. A good modern substitution would be drained whole-milk cottage cheese or ricotta, like that shown in an image in the 14th Century *Tacuinum Sanitatis*¹². I chose to approximate the original ingredient by heating a quart of whole milk on my stove, taking it off the heat and adding a tablespoon of vinegar to it to curdle it, and then hanging the resulting curds in cheesecloth to create a fresh cheese.¹³

2. Regarding the butter in this recipe, depending upon the season when Ember Day was celebrated, it might have been freshly made (as opposed to stored during the winter) but it would be definitely salted.¹⁴ Therefore, I took heavy cream and churned it in my stand mixer into fresh butter, then added a little salt. I did not handchurn the cream into butter because I don’t have a manual churn and because I don’t have the physical arm strength to do this operation.

The butter in the original recipe may have been melted (to remove salt, as explained in footnote #11), but I doubt that it would have been added to the eggs hot (thus risk turning them into scrambled eggs!). A contemporary source, *Le Ménagier*

⁸ “...while it is **greene...**” *A Closet for Ladies and Gentlewomen*, 1636.

⁹ “Keeping milk on hand in the kitchen for any length of time was of course unthinkable – at least if you wanted eventually to be able to draw upon sweet milk. Most milk was therefore destined either to be put to immediate use in cooking or to be converted into its longer-lasting products, butter or cheese. Even these latter substances almost invariably had salt added to them in order to prolong their life.” Pg. 14, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*, Terence Scully, The Boydell Press, 1995.

¹⁰ Pg. 124, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*,” Bridget Ann Henisch, Penn State Press, 1994.

¹¹ Pg. 118, *The English Hous-wife*, Gervase Markham, 1649.

¹² Color Plate XXXI, *Tacuinum Sanitatis: The Medieval Health Handbook*, George Braziller, 1996.

¹³ Basics of soft cheesemaking courtesy of “Cheese Making for the Compleat Novice” by Lady (now Dame) Aoife Finn, <http://www.florilegium.org>.

¹⁴ “Most butter was made in the spring and summer months, and it was packed in salt to preserve it for the winter. To remove most of this salt, the butter was either washed and rubbed in fresh water or heated over the fire to clarify as is done today.” Pg. 126, Henisch.

de Paris, describes softening butter to remove salt and prepare it for cooking, so I will use mixer-kneaded butter rather than melted butter.¹⁵

3. I skimmed a number of egg recipes in **Forme of Cury** and **The Harleian MS**, and I don't see anything more specific about the "eyren" (eggs) size or origin, other than that the eyren be "faire" (fresh). The eggs could have come from any number of fowl, but I think they would most likely have come from chicken, duck, or geese¹⁶, since those the fowl most mentioned in the other recipes. I've looked at several examples of Renaissance artwork and (although this is documentation from about 100 to 200 years later than this recipe) the eggs in a cook's hand clearly look like they are medium¹⁷. Some are white, but many are greyish-brown or even bluish in color¹⁸. A contemporary 14th Century piece of artwork depicts eggs that look actually large-sized in a woman's hands¹⁹. So, contrary to the common SCA assumption that eggs were always smaller in period, I choose to use large-sized chicken eggs.

4. "*Raisouns courans*" is an easy one: The OED²⁰ verifies that it refers to currants – a very common dried fruit in Medieval recipes.²¹ In contemporary recipes, the same ingredient is referred to as Roysonys of Coraunce²².

5. Hmm. What kind of onions were used in Medieval cuisine? Let's look at the artwork...late-period woodcuts depict what looks like both white and Spanish onions²³, as opposed to modern sweet onions like Mayans or Walla Wallas. White seem to be mentioned the most in contemporary sources to this recipe²⁴. If the recipe had meant leeks, I believe that would have been specified, as they are in many period recipes. Thus, I used white onions for this recipe.

6. The recipe does not specify which herbs should be used, so how did I choose the ones I did? Simple. I looked at other recipes in **Forme of Cury** to see what used there. Recipe #107, *Congur in sawse*, calls for "persel, mynt, rosmarye, & a litul sawge." Other recipes in the cookbook call for "garlek," "whyte of lekes," and "sauerey, tansey, veruayn, rewe, ditayn, fenel, southrenwode..."

So, I believe it's safe to theorize that the cook whose recipes inspired this cookbook commonly used parsley, mint, rosemary, sage, garlic, leek, savory, tansy, vervain, rue, dittany of crete, fennel, and southernwood in his tartes. I choose to use

¹⁵ "Otherwise put your salt butter in fresh sweet water and knead and rub it there with your hands and the salt will remain in the water." Pg. 309, Coulton and Power.

¹⁶ Plates 207 and 208, Braziller.

¹⁷ "Old Woman Poaching Eggs," painting by Diego Valezquez, 1610.

¹⁸ "Kitchen Scene," painting by Pieter Cornelisz van Ryck, 1604.

¹⁹ B&W plate 40, Braziller.

²⁰ "(raysons of) Coraunte... (raisins of) Corinth... reduced before 1500 to coraunce, corints, currents, corans, corantes... The raisin or dried fruit prepared from a dwarf seedless variety of grape, grown in the Levant, much used in cookery and confencionery (1334)." pg. 377, OED.

²¹ "Dried currants, raisins, dates, and figs were fairly familiar because they were imported for winter, and particularly for Lent..." pg. 113, Henisch.

²² #149, Potage Dyvers, *Harleian MS*. 279.

²³ "...it is couered with very fine skinned for the moft part of a whitifh colour... There is also a Spanifh kinde, whose root is longer than the other, but in other respects very little different." p. 169, *The Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes*, John Gerard, 1597.

²⁴ B&W plates 134, 135, Braziller.

as many fresh herbs as I could (assuming that this is a spring or summer Ember Day celebration), which ended up being parsley, sage, mint, and rosemary.

I added dried dittany of crete, savory, and fennel seeds. I ground the dried herbs in a small mortar with a pestle, and blanched the fresh herbs with the onions, as the original recipe dictates. I pressed them in a sieve to remove excess moisture, since many medieval recipes direct the cook to use a boulding cloth or fine sieve to filter the food and ensure its commingling with other ingredients, per the Humoral Theory.²⁵

7. Sugar was transported from the Far East to Europe in four forms: syrup, pressed “loaf” or cone sugar, granulated crystals, and refined “white” sugar.²⁶ The kind most depicted in period artwork (such as in Scappi’s 1570 series of kitchen scenes) is loaf sugar. I also noted that the most common description of the use of sugar in this earlier period is of it being scraped or grated onto a dish as a spice directly before it is served... which I believe means it was generally in loaf form. Therefore, I scraped sugar for this recipe off a sugar cone I purchased from Francesco Sirene, Spicier.

8. For the *poudre douce*, I freshly ground and blended most of the pricey spices mentioned in other recipes in ***Forme of Cury***: freshly ground ginger, cinnamon, mace, cloves, nutmeg, galangale, grains of paradise, cubebs, and saffron.²⁷ I added sugar that I grated from the sugar cone that I purchased from Francesco Sirene, Spicier.²⁸

9. The pie crust was an interesting element to ponder and research. I immediately choose not to blind-bake it because 1. the recipe did not say to do so, and 2. doing so would have overbaked the crust before the filling was properly cooked through.

Is this a covered “double-crust” pastry? I don’t believe so. In fact, the recipe does not call for a top or lid. (Note that the second, later recipe specifically calls for it to be uncovered.)

Come to think of it, does this recipe include a pie crust at all?

“Bake it in a trap” means that the tort should be baked in a pan or dish. Another recipe in the cookbook, #172 *Tartee*, directs the cook to “...make a crust in a trap.” #179 *Sambocade* similarly says to “make a crust in a trap...,” as does #174 *Tart de Bry* (“Do it in a trap”). These are not all cheese fillings, by the way.

Did the cook simply forget to note that there should be a pie crust? It’s possible. However, I don’t see any other tortes in this or other medieval cookbooks that contain a dairy filling and **don’t** have a crust. Plus, fillings without crusts tend to be rubbery. I think I should include a crust in this recipe!

Should this be a delicate, flaky crust or a stiff, hot-water one? Recipe #175 *Tart de brymlent* directs the cook to “make a coffyn an ynche depe...” and #177 *Tartletes* says to “...make a litell coffyn...” These recipes contain fish and meat fillings.

²⁵ Pg. 99, Scully.

²⁶ Pg. 27, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices*, Andrew Dalby, 2000.

²⁷ There does not appear to be one documented recipe for this very common Medieval spice mixture. Like modern curry and garam masala recipes, every cook likely had his (or her) own mixture. Several medieval recipes call for a combination of common “sweet” spices, as in #13. Gyngaudre. “...Put therto poudyr of pepyr, gynger, and poudyr of canell.” (pg. 39, *An Ordinance of Pottage*, Constance B. Heatt, 1988.) I have chosen to use a combination of mostly ginger and cinnamon with additional common Medieval spices that were highly valued and used in recipes to demonstrate wealth.

²⁸ <http://www.silk.net/sirene>

It's not arguablely clear that a crust in a trap always delicate and a coffyn is always sturdy, or that cheese fillings always get trap crusts while meat fillings get coffyns.

In fact, #207 *Payne puff* directs the cook to make a "*tendre past*" as a "*coffyn*." I therefore surmise that coffyns could be delicate and not necessarily a stiff, free-standing, hot-water coffin as is commonly depicted in so much early medieval artwork. (Plus, the recipe doesn't direct the cook for form a "stiffe" coffyn, as many recipes do.)

How about crusts in traps? Well, logic dictates that if something is sturdy on its own, it wouldn't need a pan to support it. If something calls for a pan, then it's probably relatively delicate.

That's a long-winded way of saying that I think this is meant to be a fairly "short" crust... although the higher protein content of English granary flour (approximated by modern white whole wheat flour) means that it would not have been as flaky as a modern pastry dough made of low-gluten white wheat flour and cold shortening.²⁹ Elizabeth David's ***English Bread and Yeast Cookery*** explains in detail how Medieval milled flour would have had a higher protein (and thus, more gluten) content than today's all-purpose flour.

Okay, so since the recipe doesn't say how to make the pie crust or what ingredients it needs, how do I decide that?

I could go with a simple pastry without any fat, as described in the fairly contemporary recipe, *Ryschewys Closed and Fried*,³⁰ but I'm not convinced that the resulting tough pastry dough is what would be desired here.

There doesn't seem to be any other contemporary recipes for pie crusts; the only one I can find is 100 years later, but would result in a relatively flaky pastry: "*Take fyne floure and a curscy of fayre water and a dysche of swete butter and a lyttel saffron, and the yolkes of two egges and make it thynne and as tender as ye maye.*"³¹

Okay, so I'll make a crust with white whole wheat flour, some freshly made cool (but not cold) butter, an egg yolk, and enough cold water (colored with a pinch of saffron) to make a pie crust. It is *not* delicate, but it's also not a tough crust.

10. The cooking methods were pretty straightforward: I rolled out the dough with a wooden pin and pressed the pie crust into a ceramic tarte tatin pan. I blanched the onions and herbs, pressed them in a sieve, and minced them finely with a sharp knife. Much medieval food preparation was accomplished in a mortar in much the way we blend things in a bowl³², so I dumped the drained cheese curds in a large ceramic bowl and broke them up with a wooden rounded spoon. I added the eggs and butter to make a smooth mixture, then blended in the remaining ingredients. I scraped everything into the pie crust, then baked it at a standard quiche temperature and length of time: 350 for about 30 minutes until the center was set but not overdone.

Ice Dragon XXV, March 2, 2002 --Culinary/Main Dish

THL Katja Orlova Davidova Khazarina

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KatjaOrlova@yahoo.com / <http://www.geocities.com/katjaorlova/MedFood.html>

²⁹ "In virtually all cases the flour was what we would call 'whole grain,' unbolted, without the bran normally having been separated from the kernel." Pg. 68, Scully.

³⁰ "...then take fine paste of flour and water, sugar, saffron and salt." *Two Fifteenth Century Cookbooks*.

³¹ *To Make Short Paest for Tarte, A Proper Newe Book, 16th Century*.

³² Pg. 211, Scully.