

Making Sense of Strawberries

an analysis of six related recipes

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Introduction

Interpreting a recipe from a medieval English source can be a challenge, not just because of changes in spelling, but also because of changes in semantics. Changes in the meaning of words and the underlying cultural subtext can have a substantial impact on the understanding of the recipe and the anticipated final product.

The five recipes below all essentially bear the same name, and aside from tart recipes are pretty much the only ones in the medieval English corpus that call for strawberries. They all use strawberries, almond milk, and spices, but it is the differences between the recipes that provide clues as to how the final dish should turn out. If they are examined in chronological order, the evolution of the dish becomes clear and possible copying or translation errors are highlighted.

The Recipes

Recipe A is fairly straightforward, ground strawberries mixed with almond or cow's milk and spices, and then thickened with bread and eggs. Presumably the mixture is cooked after the eggs are added. Hieatt and Jones translate the name of this recipe (along with Recipe B) as "Strawberry Pottage", which predisposes the reader to imagine that the final product should be like a soup or stew. While this is possible, it is not necessarily so, and is not consistent with later versions of the recipe.

Recipe B is similar to A in the base ingredients of strawberries and almond milk, but there are some notable differences. Here instead of eggs the mixture is thickened with either amidon or rice flour, cinnamon and sugar are specifically called for instead of the generic "spices", and it is colored "red" instead of using saffron. This recipe also specifies "*char grosse*", which Hieatt and Jones translate as "beef, pork, or mutton". This translation would lead one to assume that this is some kind of meat dish, which may be incorrect.

Recipe C appears to be a contemporary translation of Recipe B. In this recipe the phrase "*char grosse*" is rendered as the somewhat enigmatic "*gret vlehs*".

Recipe D appears to be a contemporary translation of Recipe A.

Recipe E is a sort of hybrid recipe of the above, which was then merged with three other recipes to save on writing or copying.

Recipe F is by far the most detailed and is similar to Recipes B and C in that it lacks dairy and eggs, however it does not call for “*char grosse*” or “*gret vlehs*”.

Analysis

With the exception of Recipe E, the recipes can easily be divided into two types: a “lenten” form for the religious days when eggs and dairy were forbidden, and a “normal” form for other days. It is very common to find this sort of pairing of recipes in medieval cookbooks, as it was necessary for medieval cooks to prepare diverse banquets during religious holidays. This also helps to explain why two of these very similar recipes appear in the same source (Recipes C and D). The merged form of these two recipes would be something like the following:

Strawberry (normal version - A,D) Take clean [boiled] strawberries and grind them. Mix with almond milk or cow’s milk. [Bring to a boil.] Add some bread, season with spices, and color with saffron. Mix in some eggs [and simmer] until thick. Garnish [with whole strawberries].

Strawberry (lenten version - B,C,F) Mix [ground] strawberries with [red wine, strain and add] almond milk, rice flour or amidon, [great flesh,] [boil until very thick, then add currants, saffron, pepper, ginger, galangal,] cinnamon, and sugar. [Dot with lard and vinegar.] Color it red [with alkanet] and garnish [with strawberries][with pomegranate seeds].

Boiled or Washed?

Recipes A and B on their own do not state that the mixture should be cooked. All of the other versions however, say that the mixture is to be boiled. In fact, a couple of the recipes state it several times. It can therefore be interpreted that the recipe was cooked, and the instructions for such in the early text were omitted as being understood.

Recipe F uses the word “washed” early on where the word “boil” might be expected. This may be derived from a misinterpretation of “*nettement*” in Recipe A. It’s not clear that washing strawberries in wine would be much different than washing them in water, but boiling fruit in wine is very common in medieval English recipes, as is the use of wine instead of broth for lenten recipes. Further, recipe F instructs that the strawberries should be strained through a cloth, which is much easier and more practical if the strawberries have been boiled first (as they apparently have in Recipe D). Straining would remove the seeds and fiber, while letting the juice and pectin remain.

Great Flesh?

The phrase “*char grosse*” and “*gret vlehs*” have led some to interpret this recipe as being a sauce. This is somewhat inconsistent though, in that these terms only appear in the versions of the recipe in which all the other ingredients are consistent with medieval lenten recipes. That someone would go to the trouble to thicken a sauce with amidon instead of eggs and use almond milk instead of cow’s milk, only to then add meat to the dish seems counterintuitive.

The term “char” in Middle-French and Middle-English was often used to refer to the edible part of fruit - much as “flesh” is sometimes used modernly, or “meat” is used to describe the edible part of nuts.

Further, these phrases show up surrounded by thickeners and spices - an unlikely place for “large pieces of meat” to appear.

It is unclear just what is meant for here, but Heatt’s and Jones’ “beef, pork, or mutton” is not likely to be it. Perhaps it was meant as a modifier for amidon, calling for “big chunks” (amidon was dried in large pieces and had to be ground before use). It might also be a reference to some other ingredient that was misspelled or miscopied.

How Thick?

The earlier recipes do not indicate the intended consistency of the dish, but they do make use of the common medieval thickeners. Almond milk naturally thickens when boiled, eggs were used to make custards, and bread, amidon, and rice flour were all used to thicken sauces and soups. This combined with the natural pectin level in the strawberries suggests an almost jelly-like product.

Recipe E says to cook it “wel pykke” and Recipe F uses the term “chargeaunt” - which another recipe from the same source as F describes as being too thick to pour. Clearly a jelly or pudding like consistency is expected here.

Conclusions

The set of related recipes appeared to be variants on the same dish, but when read in the context of meat and meatless feast days it becomes clear that they are actually two separate dishes with the one being thickened with starch and almond milk instead of eggs. The strawberries were probably cooked before use, possibly in wine. Both dishes were likely to be very thick, similar to jelly or pudding, and not pourable like a sauce or soup.

Recipe A (ca. 1290)

17. Fresee. E un autre viaunde, ke ad a noun fresee. Quillez nettement freseus, e pus braez les; e pus pernez let des alemaundes ou de vache e destemprez le bien; e pus metez un [poi] de paun de wastel, e liez le bien espe/s e colurez le de seffran, e des oeufs liez, e metez de freseus entirs.

17. Strawberry pottage. Here is another dish, which is called strawberry pottage. Gather strawberries cleanly and grind them; then take almond or cow's milk and mix thoroughly; then add a little wastel bread and some eggs, and thicken the mixture well; color it with saffron, and put whole strawberries on top.

British Library: Additional 32085, as presented in "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections Edited from British Library Manuscripts Additional 32085 and Royal 12.C.xii", by Constance B. Heatt and Robin F. Jones, *Speculum* 61/4 (1986), p.859-882.

My translation: 17. Strawberry. And another dish, that has the name strawberry. Neatly gather strawberries, and grind them. And then take almond milk or cow's and temper it well. And then put a little wastel bread, and alay it with good spices and color it with saffron, and alay it with eggs, and put whole strawberries therein.

Recipe B (ca. 1320)

13. Fryseys. Freses moillez en let d'alemandes, flur de ris ou de amydown, char grosse, poudre de canel, e sucre; colour vermail; freses plaunte/ desus.

13. Strawberry Pottage. Strawberries soaked in almond milk, rice flour or wheat starch; beef, pork, or mutton; ground cinnamon and sugar; the color, red; strawberries set on top.

Royal 12.C.xii, as presented in "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections Edited from British Library Manuscripts Additional 32085 and Royal 12.C.xii", by Constance B. Heatt and Robin F. Jones, *Speculum* 61/4 (1986), p.859-882.

My translation: 13. Strawberries. Strawberries moistened with almond milk, rice flour or amidon, large flesh, cinnamon, and sugar. Color it vermillion. Strawberries planted thereon.

Recipe C (ca. 1325)

13 Freseyes. Streberyen igrounden wyþ milke of alemauns, flour of rys oþur amydon, gret vlehs, poudre of kanele & sucre; þe colur red, & streberien istreyed abouen.

British Library: Additional 46919, as presented in “Curye on Inglysch”, Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, Oxford University Press (1985), p.46.

Recipe D (ca. 1325)

37 An oþur mete þat hatte fresse. Nym clanlyche frissiaus & sobþen grind in a mortar, & sobþen nim milke of alemauns oþer of cou, & tempre wyþ ius of frissiaus; & sobþen do a lute bred of wastel, & lye wel wiþ spesces & ayren & icoloured wiþ saffron, & soben dresse.

British Library: Additional 46919, as presented in “Curye on Inglysch”, Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, Oxford University Press (1985), p.50.

Recipe E (ca. 1381)

46 For to make spine. Nym þe flowerys of þe hawþorn clene gaderyd & bray hem al to dust, & temper hem wyþ almaunde mylk & aly yt wyþ amydown & wyþ eyryn wel þykke; & boyle it & messe yt forth, & flowrys & leuys abouyn on.

47 For to make rosee & fresee & swau: þey schal be ymad in þe selue maner.

MS Douce 257, as presented in “Curye on Inglysch”, Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, Oxford University Press (1985), p.50.

Recipe F (ca. 1435)

.Cxxiiij. Strawberye. - Take Strawberys, & waysshe hem in tyme of zere in gode red wyne; þan strayne þorwe a cloþe, & do hem in a potte with gode Almaunde mylke, a-lay it with Amyndoun oþer with þe flowre of Rys, & make it chargeaunt and lat it boyle, and do þer-in Roysonys of coraunce, Safroun, Pepir, Sugre grete plente, poudere Gyngere, Canel, Galyngale; poynte it with Vynegre, & a lytil whyte grece put þer-to; coloure it with Alkenade, & droppe it a-bowte, plante it with þe graynys of Pome-garnad, & þan serue it forth.

Harleian ms. 279, as presented in “Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery Books”, Thomas Austin, Oxford University Press (2000), p. 29.