

Medieval Beverages for a Hot Day

Many people wonder what sort of drinks was common to the folk in the Middle Ages. There are a number of sources, which provide recipes for beers, wines and meads. These beverages of course were the most common for people to have to drink. Brewed drinks provided a beverage that was typically free from pollution and easy to make in large quantities. The alcohol levels in these brews were low, but high enough to act as a preservative. Grapes were not the only fruit to be made into brews, just about all juices were. Again, this was a way of preserving the fruit juice. Apple juice became cider, pear juice became perry, and so forth. I'm certain that the Brewer's Guild would be happy to expound upon this topic of brewed drinks.

But what sort of non-alcoholic drinks were available during the Middle Ages? How did the people cool their drinks on a hot day? Hopefully, I'll be able to answer both these questions in an interesting and tasty way.

Water

Water, the planet is covered mostly by this most essential material component of life. Vast oceans and seas contain a seemingly inexhaustible supply of water that is too salty to drink and would cause most people to dehydrate than relieve their thirst. Fresh water is in shorter supply. The Middle Ages is not well known for its sanitary treatment of water supplies. It was typical for one town or village on a river to pollute it, with little or no concern for those who may live down river. This is likely due to the basic lack of knowledge of what bacteria or other contaminants were. But the people knew enough that water from such sources were not good for their health.

In The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages, Terence Scully writes "As a mealtime beverage, water did not play as important role on the medieval dinner table as it does today. The same disadvantages militated against the use of water on the table as in the kitchen: only spring-water could be trusted to be free of pollution, and that only with a number of carefully weighed provisos: the discharge from the spring must have a good flow, it must come directly from the ground or a rock, it must be cold, and so forth."

Thus spring water, or water that had been treated was the water that people would drink, except those who did not have the means to have a liquid any other way. To further this, in Food and Drink in Britain (From the Stone Age to the 19th Century), C. Anne Wilson writes, "Of the non-alcoholic beverages the commonest were milk, buttermilk, whey and water. Bede quotes an example of royal initiative in the matter of water provision which took place about the year 628. King Edwin of Northumbria, having noticed clear water springs near the highway in a number of places, had posts erected beside them from which bronze drinking cups were hung. And the people held him in such awe and love that none dared lay hands on them except for their intended purpose." Ann Hagen further supports this in Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink, Production and Distribution by stating "That springs were evidently well-regarded, is evinced by the number of times that a spring suddenly welled-up on the sites were martyrs were slain. King Alfred added to his translation of Boethius on the Golden Age, 'they drank the water of the clear springs'."

Non-Alcoholic Beverages

As noted above, some of the non-alcoholic drinks include Milk, buttermilk and whey. Adding to that list seasonal fruit juices, you had a vast variety of beverages available for consumption. However, a good portion of the milk taken for consumption, or fruit juices made its way into being preserved in such forms as cheese and brewed drinks. Fruit juices were also made into syrups, diluted with cold water, it makes a very refreshing drink. There is still a remaining question, how were beverages cooled on hot days?

Ice and Snow

The answer to the question of how did people in the Middle Ages cooled their drinks seems blatantly obvious. They used ice and snow. But how did they have ice on a hot day, let alone snow? How did they prevent it from melting?

In New Preservation Techniques, Giorgio Pedrocco writes “The use of snow and ice as natural preserving agents goes back to ancient times. The homes of the rich contained wine cellars and deeper underground spaces where ice and foodstuffs could be kept. Each town or village had one or more icehouses – buried structures in which the ice collected during the winter was stored for later use to preserve meat, fish, and vegetables.” According to Charles Panati in Ancient Inventions “Even normal Greeks and Roman bought snow and ice imported on donkey trains. Few could afford private ice houses. Most urban residents bought it at snow shops. In Rome deep pits were filled with snow and covered with straw. Water melted and ran through forming a bottom layer of ice that sold at a premium. Snow could be more expensive than wine.”

Charles Panati also states “There were ice houses in the Near East as early as 1700 B.C. when Zimri-Lin, a ruler of Mari (an important city on the Euphrates), boasted of having constructed the first ice house on the Euphrate... Alexander the Great built the first Greek ice house.” Ice-houses became more common after the 17th century started. Ice-houses were known in Colonial Williamsburg and were written in accounts of 19th century farm life.

In Europe today, exist well known natural ice-houses, ice caves. Notable ice caves are found in Slovakia, Macedonia and Austria. In a cave formed by a volcanic eruption, conditions can be perfect for water to seep through the ground and freeze in the cave. A temperature trap keeps cold air, below freezing, down in the cave; the same science that is used in modern store freezers.

The serving of iced beverages was quite a sign of hospitality. It has been said that after the battle of Hattin in 1187 with the capture of Guy de Lusignan by Salah al-Din’s (Saladin) forces, Guy was offered a glass of rosewater cooled with snow as a sign that his life was safe. Again, in Baccaccio's The Decameron, it is written "And when they descended to inspect the huge, sunlit courtyard, the cellars stocked with excellent wines, and the well containing abundant supplies of fresh, ice-cold water, they praised [their lodgings] even more."

The use of ice or snow in drinks wasn’t limited to water. It was used to cool any beverage that a person might want cold. In Liberation of the Gourmet, Jean-Louis Flandrin writes “For instance, some physicians argued in favor of the practice of drinking iced wine, which the French took

from the Italians and the Spanish in the sixteenth century.” He goes on to write, “Laurent Joubert, writing in 1580, did not fully accept this new aristocratic custom. Although he was willing to tolerate cooling wine during the summer by immersing bottles in well water ... he refused to countenance the use of ice or snow for the same purpose.”

Recipes

The following recipes are found in An Anonymous Andalusian Cookbook of the Thirteenth Century, translated by Charles Perry. The redactions of these recipes were written in A Miscellany (9th edition), by David Friedman and Betty Cook. Dilute these syrups with water to taste for a tasty beverage, or serve directly over shaved ice or snow for a tasty cold treat. You can find some of these syrups at your local Middle Eastern market today.

Syrup of Simple Sikanjabîn (Oxymel)

Take a ratl of strong vinegar and mix it with two ratls of sugar, and cook all this until it takes the form of a syrup. Drink an ûqiya of this with three of hot water when fasting: it is beneficial for fevers of jaundice, and calms jaundice and cuts the thirst, since sikanjabîn syrup is beneficial in phlegmatic fevers: make it with six ûqiyas of sour vinegar for a ratl of honey and it is admirable.

This seems to be at least two different recipes, for two different medical uses. The first, at least, is intended to be drunk hot. In modern Iranian restaurants, sekanjabin is normally served cold, often with grated cucumber.

Syrup of Pomegranates

Take a ratl of sour pomegranates and another of sweet pomegranates, and add their juice to two ratls of sugar, cook all this until it takes the consistency of syrup, and keep until needed. Its benefits: it is useful for fevers, and cuts the thirst, it benefits bilious fevers and lightens the body gently.

Use equal volumes of sugar and pomegranate juice (found in some health food stores). Cook them down to a thick syrup, in which form they will keep, without refrigeration, for a very long time. To serve, dilute one part of syrup in 3 to 6 parts of hot water (to taste).

Syrup of Lemon

Take lemon, after peeling its outer skin, press it and take a ratl of juice, and add as much of sugar. Cook it until it takes the form of a syrup. Its advantages are for the heat of bile; it cuts the thirst and binds the bowels.

This we also serve as a strong, hot drink. Alternatively, dilute it in cold water and you have thirteenth century lemonade. All three of the original recipes include comments on medical uses of the syrups.

Contact Information:

Mistress Euriol of Lothian
aka Cassandra Baldassano

503 Stone Hedge Place
Mountaintop PA 18707

570-678-7408
euriol@yahoo.com

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