

Almond “Cheese”

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Objective

My goal in this project was to attempt to make a “cheese” or “butter” from almond milk, in a manner similar to the cheese curds I made previously when testing the fourteenth-century recipe for “Frytour of Mylke.” The method described in several medieval recipes is very similar to that for making cheese from animal milk, and having made such cheese many times, this captured my interest. I wanted to find out how well the almond version would work.

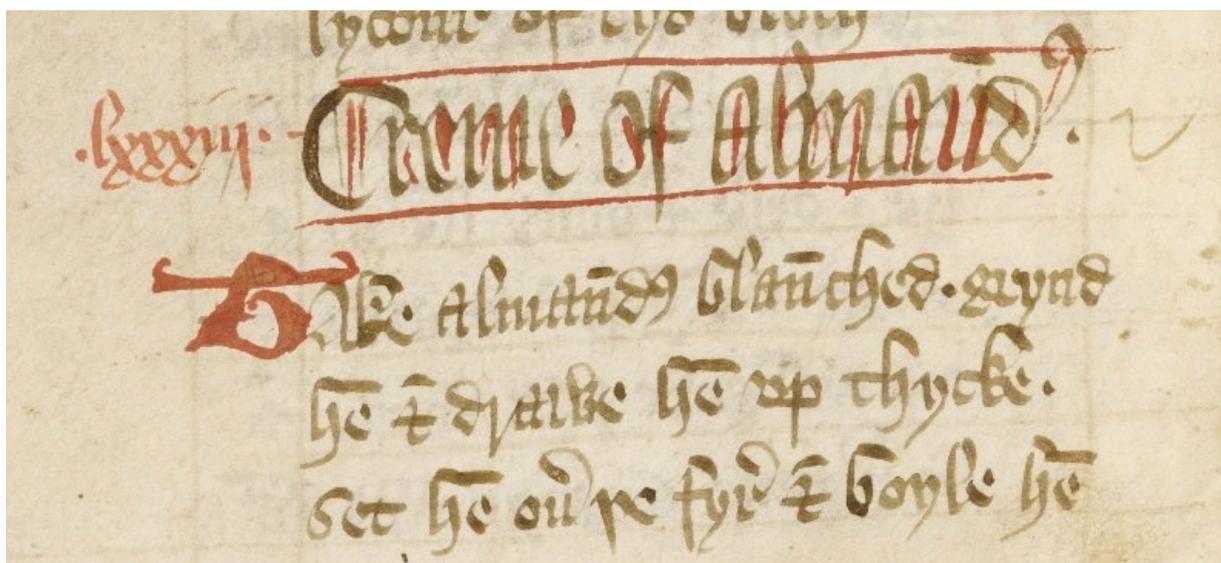


Figure 1. *Creme of Almandes* in page f43v, English MS 7 (*Forme of Cury*), the John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester.

Background: the recipe

Almond “cheese” (or, more commonly, almond butter ~ not to be confused with the peanut butter-like “almond butter” that is found in jars today) is found in several medieval recipe collections. One occurrence is in *The Forme of Cury*, an English collection of recipes compiled in about 1390 by “þe chef mayster cokes of kyng Richardus þe seconde” and existing in several parallel manuscripts that come from a lost original. (“Forme”)

The recipe from *Forme of Cury* has been transcribed by Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler in *Curye on Inglysch*, as follows:

Creme of almaundes.

Take almaundes blaunched; grynde hem and drawe hem vp with water thykke. Set hem ouer the fyre & boyle hem. Set hem adoun and spryng hem with vyneger. Cast hem abrode vpon a cloth, and cast vpon hem sugur; whan it is colde, gadre it togydre and leshe it in disshes. (117)

Also in *Curye on Inglysch*, Hieatt and Butler include transcriptions of two more similar recipes found in the collection *Utilis Coquinario*, another late fourteenth-century or possibly early fifteenth-century manuscript. These versions are:

For to make crem & botere of almoundes.

Tak blaunched almaundes & bray hem wel in a mortar, & tempre hem with luk water. & draw þerof melk as thikke as þou myȝt, & do it in a newe erthen pot, & do þerto vynegre hett a litel. Whan þe melk & þe vene-gre be put togedere perce þe pot benethe þat þe licoure may renne out, & whan it is all ronnen tak þat þat leueth in þe pot & do in a fayre twayle & left it vp & down; & whan þe licoure is out clene, tak it of þe twayle & it is botere & creem.

Botere of almand melk.

Tak þikke almand melk & boyle it, & as it boyleth cast yn a litel wyn or vynegre, & þan do it on a caneuas & lat þe whey renne out. & þan gadere it vp with þyn hondes & hang it vp a myle wey, & ley it after in cold water, & serue it forth. (84)

Other variations on this recipe were found elsewhere in Europe. *Du fait de cuisine*, from the year 1420, gives a version that suggests making the almond butter parti-colored:

Again, an almond butter: and to give understanding to him who should make it let him arrange to have a great quantity of very good sweet almonds and blanch, clean, and wash them very well and put them to be brayed in a mortar which should not smell at all of the scent of garlic, and let them be brayed very firmly and moistened with fair fresh or lukewarm water; and when they are well brayed take them out and strain them very hard through a good and very clean strainer onto a large fair silver dish. And then arrange that he has a fair, clear and clean frying pan and empty it in, then put it on a pretty and fair fire and stir constantly with a fair spoon until it is cooked enough, and put in a little salt; and when it is cooked arrange that he has a good, clean and strong strainer and stretch it over a fair silver dish and let him empty his butter on top and wrap it in the said strainer and then twist it well and strongly until the water in it comes out; and, this being done, let him empty it onto a fair and clean silver dish; and then let him arrange that he has a great deal of very good beaten sugar-but only what is necessary-and mix it in with the said almond butter. And, if it happens that he wants to make it parti-colored, let him put half of the said butter in another silver dish and put and mix in as much beaten saffron as is necessary to make it yellow; and when this comes to the sideboard, let him take his gold or silver dishes and put on each dish white butter on one side and next to it on the same dish colored butter, and then let it be served. (Chiquart)

A Dutch cookbook of the late fifteenth-century, *Wel ende edelike spijsse*, has another take on the recipe:

Butter and cheese made of almonds. Make good almond milk. Then let it boil in a pan. Take good wine vinegar with a spoon, sparingly and little in all. As soon the [almond] milk starts to curdle, pull the food backwards and take a small basket with straw in it and a cloth upon it. Let your food cool on it. Have a small cheese mould and mix sugar with the food in it. Make cheese in the cheese mould and butter in the platter.

All of these recipes are essentially the same. Almond milk is heated, and then wine or vinegar is added to make the mixture curdle. The mixture is then drained (usually through a cloth), and the remaining curds are sometimes mixed with sugar. Here is a modern English version of the *Forme of Cury* recipe:

Cream of almonds.

Take blanched almonds, grind them, and add water to make a thick almond milk. Heat the milk to boiling. Remove from the heat, and sprinkle in a bit of vinegar. Drain the curds in a cloth, and add a bit of sugar. When the curds are cold, squeeze the cloth tight, then slice the cheese into dishes.



Figure 2. Fresh almond milk.

made possible probably enabled me to get a higher yield. I ended up with about three pints of milk.

I then heated the almond milk, stirring occasionally to avoid scorching and sticking. This could easily be done over a period-style cooking fire, given the correct tools and implements. However, I do not currently have access to those materials, nor to a cooking fire, so I made the cheese on my (relatively) modern stove, cooking the milk in an enameled cast-iron pan. After a while but before it reached the boiling point, the milk began to thicken noticeably.

When the milk came to a boil, I let it boil for a minute and then removed it from the burner and added a small amount of white wine vinegar, about a teaspoon. Odile Redon suggests either red or white wine vinegar for use in most medieval cooking, depending on the recipe (43). White seems more suited for making a white cheese, so I chose to use white wine vinegar.

The milk did not curdle as obviously as cows' milk usually does when I make acid-coagulated cheese curds using this method. Typically when making this cheese with cows' milk, one can see a nearly-immediate separation of the milk and whey. However, this is not cows' milk, and I was unsure whether I should expect such an obvious curdling.

I know from experience that when too much acid is used in making this type of cheese, the curds do not form correctly, and so I had some concern that I might be using too much vinegar in the almond milk. Since it had thickened quite a bit anyway, I went on with the process. Though the medieval recipes do not mention it, I let the mixture sit for about five minutes so that curds might form more strongly. This is what I usually do when making acid-coagulated cheese from cows' milk.

After waiting for five minutes, I poured the mixture (which had thickened nicely, though it hadn't separated and "curdled" quite like cow's milk) into a muslin cloth and hung it to drain¹. It was still very hot, too hot to

The process

I followed the *Forme of Cury* recipe as given above.

I began with almond milk, which I made from eight ounces of raw, blanched almonds. I made part of the milk by following the directions in *Forme of Cury*: I ground the almonds in a mortar, adding water until the consistency seemed correct. I then strained the almond solids out of the milk. This method works nicely but is time-consuming; to save time and arm muscles, I then switched to using a modern blender to grind the almonds. The resulting milk was identical to the milk I made by hand-grinding, though I believe the finer grind this



Figure 3. The almond milk after the vinegar is added. You can see that it is thicker.

¹ I used a cotton muslin cloth; in period, this would have been linen, as referred to in several recipes including "Vyaund leche" in *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery Books* (36).



Figure 4. The almond cheese in the draining cloth.



Figure 5. In comparison, this is what cheese made from cows' milk looks like when unwrapped-and in better lighting.



Figure 6. Parti-colored almond cheese; the bright yellow “botere” is colored with saffron, as recommended in Du Fait de Cuisine.

squeeze out the “whey,” so I waited about an hour before I returned to the draining cloth. Once it had cooled, I was able to squeeze the cloth tight and squeeze out the remaining “whey.”

After I had squeezed out the last of it, I unwrapped the cloth to find a mostly-solid mass that looked exactly like acid-coagulated milk cheese would at this stage. It looked a bit dry but was actually somewhat similar to cream cheese in texture, and not dry at all in mouthfeel. I tried some of it plain on a bread roll, spreading it on with a knife, and it tasted fairly neutral, with a slight almond taste and just a touch of the vinegar remaining. Then I added sugar as recommended in many of the medieval recipes, including that in the *Forme of Cury*, and tried it again. With sugar, it tasted good and made a very nice spread for bread. (Though the recipes didn't mention it, I also tried some with powder douce, and that was exceptionally good.)

When I mixed the sugar in and stirred the cheese, it looked more smooth, much more like butter or whipped cream than like cheese. The appearance is very similar to some kinds of butter or cheese (even slightly yellow).

As recommended in the recipe in *Du fait de cuisine*, I tried mixing in some ground saffron to color a portion of the cheese. The result was a lovely yellow color.

Conclusions

Though it was a bit disconcerting that the almond milk and vinegar did not behave exactly the way that I am used to with cows' milk and vinegar, the recipe does create a result that is both fairly good to eat (particularly once sugar is added) and rather feasible as a substitute for animal-based soft cheese and butter on days when one's persona cannot eat flesh, though it does not taste much like the real thing. It is not terribly hard to make, and in the context of SCA events, could be used as necessary for feast guests who are following a vegan diet.

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