Edible Coffins; Medieval Pastry

Introduction

If you know anything about medieval food, you’ll know that pastry was important as a food preserver. Food would be cooked in a pastry case called a coffin, for transportation, then cut out of the coffin, which would be thrown away. Experimentation by SCA cooks has actually shown that food can be cooked in a pastry case and stored for around a week in a cool place, so long as there are no gaps in the pastry.

But that’s not the whole story. You do find pie recipes, particularly for meat dishes, where the text specifies a coffin, and this is probably what’s referred to above. However, you come across recipes with more delicate, luxurious fillings, and these refer to the casing as a “fair paste.” These fair pastes may be sweetened or use luxury ingredients like sugar or saffron, which would not have gone into a dish that wouldn’t be eaten. I think these were two different formulations, one intended to be eaten, the other not (or at least distributed as alms for charity).

During the SCA period, one of the great culinary innovations was introduced – shortcrust pastry. This led to an explosion of new recipes for pies and tarts designed to showcase this new development. And from shortcrust pastry was developed the first puff pastry.

This collegium traces this evolution of pastry, and will hopefully provide you with some tips for making better pastry. Although you can buy shop bought pastry, making your own is not as difficult as it sounds, and means you can control the recipe far more than you can with bought pastry.

A Little Bit o’ Science

One thing I’ve come to realise – if you understand what’s happening with cooking techniques and ingredients, it helps makes the process much smoother (and helps you understand what went wrong sometimes).

The Nature of Gluten

Gluten is a protein, that when wet, can stick to itself and form long chains. It can also change its shape, especially when heated and moulded. When it’s heated, gluten stretches, and when it cools, it relaxes, but it retains its shape. However, the more you work it, the more gluten sticks together, and becomes tougher.
The Role of Shortening (Fat)

Shortening is fat. The most common fat added to pastry is butter, though you can also see lard pastries. Shortening acts as an extra binder in pastry. These pastries will tend to be crumblier (or more tender) than pastries without shortening. If you add too much shortening, your pastry won’t bind, as the shortening interferes with the gluten.

The Role of Sugar

Sugar, as it heats, turns from a solid, to a liquid. As this liquid cools, it re-forms into a solid, but the sugar crystals are now more cohesive. These sugar crystals will stick to each other, and any other materials in the mix. A pastry with sugar in the mix will therefore be crisper than one without. However, it may tend to spread while it’s cooking and it’s more liquid. You will also find that pastry with sugar will stick a lot more to the baking container, so DEFINITELY don’t forget to grease the tray. Even silicon bakeware can stick to sugar pastries, though not as badly.

Early Pastries

There are very rarely recipes for early pastry, and they don’t contain any shortening or eggs to bind them. This means you’re entirely relying on the gluten to bind the pastry, so you have to warm the gluten.

Coffyns

You tend to find “coffyns” associated with meat recipes, and I suspect these were the ones where the pastry wasn’t meant to be eaten (by nobility). The flour was probably much coarser.

The following recipe comes from Peter Brears.¹ He has experimented with both hot and cold water, and discovered you can’t make pastry with cold water if there is no shortening.

225g wholemeal flour
Approx. 150mL boiling water
½ tsp salt

Put the flour and salt in a bowl in a mound, and make a well in the centre. Pour the boiling water into the well, then use a spatula or spoon to mix. When the pastry is cooler, get your hands in to finish

¹ Peter Brears, Cooking and Dining in Medieval England, 129.
incorporating the pastry. You will need to work fairly fast, as the pastry will stiffen as it cools. Either roll the pastry out, or put it in your pie tin and press into shape. This will make enough pastry to fill a 20cm pie tin, with a lid.

It’s important to make the well in the flour, rather than just pouring the water over the flour. If you don’t make the well in the centre, the top layers of the flour will absorb all the water but the flour at the bottom of the bowl won’t be incorporated as well. Making a well in the flour distributes the water through the flour much better.

**Fair Pastes**

In sweet recipes such as custard or fruit tarts, you will see “fair paste”. Because they’re referred to as “fair,” I believe these mixes were meant to be consumed.

Harleian MS 4016. 140

*Take and make faire paste of floure, water, saffron and salt; And make rownde cofyns pere-of; and þen make stuff as þou doest for risshesheses, and put þe stuff in þe Coffyns, and cover the cofyns with þe same paste, and fry hem in goode oyle as þou doest for rissheshewes and serve hem forthe hote in the same maner.*

Take and make fair paste of flour, water, saffron and salt. And make round coffins thereof, and then make stuff as thou do for rissoles, and then cover the coffins with the same paste, and fry them in good oil as thou do for rissoles and serve them forth hot in the same manner.

There is a similar recipe in Harleian MS 279.1v, which adds sugar to the recipe. Adding sugar will make for a crisper pastry.

This recipe is also from Peter Brears.²

250g white flour
150mL water
Large pinch saffron
½ tsp salt
Optional: 75g sugar

In a saucepan, heat the water, saffron and sugar if using to boiling (and the sugar has dissolved). Put the flour and salt in a bowl in a mound, and make a well in the centre. Pour the boiling water into the

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² Peter Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*, 130.

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well, then use a spatula or spoon to mix. When the pastry is cooler, get your hands in to finish incorporating the pastry.

The First Shortcrust Pastry

The earliest recipe representing what we call shortcrust pastry appears in England in 1545, but it is likely shortcrust pastry was first developed in Italy. As with most recipes, you don’t really get instructions. But this is the first time you get butter and eggs appearing, and after this, actual recipes for pastry start appearing much more often. This is one of the ways you can tell this is a departure. Prior to shortcrust pastry, pastry recipes were rarely recorded because it was one of those things everyone knew.

To make short paste for tarte.

Take fyne floure and a cursey of fayre water and a dysche of swete butter and a lyttel saffron, and the yolckes of two egges and make it thynne and as tender as ye maye.

250g flour
125g butter
Pinch saffron
2 egg yolks
Approx. 40mL water (roughly 2tbs water)

Beat the egg yolks lightly and set aside. Dissolve the saffron in the water. Cut the butter into small cubes and add to the pastry. Using just the tips of the fingers, rub the butter into the flour so the flour becomes coated in butter and starts to resemble breadcrumbs. Add the eggs and the water and beat lightly to bring the mix together into a pastry. Handle everything as little as possible – if you start to heat the flour and butter too much, it will start to become much tougher as the gluten strands start to bind. Allow the pastry to rest in a cold place for at least half an hour before using.

The eggs here are not being used to bind – they are there to enrich the dough. As we will see later on, you don’t actually need the egg yolks to bind the pastry.

You can also make this recipe in a food processor, however mixing by hand doesn’t actually take that long. The blades of the food processor can actually heat the mix too much and make it less tender. The recipe makes enough for a 24cm pie with a lid.

Another recipe:

TO MAKE FINE PASTE

Take fair flour and wheat and the yolks of eggs with sweet butter, melted; mixing all
these together with your hands, till it be brought down paste. Then make your coffins, whether it be for pies or tarts. Then you may put saffron and sugar if you will have it a sweet paste. Having respect to the true seasoning some use to put to their paste beef or mutton broth, and some cream.³

This recipe suggests you can add sugar to your pastry, or meat broth if you want a savoury pastry. However, there is one very, very significant issue with this recipe: it is not going to work. When you melt the butter, you are separating the liquid from the solid – the fat. As shortcrust pastry relies on the fat to bind the pastry, separating the fat out is going to interfere with this.

_The Good Huswife’s Jewell_ appeared in the Elizabethan age, when the introduction of the printing press and the appearance of a middle class led to an explosion of cookbooks appearing. Some of these were written by cooks, who didn’t necessarily want to reveal all their secrets; others were written by editors who talked to cooks and didn’t always understand what they were being told. So you do come across recipes you simply can’t get to work no matter how hard you try.

### French Puffin— The First Puff Pastry

**A French Puffin.**

Take and make a verye fine peece of paste with yolkes of Egs and sweete butter and sugar: and drive your cakes very thin and fine, six or seaven, and put butter molten betweene everye one of them, make your cakes little round ones, and let there be a good deale of Butter in the dishe bottom and then set them in the Oven till they be baked inough, then strew on sugar upon it and serve it out.⁴

**To make a butter paste.**

Take flour, and seven or eight eggs, and cold butter and fair water, or rosewater, and spices (if you will) & make your paste. Beat it on a board, and when you have so done, divide it into two or three parts and drive out the piece with a rolling pin. And dot with butter one piece by another, and then fold up your paste upon the butter and drive it out again. And so do five or six times together, and some not cut for bearings. And put them into the oven, and when they be baked, scrape sugar on them, and serve them.⁵

250g flour  
4 egg yolks  
20mL rose water  
100g butter

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³ Thomas Dawson, _The Good Housewife’s Jewel_, ed. Maggie Black, 70.
⁵ Thomas Dawson, _The Good Housewife’s Jewel_, ed. Maggie Black, 70.
Lightly beat the egg yolks and rose water. Sift the flour into a bowl, then make a well in the centre. Pour the eggs into the well, and mix the flour and eggs together. Add more water if necessary. Roll the pastry into a rectangular shape about 3 times as long as it is wide. Cut the butter into little cubes and dot over the surface of the pastry. Fold the pastry into three – use two thirds of the pastry in the first fold, then fold the final third of the pastry over the top. Then turn the pastry so the short side is in front of you, and roll the pastry out again to about 3 times as long as it is wide. Fold the pastry in thirds again, and then turn and roll out again. Fold the pastry into thirds again, but this time leave to rest until it is needed.

The gluten is shaped into layers by the folding and rolling, and the butter will work to help separate the layers and make them puff up as the pastry cooks.

**Pastry for Special Diets**

A major dietary issue you will probably come across (and usually when you are planning pies) is gluten free. Fortunately these days you can buy quite decent gluten free pastry that actually holds together. You may have worked out that gluten is quite critical in pastry, so making pastry without it is really, really hard.

**Vegan/Lactose Free Pastry**

You don’t need to add eggs to a shortcrust pastry, and you can use dairy free spreads or oil for the shortening.

250g flour
125g dairy free spread, such as Nuttelex
Approx. 40mL water (roughly 2tbs water)
Pinch salt

Cut the dairy free into small cubes and add to the pastry. Using just the tips of the fingers, rub the butter into the flour so the flour becomes coated in butter and starts to resemble breadcrumbs. Add the water and beat lightly to bring the mix together into a pastry. Handle everything as little as possible – if you start to heat the flour and butter too much, it will start to become much tougher as the gluten strands start to bind.
Cooking Pastry

If you are baking a case for a tart, you will need to blind bake the case first. This means you are partially cooking the case, otherwise you are going to wind up with partially cooked pastry and a soggy bottom.

To blind bake, roll the pastry out and line the tart case. Prick the bottom of the case all over with a fork – there is going to be air trapped underneath, and this will allow the air to escape (the holes will fill during baking). Line the case with baking paper, then fill with weights, such as dried pulses. If the pastry has an edge, wrap this in foil with the shiny side out, to stop it burning. Bake the filled case for around 8 minutes in a hot oven (around 200 degrees), then carefully remove the weights and baking paper, and bake for a further 10 minutes to allow the bottom to crisp and dry. The filling will probably have to be cooked at a lower temperature.

Further Reading

A Proper Newe Booke of Cookerye ed. Anne Ahmed. Cambridge: Corpus Christi College, 2002. Contains a facsimile of the original manuscript with an excellent translation, plus good redactions of some of the recipes, plus a discussion of the manuscript. I do wish all period cookbooks had editions this good!

Brears, Peter. Cooking and Dining in Medieval England. Totnes: Prospect Books, 2008. A massive tome that deals with all aspects of producing and preparing food in the medieval period. There are also many recipes, but try to find the original and compare to Brears’ recipe, as sometimes he changes things for no good reason.

Brears, Peter. Cooking and Dining in Tudor and Early Stuart England. Totnes: Prospect Books, 2015. A massive tome that deals with all aspects of producing and preparing food in this period of massive social change. Again, make sure to find the original recipes to check.

Dawson, Thomas. The Good House wife’s Jewel ed. Maggie Black. Lewes: Southover Press, 1996. A late Elizabethan household manual. However, the original was published in 2 parts, and Maggie Black has edited these into a single volume, re-organising and leaving recipes out. I also don’t agree with some of her translations. Still, this is easier to read than the block letter printed original.

Fulton, Margaret. Margaret Fulton’s Encyclopedia of Food and Cookery. Sydney: Grant Hardin Books, 2009. If you do any sort of cooking and you don’t have this book, what are you DOING? Margaret Fulton is
known as “the woman who taught Australia how to cook” for very good reason. This book describes just about any cooking technique you can think of, and also describes many ingredients and how to use them. I reach for this book A LOT to find base recipes for things.


Cookbooks explain the “how” of cooking; in this book McGee explains a lot of the “why.” Essential reading for understanding cooking, especially for those of us who want to ignore Heston when he says “Please don’t try this at home!”


These books show the standard you should be aiming for in redactions. Renfrow is a SCAdian, and these recipes are taken from two C15 English manuscripts. Volume 1 has the original recipe, a translation, and a redaction, with notes, menus and a glossary. Volume 2 is the recipes and translations from the C15 manuscripts that haven’t been redacted.


This essay traces how four foods evolved in the Middle Ages, including pastry.


An absolutely essential book in any SCA cook’s library. Contains information about the production and preparation of food, and the scientific ideas behind food of the time.