

Bisket bread

Lady Katherine Rowberd

Category: Cooking (single dish)

Level: Intermediate

Overview

Elizabethan food is characterized by its use of sugar in just about everything, and the popularization of a range of sweet finger-foods called "banqueting dishes". One such dish is bisket bread, a hard, spiced cake made with flour, sugar, eggs, and spices. Recipes for bisket bread are found all through cookery books in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and although the recipes vary considerably it is possible to draw generalised conclusions from them.

The dish I have prepared is a reconstruction based primarily on a recipe from Thomas Dawson's 1596 book, *The Good Huswife's Jewell*, with additional tips garnered from a few other recipe books written just after 1600.

Dawson's recipe

To make fine bisket bread

Take a pound of fine flower, and a pound of suger, and mingle it together, a quarter of a pound of Annis seedes, foure eggs, two or three spoonfuls of Rose water put all these into an earthen panne. And with a slyce of Wood beate it the space of two houres, then fill your moulds halfe full: your mouldes must be of Tinne, and then lette it into the oven your oven, beeing so whot as it were for cheatbread, and let it stande one houre and a halfe: you must annoint your moulds with butter before you put in your stuffe, and when you will occupie of it, slice it thinne and drie it in the oven, your oven beeing no whotter then you may abide your hand in the bottome.

This recipe, like most of the period, is much easier to understand if you already know what it's trying to tell you. The average Elizabethan cook would have known what bisket bread looked and tasted like, and would have been familiar with the usual techniques and tools of Elizabethan cookery. Unfortunately I am not as familiar with these things as the average Elizabethan cook, and so I had to work it out for myself.

On first perusal, the recipe appears to call for:

- 1 lb flour
- 1 lb sugar
- ¼ lb aniseed (whole)
- 4 eggs
- 2-3 spoonfuls rosewater

Already some difficulties are evident. Minor questions include "how big is the spoon they're using for rosewater?" and "How big is an Elizabethan pound?" The more immediate concern is that there seems to be a *lot* of whole aniseed in there. What's going on?

When it comes to the question of how the dish was cooked, we have another set of questions to answer:

- What sort of baking dish ("moulde") is it cooked in?
- How hot should the oven be?
- How long should it cook for?

We can answer these questions in part through knowledge of modern cookery, and in part through research into Elizabethan cookery in general and other bisket bread recipes in particular.

Supporting evidence from other recipes

Luckily there are many other recipes for bisket bread, and these can help us answer some of the questions we had about Dawson's recipe. All the bisket bread recipes I could find are gathered in Appendix A, but a summary table appears below:

<i>Author</i>	<i>Recipe</i>	<i>Flour</i>	<i>Sugar</i>	<i>Eggs</i>	<i>Yeast</i>	<i>Aniseed</i>	<i>Coriander</i>	<i>Rosewater</i>	<i>Other flavours</i>	<i>Cooking method</i>
Dawson	1	1 lb	1 lb	4		¼ lb		2-3 spoons		Loaf, sliced and dried
Dawson	2	½ peck		8		1 oz		1 pint	Musk. Muskadine (wine)	As you think best
Plat	1	½ peck		4 whites	½ pint ale yeast	1 oz	2 oz			Loaf, sliced and dried
Markham	1	1 lb	1 lb	8 whole, 4 yolks		½ oz	½ oz			Loaf or flat cakes
Fettiplace	1	1 lb	1 lb	8		1 oz	½ oz			Flat cakes
Fettiplace	2	1 lb	½ lb	9 whites, 6 yolks		?	?			Loaf, sliced and dried
Fettiplace	3	1 lb	1 lb	16 yolks, 4 whites		?	?			Flat cakes
Fettiplace	4	1 lb	1 lb	12 yolks, 6 whites		?		3 spoons	Fennel, caraway	Flat cakes

The first thing I noticed is that the ¼ lb of aniseed recommended by Dawson is not immensely more than is suggested by other authors. Most suggest ½ to 1 ounce for a recipe using 1 lb of flour, and some combine it with coriander or other spices.

Generally we see about 1 to 1 ½ oz of spices, as opposed to Dawson's 2oz. So it appears that Dawson was suggesting more spice than was common, but not so much more that it was as completely improbable as I originally thought. Dawson does not suggest to grind the spices, while other recipes sometimes do, so perhaps the whole anniseeds are less strong in flavour than ground anniseed?

The next obvious thing is that there are two primary cooking methods for bisket bread. The first is to cook it as a loaf, either poured into a tin or moulded on a tray (presumably the mixture is stiffer). When the loaf is mostly cooked, it is taken out,

allowed to cool, sliced, and the slices are dried in a warm oven to make a crisp bread that will keep well.

The second method is to cook the bisket bread as a thin cake. Spoonfuls of the mixture are put onto greased plates, and allowed to spread out as they bake. When they are cooked on one side, they are turned over and allowed to cook on the other side. This method does not appear prior to 1600, however.

In terms of ingredients, the eggs, flour and sugar are common ingredients. Some spice or other flavouring is usually added. Only the proportions and the exact spices vary. The exception is Dawson's second recipe, which is a yeast-raised bread with wine in it. This is an anomaly among bisket recipes, and I have more or less ignored it.

My reconstruction

My reconstruction is mostly based on Dawson's recipe quoted in the introduction to this paper, with adjustments and hints taken from the other recipes I read. I made several attempts at baking bisket bread, slightly varying the ingredients and techniques each time, and the resulting recipe is one that has worked well for me and which I believe would not have appeared unusual or incorrect to an Elizabethan confectioner.

Ingredients:

2 ½ cups (370g) flour
1 ½ cups (370g) sugar
1 oz aniseed, ground
½ oz coriander seed, ground
8 whole eggs
butter (to grease the pans)

Beat eggs thoroughly. Gradually sift mixed flour, sugar and spices into the eggs, beating constantly for about half an hour or until the batter changes to a lighter colour and has bubbles in it. Allow to rest a few minutes, or tap the bowl on the bench top, to encourage the largest bubbles to rise to the surface.

Butter the inside of two loaf tins. Spoon the mixture into the tin, and bake at 200C/400F for approximately 40 minutes, or until a knife inserted into the middle of the loaf comes out clean.

Turn out and allow to cool. Slice as thinly as you can, and place on a wire rack in a warm oven (70-100C) for 2 hours or until very dry.

Notes on my reconstruction (materials and techniques)

I chose to use organic white flour and free-range eggs, which are as close to their Elizabethan equivalents as I could easily find. My sugar was plain white cane sugar; although Elizabethan sugar would have been scraped from a cone, I was unable to acquire cone sugar, nor less processed sugar with a fine enough grain for baking.

My spices were ground freshly using an electric spice grinder. I have ground spices by hand in the past, using a mortar and pestle, but my wrists are sensitive to strain and I did not wish to injure myself making this dish. For a similar reason, I used a rotary hand beater to beat the batter. I have beaten the batter with only a wooden spoon in the past, with great success, but on that occasion I also had the assistance of another cook with stronger wrists than mine.

The batter contains no chemical raising agent. Modern biscotti recipes usually use baking soda, but this recipe used only the air whipped into the batter by human effort to make the loaf less heavy. The result is in fact a fairly dense loaf, which must be cut into very thin slices to be easily eaten once dry.

I chose not to include rosewater in my reconstruction; it does not commonly appear in other recipes, and I felt that it might make the batter less able to hold air than if I used only eggs for moisture.

My loaves were baked in metal loaf tins in an electric oven.

My original estimate of the oven heat was 230 degrees celsius (450F), based on Peter Brears' reconstructed recipe for cheat bread. However, this tended to burn the biscuit bread without cooking the inside. I reduced the heat to about 200C (400F) as recommended in several modern biscotti recipes, with greater success. Cooking time was determined by experimentation.

I sought information on Elizabethan weights and measures online, as I did not have access to the necessary books. According to information garnered from a member of the SCA-Cooks mailing list, who found in the information in Zupko's "Dictionary of Weights and Measures", flour and sugar were measured using troy ounces and pounds, while spices were measured using avoirdupois (avdp.) ounces. A troy pound contains 12 ounces, each troy ounce weighing 31.103g. An avdp ounce weighs 28.359g. Therefore, the measures used for spices in my recipe are approximately the same as modern measures, but the pound used for flour and sugar should really weigh about 370g.

Appendix A: Full recipe sources

Dawson, the Good Huswife's Jewell, 1596

1. To make fine bisket bread

Take a pound of fine flower, and a pound of suger, and mingle it together, a quarter of a pound of Annis seedes, foure eggs, two or three spoonfuls of Rose water put all these into an earthen panne. And with a slyce of Wood beate it the space of two houres, then fill your moulds halfe full: your mouldes must be of Tinne, and then lette it into the oven your oven, beeing so whot as it were for cheatbread, and let it stande one houre and a halfe: you must annoint your moulds with butter before you put in your stuffe, and when you will occupie of it, slice it thinne and drie it in the oven, your oven beeing no whotter then you may abide your hand in the bottome.

2. To make Bisket bread

Firste take halfe a Pecke of fine white flower, also eight newe laide egges, the Whites and Yolkes beaten together, then put the said egges into the Flower, then take eight Graines of fine Muske, and stampe it in a Morter, then put halfe a pint of good Damaske water, or else rosewater into the Muske, and mingle it together, and put it into the wine or Muskadine, but Muskadine is better, and put it into the flowre, also one ounce of good anniseedes, clean picked and put therin, and so to work them altogether into a Paste, as yee doe bread, and then make your biskettes into what fashion you think best, and then put them into an Oven, and bake them hard if you will keepe them long, or else but indifferent, if you will have it candite, take rosewater and Suger, and boyle them together till they be thicke, and so slices of bread, then set hot in the Oven until the same be candit.

Hugh Plat, Delights for Ladies, 1609

1. To make bisket bread, otherwise called French bisket.

Take halfe a peck of fine flower, two ounces of coriander seeds, one ounce of anni seeds, the white of foure eggs, half a pinte of Ale-yeast, and as much water as will make it up into stiffe paste; your water must be but bloud warm: then bake it in a longroll as big as your thigh: let it stay in the oven but one houre, and wne it is a day old pare it and slice it overthwart: then sugar it over with fine powdred sugar, and so dry it in an oven again: and being dry, take it out, and sugar it again: then box it, and so may keep it all the yeere.

Markham, the English Huswife, 1615

1. To make Bisket-bread

To make Bisket-bread, take a pound of fine flower, and a pound of Sugar

finely beaten and searsed, and mix them together, then take eight eggs, & put four yelks, & beat them very wel together; then strew in your flower and sugar as you are beating of it, by a little at once, it will take very near an hours beating, then take half an ounce of Anniseeds and Coriander seeds: and let them be dried and rub'd very lean, and put them in; then rub your Bisket-pans with cold sweet Butter as thin as you can, and so put it in, and bake it in an Oven: but if you would have thin Cakes, then take fruit dishes, and rub them in like sort with Butter, and so bake your Cakes on them, & when they are almost baked, turn them, and thrust them down close with your hand. Some to this Bisket-bread will add a little Cream, and it is not amiss, but excellent good also.

Elinor Fettiplace's Receipt Book, 1604

1. To make bisket bread.

Take one pound of flower, & one pound of sugar, one ounce of anniseeds, half an ounce of coriander seed, mingle these together, take viii eggs beat them verie well, then put in your stuff, then beat it alltogether very well, then take dishes & annoynt them with butter & put the stuf into them, Let the oven be as hot as it is for manchet, when it is brown at top turne it, & set it in againe, if you will have it light put the yolks of viii eggs more into it, & beat the sugar with the eggs, before the flower bee put in.

2. To make bisket bread stif

Put to a pound of flower half a pound of sugar, nyne whites and six yelks of eggs, finelie beaten, mould it together, & make it up in a roule to bake it, when it is baked slice it & drie it, in the oven on a gredyron, you must put in some anniseeds, & coriander in the moulding.

3. To make light Bisket breade

Take a pound of flower & a pownde of sugar, & some caraway seeds & annis seeds, searce your sugare very small, take to every pound of sugar the yokes of xvi eggs & the whites of fowre, & beat them verie well, then put in your flower & sugar & seeds, beating it all well together, then annoynt your dishes with butter & poure in your batter, & so set it in the oven till it bee baked, the oven must not be so hot, as for manchet.

4. To make biskett Cakes. VG

Take the yelks of xii eggs & the whites of six, then beat them verie well, then take a pound of sugar beaten, & searsed, & put it to the eggs, & beat it, till it bee melted, then put in a pound of fine flower, & three spoonfulls of rose water, & beat it well the space of an hower, then put in some fennell seed, caraway seed & annisseed, then stirre it altogether, & have thin plates annointed with butter & put a spoonful in the middle of every plate, & put it in the oven as soone as you can,

when it is bake inough of one side, turne the other side upward, so let it stand in the oven, till it bee through baked, if you will have it made with more sugar, put in the wait of a pound & a quarter to one pound of flower, & the whites of tenne eggs, and the yelks of fower, & three spoonfulls of rose water, & beat it & bake it as you doo the other.

Bibliography

Brears, Peter, "All the King's Cooks: The Tudor Kitchens of King Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace", Souvenir Press, London, 1999

Dawson, Thomas, "The Good Huswife's Jewell", London, 1596

Markham, Gervase, "The English Huswife", London, 1615

Plat, Hugh, "Delights for Ladies", London, 1604

Fettiplace, Elinor, "The Complete Receipt Book of Ladie Elynor Fetiplace", Stuart Press, Bristol, 1994

Zupko, Ronald, "British Weights and Measures: A History from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century", University of Wisconsin, 1977