

An Evaluation of Interpretive Variation within Period Culinary Recreation: Utilizing the Roman olive condiment Epitrium as a test subject.

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Contents

Introduction: a brief description on how the project came to be and why.

The Method: a breakdown of the research and thought processes that yielded the final recipe choices.

Conclusion: what can be taken away from the experiment.

Appendix: notes on the accompaniments.

Ingredient Lists for the Samples

Variation #1: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Coriander Seed, Cumin, Fennel Seed, Rue, Mint.

Variation #2: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Cilantro, Cumin, Fennel Seed, Rue, Mint.

Variation #3: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Coriander Seed, Cumin, Fennel Bulb, Rue, Mint.

Variation #4: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Cilantro, Cumin, Fennel Bulb, Rue, Mint.

Variation #5: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, White Wine Vinegar, Coriander Seed, Cumin, Fennel Bulb, Rue, Mint.

Variation #6: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Coriander Seed, Cumin, Fennel Seed, Rue, Mint.

Variation #7: Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Cilantro, Cumin, Fennel Bulb, Rue, Mint.

Variation #8: Black Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Cilantro, Cumin, Fennel Seed, Rue, Mint.

Variation #9: Black Olives, Green Olives, Olive Oil, Red Wine Vinegar, Coriander Seed, Cumin, Fennel Bulb, Rue, Mint.

Please be aware that every one of these items contains Rue. Rue is not dangerous in small quantities, but if you are pregnant, or have reason to think that you might be pregnant. Please do not eat these samples. Rue is a known abortifacant and inappropriate for pregnant or lactating women.

Introduction

When one first picks up a period culinary manuscript, a significant difference is readily identifiable between a modern cookbook and the text in one's hand. In a modern cookbook one is presented with a list of measurements associated with ingredients. After which one finds explicit instructions as to how to process and combine the presented ingredients. Frequently these instructions include temperatures and time as well as helpful suggestions for troubleshooting problems. For the vast majority of period cookbooks this is not so. The period author assumes a certain level of knowledge of culinary endeavor on the part of the reader. Frequently, the period author was writing a sort of short hand to assist a skilled cook in the preparation of a dish. Because of this most period recipes are lists of ingredients with vague instructions as to how they are to be combined and frequent admonitions to "cook it 'till it be enough".

And all of this is assuming that you have a culinary manuscript for the particular time period you are investigating. Often no such text has survived. Recipes can be gleaned from other sources, where the recipe is mentioned in passing as a listing of ingredients and methods. Or one might have found a listing of the foodstuffs purchased for a particular household, to this you add your knowledge of the available cooking methods to develop possible dishes that might have been served. All of these elements lead to the practice of period culinary recreation to be more of an art than a science. Extensive knowledge of the available food stuffs, processing techniques and cooking methods is required to approach an approximation of a period dish.

Even with the knowledge and experience one is left with the fact that most period recipes can have many, many different interpretations. And it is with this fact that I am interested today. Give a dozen experienced SCA cooks the same recipe and you will most likely receive a dozen different dishes. And each cook will have very good reasoning behind the choices that they made. Each dish will be an entirely feasible recreation of that period recipe. Of course, the accuracy of the dish will depend on the depth of knowledge and experience of the individual cook and each cook will bring something different to the table.

To demonstrate this principle, I have chosen a relatively simple dish from the Roman times, *Epitrium*. The original recipe for *Epitrium* can be found in the agricultural treatise *de Agricultura* written by Cato in the 2nd century BC.

Epityrum album, nigrum, uariumque sic facto: ex oleis albis, nigris, uariisque nucleosis eicito; sic condito; concidito ipsas, addito oleum, acetum, coriandrum, cuminum, feniculum, rutam, mentam; in orculam condito: oleum supra siet. Ita utitor.

Make Green, black or varicolored *epityrum* in this way. Pit the green, black or varicolored olives. Season them thus: Chop them, and add oil, vinegar, coriander, cumin, fennel, rue and mint. Put them in a small jar, with oil on top and they are ready to use. (Dalby, 181).

In one of the many compilations available to the cook of the Current Middle Ages, *A Taste of Ancient Rome*, we are provided with additional information on the condiment:

The Greeks and Romans ate this olive paste together with cheese, whence the derivation of its name (*epitrium* = over cheese). Varro (*De lingua Latina* 7, 86) described it as a Greek recipe, and Columella (12, 49, 9) suggested that the olives be seasoned with salt, lentiscus, rue and fennel (Giacosa, 60).

Dalby provides a contrary opinion for the claimed Greek origin of the dish in a footnote which states: "**Olive relish**, Latin *epitrium*, was a specialty of Sicilian origin according to Varro, *On the Latin Language* 7.86." Whichever proves to be true is of no real importance to this particular investigation. Suffice it to say that the recipe was most assuredly used in the Roman time and was most likely Mediterranean in origin.

I chose this dish specifically because of its deceptively simple appearance. It is a perfect example of vague wording and instructions with a laundry list of ingredients. So I have chosen to illustrate some of the variants that could be posited based on the base recipe. As noted on the cover page, all of these dishes contain Rue. It is not readily available in its fresh form; the rue in these recipes was grown in my backyard. If you are nursing, pregnant or have a possibility that you might be pregnant, please do not sample these dishes. That said I hope you like Olives!

Variation #1:

¼ C Black Olives (medium chop)
¼ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
3/8 t Coriander Seed (ground)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
¼ t Fennel Seed (ground)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

This represents the most basic interpretation of the recipe. I have chosen to use both green and black olives to provide the varicolored appearance and a good balance of flavors. This version assumes that both the Coriander and the Fennel are in their seed form, with the Rue and the Mint being herbs. The Red Wine Vinegar provides a robust tanginess to balance out the strong flavor of the olives. None of the individual flavors should overshadow the others.

Variation #2:

¼ C Black Olives (medium chop)
¼ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
1 fat pinch Cilantro (chopped fine)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
¼ t Fennel Seed (ground)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

And here we have our first choice. Coriander is a plant that is used for both the seed and the leaf. In modern times we are more familiar with the herb Coriander when it is called by the name Cilantro. In another Roman culinary manuscript attributed to Apicius, *Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome*, Coriander is called for in both its fresh and seed form. At times Apicius specifies which to use and at times he does not, leaving it up to the cook. In some recipes the cook can decipher which is meant by the company it keeps. If it is a listing with identifiable herbs, then a good case can be made for it being Cilantro. If instead it is found among distinct spices, one can argue that the intended ingredient is the seed. Unfortunately in the listing provided for us there is one distinct spice; Cumin and two items that are used almost exclusively in their fresh form; Mint and Rue. This leads us to our next variation.

Variation #3:

¼ C Black Olives (medium chop)
¼ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
3/8 t Coriander Seed (ground)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
½ t Fennel Bulb (minced fine)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

Wanting to vary only one ingredient at a time we return here to the spice Coriander to provide the base for varying the second ingredient with two faces: Fennel. Fennel is used both for its bulbous root and its flavorful seed. Either is a viable option in this recipe. And as stated above, one cannot tell which is preferred by its associates.

Variation #4:

¼ C Black Olives (medium chop)
¼ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
1 fat pinch Cilantro (chopped fine)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
½ t Fennel Bulb (minced fine)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

Finally, this variant is the opposite of the first. Instead of the assumption that Cato is calling for all ground spices, we elect to conclude that he prefers the aromatic versions of Coriander and Fennel. This leaves us with one lonely spice, Cumin, in among all the leafy herbs.

After all four variants were completed, I inflicted them upon my ever faithful taster; my husband. Of the four, he liked version three the best. So that is the one I chose to proceed with my next variation. If you don't like it – talk to him.

Variation #5:

¼ C Black Olives (medium chop)
¼ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t White Wine Vinegar
3/8 t Coriander Seed (ground)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
½ t Fennel Bulb (minced fine)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

The recipe specifies that we are to add vinegar. Taking into consideration the Roman love of wine, and the lack of ale in their menus, I feel it is safe to assume that we are speaking of a wine vinegar. Unfortunately there is no way to know if a White or Red Wine Vinegar would be more appropriate. So here is a sample with the spicing of Variation #3 only using White Wine Vinegar instead of Red.

Variation #6:

¼ C Black Olives (medium chop)
¼ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
1 pinch Coriander Seed
1 pinch Cumin Seed
1 pinch Fennel Seed
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

For this variation I wanted to look at technique instead of ingredients. Up to this point all of the spices have been ground spices. I used spices that were purchased pre-ground for convenience. Because the ingredient combination in Variation #1 was predominantly spices I went with those proportions. Instead of using the ground spices I placed a pinch of whole seeds for each spice in a mortar and pestle. After a few quick pounds I had well cracked spices which I added to the mixture. This produces a distinctly different flavor than the ground spices. The recipe provides no instructions to grind the spice or leave it whole. I believe that one could effectively argue that the grinding of spices is an unspoken understanding, but one could also justify leaving the spices whole because Cato does not tell us to grind them. A further variation on this would be to add the spices whole.

Variation #7:

½ C Green Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
1 fat pinch Cilantro (chopped fine)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
½ t Fennel Bulb (minced fine)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

And we come back to ingredients, for this variation and the next. In the recipe it is made clear that you can make a black, green or varicolored *epitrium* so I would be remiss if I did not provide variations with only one color of olive. For the green olive only recipe I chose to base it on the ingredient combination in Variation #4 because green to me says herbs. Variation #4 is the version with the most herbs so it is the one I chose to use.

Variation #8:

½ C Black Olives (medium chop)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
1 fat pinch Cilantro (chopped fine)
3/8 t Cumin (ground)
3/8 t Fennel Seed (ground)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)

As expected, this is the version using only black olives. The only one of the original 4 versions that I have not yet produced a variant on is Variation #2, mostly because it was my husband's least favorite. To compensate for the stronger flavor of the black olives I have increased the quantities of the spices and herbs by a bit.

Variation #9:

¼ C Black Olives (chopped fine)
¼ C Green Olives (chopped fine)
2 T Olive Oil
2 t Red Wine Vinegar
3/8 t Coriander Seed (ground)
¼ t Cumin (ground)
½ t Fennel Bulb (minced fine)
1 inch sprig Rue (chopped fine)
1 pinch Mint (chopped fine)
Olive Oil to cover

For my final variant we are looking once again at technique; specifically, the instruction to “chop” the olives. Exactly what is meant by “chop”? In modern culinary terms there are many specific terms that convey a specific amount of chopped-ness. One can dice, mince, cube or julienne, each of which have very specific meanings and imply a specific end result. But all we are told here is to “chop” the olives. So, for this variation I have chosen to chop the olives very finely, what would be known in a modern kitchen as a mince. And, since I have gone through all of the varieties one full turn, we are back to my husband's favorite ingredient combination. This made it necessary to mince the fennel as fine as the olives so that there was not a discernable texture difference.

Conclusion:

Presented here has been a small selection of the possible interpretations for *Epitrium*. It is my hope that by tasting actual samples it is possible to have a better understanding of what minor variations in a recipe can do to the end product. If one were to speculate how many possible variations there are, I believe the numbers would be vast. From the original four combinations presented here one could expand to eight with the simple change from Red Wine Vinegar to White. Taking those eight combinations and changing to Green olives only we have expanded to 16. Add to that 16 an additional eight containing Black olives only and we reach the number 24.

With that 24 we could change the chopping technique to a fine mince and double the number to 48 varieties. And these are only with the goal of providing a balanced flavor of the ingredients. Should someone choose to, they might desire to create a version that was strongly mint flavored. Then we could have one each of the above 48 versions skewed heavily towards mint and therefore a completely different flavor. Each of the ingredients could be emphasized in this way, providing even more variations. It is up to the individual cook to choose how the dish should be prepared. And each one, assuming knowledge of period cooking techniques, could produce an entirely viable interpretation of this period recipe.

Because we are presented with such vague instructions in many cases; it makes it even more important to have a firm understanding of the culinary context of each recipe, including both culture and cuisine. From this solid grounding a re-creationist can make logical, reasoned decisions regarding the interpretation of each recipe. Finding recipes with more precise instructions becomes of great importance, for it is from those recipes that one can develop a better understanding to apply to the ones that leave much to the imagination.

Which one of these variations is the best? Well, that is up to the individual taster. A cook in period would strive to create the one that most suited his masters' palate, for that would be the final arbiter of "correct". Which one is more historically accurate? They all are.

Bibliography

Dalby, Andrew. *Cato On Farming: De Agricultura*. Prospect Books, Wiltshire. 1998.

Forster, E.S. and Heffner, E. *Columella II De Re Rustica V-IX*. William Heinmann Ltd., London. 1968.

Giacosa, Ilaria Gozzini. *A Taste of Ancient Rome*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 1992.

Appendix:

Considering that you, the judges, might get a bit tired of eating olive relish I have chosen to also provide some accompaniments to go with the relish. I do not consider these to be a part of the entry, although with more work they could be. I have chosen to simply purchase the necessary items from the market to provide you with something to clear your palate.

As has already been addressed, *Epitrium* means “with cheese” when considering its Latin etymology, so I have provided some cheese to go with your olives. I considered preparing my own fresh cheese, but upon doing some research the only documentation for the cheese making process that I could find that was relatively contemporary to Cato was the following excerpt from *De Re Rustica* by Columella:

VIII. It will be necessary too not to neglect the task of cheese-making, especially in distant parts of the country, where it is not convenient to take milk to the market in pails. Further, if the cheese is made of a thin consistency, it must be sold as quickly as possible while it is still fresh and retains its moisture if, however, it is of a rich and thick consistency, it bears being kept for a longer period. Cheese should be made of pure milk which is as fresh as possible, for if it is left to stand or mixed with water, it quickly turns sour. It should usually be curdled with rennet obtained from a lamb or a kid, though it can also be coagulated with the flower of the wild thistle or the seeds of the safflower, and equally well with the liquid which flows from a fig-tree if you make an incision in the bark while it is still green (Forster 285).

What is not immediately evident from reading this portion is that the discussion occurs during Columella's dissertation on goats. While I have ready access to cow's milk it is more difficult to acquire goat's milk. I believe it would be a great deal of fun to further investigate this subject, and hopefully some day soon I will have a separate entry on cheese and cheese making. But for now this project is about olives and I decided to concentrate my efforts there. So the cheese that you are presented today is purchased goat's milk cheese from the market.

If you have *Epitrium* and cheese what shall you eat them upon? The obvious answer is bread. There is no question that bread is period. Bread is the staple of almost every period diet we have encountered. But bread is also one of the most enigmatic food stuffs to document. Arguments have been made that bread was so easy to make that any house wife could do it, so no one ever thought to write it down. Other arguments are made that the techniques for making bread were so important that they were a closely guarded secret among the various guild type organizations that existed over time.

Whichever is true, we have no real way of knowing. But we do know that there are very few surviving recipes for bread in the corpus of culinary manuscripts. As with the cheese, this would make a fascinating project all in itself and hopefully I will be able to explore it in a future entry, but for now I will purchase it from my local baker's guild (I mean market). But, for the sake of documentation below you will find the closest thing to a bread recipe to be found in Cato:

74. Make kneaded bread as follows. Wash hands and mortar thoroughly. Place flour in a mixing bowl, add water gradually, work nicely. When well worked, shape and bake under a crock.

(Dalby 155)

Nice and vague isn't it?