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“A gallon of the finest honey you can get”: Considering Quantity and Domestic Work in Mary Baumfylde’s Receipt Book

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In this short essay, Mary Baumfylde’s 1626 receipt book serves as a proof-text to meditate upon issues of quantity, consumption, and domestic work that emerge from a careful study of her recipes that use honey as an ingredient. The second half of the essay then turns to some pedagogical considerations in teaching these receipts. In particular, I make the case that the study of the receipts specifically calling for honey allows students to think about how the practice of making involves complex engagement between the human and the nonhuman worlds and how material circumstances and seasonal realities often dictated production in the early modern world.

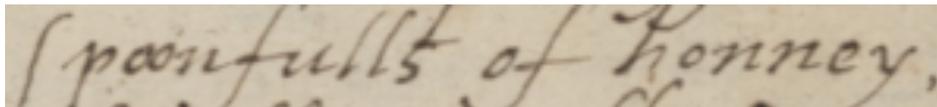
Honey was a valued commodity in Renaissance England,[\[1\]](#) and as such, English men and women often kept bees, trimming hives on their properties, and wintering them so they would have healthy stocks and sufficient yields in the spring. Edmund Southerne, in *A Treatise concerning the right use and ordering of Bees* (1593), notes “how far English honey passeth that of other countries,” thus making a claim for the excellency of honey close to home. A natural sweetener in its own right, honey—what Charles Butler in *The Feminine Monarchie* (1603) called “celestial nectar”—was a go-to alternative for numerous confections

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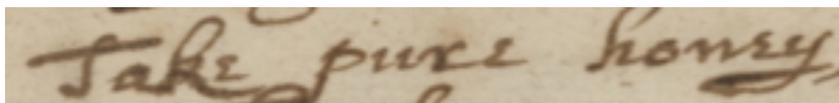
and receipts in the early modern world. According to the *Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities 1550-1820*, “honey was the main sweetener used in cooking” before “sugar was widely and cheaply available.”^[2] However, by the late seventeenth century, John Worlidge, in his *Apiarium; or a Discourse of Bees* (1676), would remark that sugar currently had more repute than honey, for now sugar was prescribed for “Conserving, Preserving, or other Confectionating” (1-2). Yet for most of the century, having this relatively inexpensive local ingredient (contrasted to expensive imported sugar) readily available allowed people of all classes to have sweetness in their diets.

It is important to consider what alternatives there were for that “pound of sugar” called for in Baumfylde’s recipe “To make a sirrupe of violets” (31r) or sugar “as much as will make it sweete” in “A receipt of Claire water” (17r).^[3] In fact, in four receipts in the manuscript, small amounts of honey are used as an ingredient:

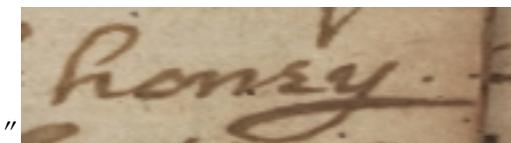
“For a canker in the mouth” (5r)—“ii spoonfulls of honney”



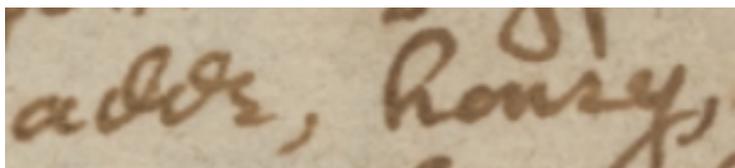
“Against Deafnes” (35r)—“Take pure honey”



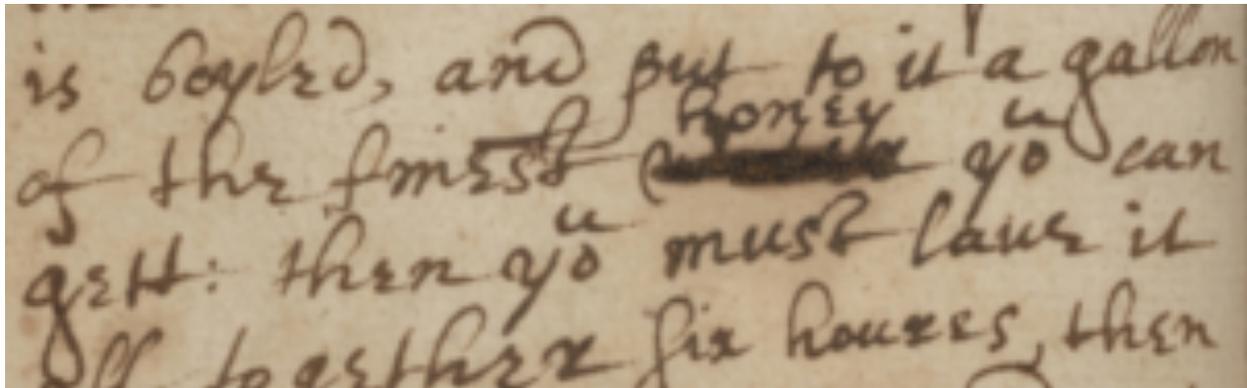
“A Secrett Quintessence” (36r)—“honey”



“For a Canker” (40r)—“adde honey”



Spoonfuls and other unknown but certainly negligible amounts of honey in the above recipes are not uncommon in culinary and medicinal receipts in the period. However, there is another receipt in Baumfylde’s manuscript, “To Make White Metheglin” (20v//21r), which calls for “a gallon of the finest honey^[4] you can gett.” A gallon!



We need to consider just how remarkable this amount of honey actually is. Keep in mind that a worker bee makes approximately one-and-a-half teaspoons of honey in her lifetime. There are 768 teaspoons in a gallon, so it would take 512 bees to produce the amount necessary for this recipe (a typical skep hive in the period could be expected to have a few thousand bees).^[5] It should be noted again that women often were responsible for the care and preservation of beehives; as John Levett, in his *The ordering of Bees* (1634), remarks, it is “good women, who commonly in this Country take most care and regard of this kind of commodity.”^[6] It wouldn’t be out of the question, then, to think that Baumfylde herself had a hand in caring for bees (or was at the very least knowledgeable of where to get enough honey in her wider networks) to yield honey for such recipes.

And what is metheglin? Metheglin is a traditional spiced mead from Wales, a popular drink in seventeenth century England (the word first appears in 1553, according to the *OED*). From two Welsh words meaning “healing liquor” (per the *Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities*), metheglin was a stronger version of mead with honey as its base. In the late seventeenth century, receipts for metheglin were common. As Ken Albala notes, honey “regained a certain vogue” in seventeenth-century England as recipes for mead proliferated, noting that “the rarity of a wild food, or in this case a wild one because the honey itself was not taken from wild bees, can bring it into fashion.”^[7] It is worth thinking about Baumfylde’s earlier recipe for metheglin in the context of those included in, for example, Sir Kenelme Digby’s book, *The Closet of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digby Opened: Whereby is Discovered Several ways for making of Metheglin, Sider, Cherry-Wine* (1669). I want briefly to point to three metheglin recipes he includes, all attributed to women. Each recipe—a white metheglin of Lady Hungerford, a metheglin of Lady Windebanke, and a metheglin of Lady Stuart—has a similar proportion of one gallon of honey to five or six gallons of water. Included among the spice mixes across these recipes are fennel, sage, parsley roots, eringo roots, thyme, pellitory of the wall, red nettle roots, clove gillyflowers, borage herb, bugloss flower, hyssop, hart’s tongue herb, betony, caraway seeds, aniseed, mallow root, alexander root, wood sorrel herb, liverwort, gingerroot, nutmeg, red sage, dried strawberry leaves, and lemon balm. Many of the ingredients and even the unusual processes align in these receipts in Digby, not to mention in *A short treatise of the excellency of bees, hony,*

mead, and metheglin (1681), where one Dr T.R. writes, “Metheglin is only a Stronger Hydromel: being unto Mead...for it beareth an Egg the breadth of six pence, and is usually made with more Hony and less Water, receiving into its Composition, as wel wholesom and sweet Herbs, as also a large quantity of proper and fit Spices.” Thus, receipts for the making of metheglin throughout the seventeenth century highlight the labor-intensive practices of gathering a large quantity of a single ingredient, one that depends upon the labor of a nonhuman beast.

Throughout these textual similarities, we can witness what Wendy Wall has noted as the “taste communities...crafted out of reading publics.” [8] And it is in studying these communities and the recipes that emerged from them that offers students a way to ask questions about quantity, domestic work, and the availability of ingredients in the early modern world. Let’s begin with side-by-side transcriptions of two early seventeenth century receipts for metheglin in order to provide a visual comparison of ingredients and processes:

To make Metheglen

Mrs. Sarah Longe Her Receipt Booke, c. 1610

Take of the best Condit-water, and the best and purest hony you can get[;] put them together in a tub, and beate them together
Till it bee strong enough to beare a new lade Egg from the bottome[;] then sett it over the fire, and put into it a little rose-mary, Time, marjoram, and winter savery ty’d up in a bundle (if you please you may put in Maiden-haire, Liver-wort, or any other herbs, as you thinke fit[;] then make a little fine bagg of Linnen, and put into it 3, or 4. races of ginger, 2. or 3.

To make White Metheglin

Mary Baumfylde, 1626

Take iii gallons, and a halfe of water then take marjorme, winter sauerie egremonie & broade tyme, of each a handfull parsely rootes, and fennell a handfull, the pithe beige taken out, cloves and cinamon of each half an ounce, put the spice in a bagge, and when the hearbs and routes are washed, put *the^m* into the water and your bagg of spice, and let it boyle together halfe an hour, then take out *your* spice, and cleanse *your* water from the hearbs, then put iii gallons and a halfe of clean water to this liquor, *which*

Nutmeggs, a little Cloves, and mace, and if
you will a little Cinamon[;] sew it up, and
put it into the boyling[;] let it boyle one
whole hour, skiming it all the while[;] then
poure it out into Earthen pans, and soe let
it stand till next morning[;] then poure
all the cleare of the pans into a good
vessel, one that hath binn used with
sacke or white-wine, and hang your
bag of spices in it[;] soe stop it close, and
lett it stand at least 2 moneths before
you drink of it[;] then draw it into bottles
if you please[;] it will be beater, you may
make it with a lemon pill to put into the
vessell; if you intend to keepe it, make it the
stronger of hony, and spice, if to drinke
at 2 moneths End, let the Egg only rise
from the bottome without swimming.

is boyled, and put to it a gallon
of the finest ^{honey} yo^u can
gett: then yo^u must lave it
all together six houres, then
take a new layd egg and put
into it, & if he swim the bread
of a groate, then tis strong
enough. if not you must adde
more honey, and lave it as yo^u
did before, and when yo^u think
it strong enough, set it one
the fire, and as it boyles scum
it very clean, and yo^u must hav^e
in readines the whites of thirtin
eggs beaten to a froath, to put
in soe soone as it is seamed
then take it from the fire,
presentlie and run it through a
Felic bagge, and let it stand til
it be very cold, then put barme
to it, and let it stand four and
twentie houres, and then tun it
up, and hang on the bagg of
spice, and when it hath done
workinge stop it very close, and
in a month or six weeks you
may drink of it. -----

By comparing two such similar receipts, students would begin to grasp how to ask questions about what they are seeing. It would be beneficial, of course, for students to engage with the *Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities* and the *OED*, but even more valuable would be for students to use EEBO (Early English Books Online) to explore John Gerard's *The herball or Generall historie of plantes* (1593) to cross reference and visualize the ingredients in their receipt. Eventually, students should transcribe and annotate a receipt of their choice,

investigating and researching the ingredients and processes found within (or even across a number of related receipts in a particular manuscript).

What might this look like in practice? Take, as an example, two of the ingredients found in the receipts above: “winter savery” (Longe) and “egremonie” (Baumfylde). Students could annotate these ingredients using Gerard like this:

winter sauerie (winter savory). From Gerard:



“Winter Sauorie is a plant resembling Hyssope, but lower, more tender, and brittle; it bringeth foorth very many branches, compassed on euerie side with narrowe and sharpe pointed leaues, longer than those of Time; among which growe the flowers, from the bottom to the top, out of small huskes, of colour white, tending to a light purple. The roote is hard and wooddie, as is the rest of the plant....They are sowen in gardens, and bring foorth their flowers the first yeere of their sowing....They flower in July and August....Sauorie is like Thyme in taste, but not in sent.... Winter sauerie ... clenseth the passages; to be brief, it is altogether of like virtue with Time” (460-61)

egremonie. From Gerard:



“The stalke is two foote and an halfe long, rough and hairie; whereupon grown manie small yellow flowers...after the flowers come the seedes somewhat long and rough, like to small burs hanging downwards, which when they be ripe, do catch holde upon peoples garments which passe by it....It growth in barren places by high waies, inclosures of medowes, and of corne fieldes, and oftentimes in woodes and copses, and almost euerie where....It flowreth in June, and somewhat later, and seedeth after that, a great part of sommer...Vertues. . .The seede being drunke in wine...doth helpe the bloudie fixe” (575-76).

Students could thus be expected to apply Gerard where appropriate, presenting not only visuals of the ingredients but also citing his own descriptions of the herbs. A combination of transcription and annotation of the receipts would be a necessary precursor to attempting to make the recipe.^[9] Students would be asked to *reflect* on what we can assume about the writer of the receipt based on the ingredients:

- where *did* the honey come from?
- did Longe or Baumfylde raise bees?
- how long did it take to put together the “fine bagg of Linnen” (Longe) or “bagg of spice” (Baumfylde)?
- what might the “thirtin eggs” (Baumfylde) say about the availability of ingredients?

and the process:

- why “lave it all together six houres” (Baumfylde) and then wait another twenty-four hours before waiting “a month or six weeks” (Baumfylde) or “at least 2 moneths” (Longe) before you can drink the metheglin?

- why add a “new layd egg” and, later, “thirtin / eggs beaten to a froath” (Baumfylde)?
- is that seemingly odd detail about putting a “new layd egg” (Baumfylde) or “new lade Egg” (Longe) in the boil to see if it has enough honey consistent in other metheglin recipes that come before or after?
- what does the constant “skimming” (Longe) and the directions to “lave” and “scum” (Baumfylde) say about the maker’s constant attention that must be given?

Baumfylde’s and Longe’s receipts for metheglin thus allow students to understand better how quantity and sweetness intersect; furthermore, by studying these receipts together, students can see how taste communities build upon one another across time and place and how sourcing the amount of honey required to make metheglin highlights the contact zones shared between humans and the nonhuman world.

By paying careful attention to a single ingredient, then, we can get closer to comprehending the processes and realities of early modern domestic work. As noted earlier, women often navigated these domestic realities in both writing and production, engaging in a type of knowledge-making that has been the focus of recent scholarly work.^[10] Michelle Dowd, drawing on the work of Natasha Korda, notes that, “[T]he emerging figure of the obedient yet commercially savvy housewife signaled not only a transformation in England’s economy but also a fundamental change in women’s labor.”^[11] Following the important work of Jennifer Munroe regarding experiential learning and the unprinted gardening manuscripts by women, we can say that Mary Baumfylde’s receipt book showcases her authority on the everyday practices of the early modern household.^[12] Such receipts enact for future readers a kind of gendered domestic production sphere, and, in the case of the female beekeepers behind the harvested ingredients in the metheglin recipes, women emerge as drivers of useful knowledge and preservers of craft.

Keith Botelho is Professor of English at Kennesaw State University and is the author of *Renaissance Earwitnesses: Rumor and Early Modern Masculinity* (Palgrave, 2009). He has published articles and essays in *Studies in English Literature, Early Modern Culture, Comparative Drama, The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Animals, Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts, Object Oriented Environs*, and *Ground-Work: English Renaissance Literature and Soil Science*. He is currently co-editing a two-volume collection of essays on insects in the early modern world, entitled *Lesser Living Creatures: Insect Life in the Renaissance* (forthcoming Penn State UP, 2021).

Notes

[1] For more on honey in early modern England, see Eva Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and my “Honey, Wax, and the Dead Bee.” *Early Modern Culture* 11. Holly Dugan and Karl Steel, Eds. 2016. 99-113.

[2] <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/traded-goods-dictionary/1550-1820/hondschoote-say-horn-leaves#h2-0002>

[3] See Kristin Bennett's essay in this issue; after making and tasting the recipe for "Snow," she notes, "To my taste, the recipe requires far more sugar and a dash of salt. Mary's skint use of sugar, however, likely speaks to its cost, or scarcity."

[4] The word scratched out below *honey* is unreadable, but it curiously does not look like a misspelling of *honey*.

[5] However, also see John Worlidge, *Systema agriculturæ, the mystery of husbandry* (London, 1675), where he writes, "Where your designe is for multiplication of your Stocks, there it's best to make your Hives the smaller; and where you aim at great quantities of Honey, there make them the greater: So that in case you cannot prevail in the one, it may nevertheless be a considerable and sure advantage in the other; as is evident in Mr. Mew's Experiment of his *Transparent Hive*, out of one of which he took fourteen quarts of Honey; then it's very probable the Hive held twice as much, for the Wax, Bees, and vacant places: so that his Hive was of an extraordinary bigness, and yielded an extraordinary advantage." 178.

[6] For more on this point, see my chapter "Thinking with Hives," in *Object Oriented Environs*. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Julian Yates, Eds. (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2016). 17-24.

[7] Ken Albala, *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007). 38.

[8] See Wendy Wall, *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 21.

[9] An expensive undertaking indeed with the required gallon of honey!

[10] For instance, see *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*. Eds. Pamela H. Smith, Amy R.W. Meyers, and Harold J. Cook (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

[11] Dowd, Michelle. *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 96.

[12] Munroe, Jennifer. *Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 15-46.