

A bit of history...

BEER SOUP: THE BREAKFAST OF EARLY MODERN RULERS

By Molly Taylor-Poleskey

As a young ruler, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, the Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia began each morning with a beer soup. He then dutifully locked himself away and attended to the day's business until the midday meal. This simple anecdote is recounted by almost every biographer of Friedrich Wilhelm. I was intrigued by the historiographic implications of this (what did biographers think it reflected about the ruler that he consumed this rather modest fare?). Beyond this, though, I became curious: what actually was beer soup? And, what it might have been like to start every day with it?



Engraving from title page of 1604 edition of the Marx Rumpolt cookbook.

Although foreign to contemporary German cuisine, beer soup was very common in central Europe in the medieval and early modern period. As such common fare, it had a wide number of permutations. The most basic definition of beer soup is a “soup of brown (probably dark) beer, cream, fat and flour or egg yolk.” Other recipes called for slightly different ingredients such as costly

spices, or onions and cheese to make a more substantial soup to accompany a roast.

After reading about various beer soups in early modern cookbooks, though, I still could not wrap my head around what a beer soup was. So, there was only one thing to do: perform “experimental research” and try beer soup for myself.

The Experiment

My friends Steve and Noria enthusiastically agreed to join the experience. We gathered at my apartment one Saturday afternoon (we couldn't bring ourselves to perform the experiment first thing in the morning) and decided to attempt two versions of the recipe. We selected the recipes for their clarity and because they used a representative mix of commonly mentioned ingredients.



Our first recipe was inspired by a recipe in an eighteenth-century encyclopedia for “a really good beer soup.” We translated it thus:

1 Bottle of dark beer

Sweet cream

Three egg yolks³

Mace

3 ½ Tbs. Butter

Raisins

Thoroughly stir mixture, boil it and serve with toast.

The result? “Repulsive,” said Steve, “I don’t want to eat it.” I had to agree, the egg-drop soup consistency combined with the taste of day-old beer was nauseating. Noria had a more descriptive response: “it’s weird that it tastes sweet; I would have never guessed it since it smells like feet.” The toast was indeed the highlight of that attempt.

The second attempt was, thankfully, slightly more palatable. For this, we used the following recipe from the 1604 edition of Marx Rumpolt’s cookbook:

1 Bottle of white beer (we used *Erdinger Weißbier*)

Cloves

3 ½ Tbs. butter

2 slices of rye bread cut into small chunks

Salt to taste

Combine beer, cloves and butter. Heat in a pot, but don’t let it boil. When it’s ready, add bread and salt and this makes a tasty soup.



Although this attempt was not completely successful, we all agreed that it was much better than the first. Perhaps with fewer cloves and less salt, it was conceivable that someone (other than us) might enjoy this soup.

Reflection

In following these recipes, I did not presume to recreate the experience of an early modern diner. The gulf between our palates, ingredients, cooking tools and methods is just too wide. But there’s no doubt that the exercise helped me realize some things about the habits and tastes of the people I study.

For example, beer soup was more a hearty drink than a soup that might constitute a meal. This fits with the description of daily habits from an early eighteenth-century court advice manual, which described beer and bread for *Früh=Trunk*, or “early drink” (instead of using the word for breakfast, *Frühstück*). The records of daily food distribution at the Berlin residence also only refer to two meals: the midday and evening meals. The elector’s beer soup, then, was more likely meant as a restorative broth. Other absolutist rulers, such as King Charles II of England, are known to have drunk such a restorative during their morning *levée* when they were ceremoniously washed and dressed.

The practical application of the recipes made me pay much closer attention to the details of the instructions than if had I just read them. I could not follow the author’s instructions to the letter. In the end, I had to make decisions about what modern ingredients to substitute for early modern ones, such as whipping cream with sugar for sweet cream. Most likely, my Calphalon pot over an electric burner also produced different results than an iron kettle or a raised hearth.

But, even Rumpolt allowed some room for improvisation: “each cook prepares food as he pleases ... in my opinion, there are no absolute rules in cooking, otherwise it would be impossible.”