

A Taste of Sicily – four cordials

By Oswyn of Baðon

Introduction

Before you are four cordials. I am not attempting to recreate any given cordial and for the time period I am interested in, it is extremely unlikely that these were ever made for recreational purposes. However, I can demonstrate that all of these flavors were present in Sicily in the Norman period (1068 CE to 1266 CE) and many had medicinal qualities. So, it is possible these concoctions were made and used for that purpose.

I have made a Lemon Ginger Gin, an Orange Almond brandy, Rosemary Pine Nut Gin and an Apricot Honey Vodka. My creative purpose is to give a taste of flavors present in Medieval Muslim/Norman Sicily. The paired sharpness of Lemon and Ginger work well together. Orange and Almond seem like a natural pairing. The resinous flavors of Rosemary, Pinenuts, and gin are reinforcing each other. Apricot and Orange Blossom Honey is intended to represent the sweet, fruity confections of the Arabs.

The base alcohols used are for variety. I am using vodka as a neutral alcohol spirit in lieu of pure grain alcohol. I explain the gin below. Officially, brandy is developed much later than the Norman Sicily timeline. But, since Sicily would have had access to both red and white wines, it is not a great stretch to believe that they might have had something that was brandy-like from the first distillation of a red wine.

Potential medical uses for the cordials (see notes below):

Lemon Ginger Gin - Anti-inflammatory, kidney stones

Orange Almond Brandy- Cardiac stimulant, pain relief; digestive

Apricot – Honey Vodka – cold symptoms, fevers, stomachaches

Rosemary Pine Nut Gin – strong diuretic, coughs, colds, and pain

Materials

Obviously, I am using fresh, modern materials that should be similar to what was available in period. Below are my references for the presence of these materials in Sicily. Since home distilling is illegal in Illinois, I have used commercial alcohols. I use New Amsterdam Vodka. It is a neutral, non-flavored vodka to substitute for a “pure” alcohol. I use Seagram’s Dry Gin. I explain that below. I use Christian Brothers VS Brandy. I find it has a good balance between price and quality.

Alcohol – it is well-known that the Muslims rediscovered the secrets of distillation. The word al-kohl in Arabic refers to kohl the mascara that they and the Egyptians would wear for beauty and protection from the sun. The word is used to describe the mascara of wine [1]. Alcohol was discovered by Jabir Ibn Hayyan and then further refined by Al Rasi [2].

There is evidence that the Muslims knew of, and at least one of them drank, something akin to a grain alcohol. The poet Abu Nuwas wrote many poems in praise of alcohol and in one of them, he refers to a wine, “the color of rainwater but is as hot inside the ribs as a burning firebrand” [3]. Rainwater would be clear and a fire burning sounds quite a bit like a high proof alcohol. Non-drinking Muslims did use alcohol for their make-up and perfumes, in their chemical and alchemical experiments, and medicines.

While the Koran does forbid the drinking of alcohol, there is certainly evidence that some Muslims did. The Koran mentions the prohibition several times, each time getting more severe. It is clear that it took quite a bit of reinforcement to get Muslims to stop drinking [4]. There is a long and well-regarded tradition of Islamic poets praising alcohol and recommending its consumption. Pre-Islam contained a genre of poetry called *khamriyya*, wine poetry. Abu Nuwas was one of many that continued this tradition after the conversion to Islam. He wrote, “Drink the wine though forbidden, / For God forgives even grave sins. [5]. Despite his lapses with wine, Abu Nuwas was considered a good Muslim. And of course, Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule were free to consume alcohol if they chose.

When the Normans conquered Sicily, they captured the great still at the Medical School of Syracuse [6]. The Norman rulers were fairly tolerant of their Muslim subjects so they would have had access to those who knew how to run the still and therefore the high-proof alcohol that it produced [no note; basically common knowledge that Roger through Manfred spoke Arabic, used Arabic officials in administration and had Arabic/Muslim archers and soldiers as elite troops].

Gin – There is no evidence that I know that says Sicily had gin. However, Sicily did have juniper berries, either on their own or as an import from Greece. The Greeks use juniper berries as a medicine, and used them to increase physical stamina in athletes for the Olympics [7]. Pliny states [8], “Pepper is adulterated with juniper berries, which have the property, to a marvelous degree, of assuming the pungency of pepper.” So, the Romans also knew of juniper berries. With the old Romans and modern Greeks (i.e Byzantines) living in Sicily in medieval times, they certainly would have had them as well.

Medically, juniper berries was primarily used as a diuretic [9] and obviously as a stimulant of some kind (as above).

Gin is a traditionally a distilled alcohol from juniper berries. In this case, I am using it as a combination of high proof alcohol and juniper berries.

Lemons (*Citrus Limon*) – Citrons are common in the Western Mediterranean but the Muslims introduced lemons as part of their transformation of Sicily. Lemons were known to the Romans. There is a mural in Pompeii with a citron, orange, and lemon. However, these were imports and it was not until the Muslims introduced them to the Mediterranean that native lemon trees existed. Qustus al-Rumi talks about lemon trees as part of palace gardens in his book on farming. The popularity of lemons then increases from then on [10].

Medically, lemons were used as follows: anti-inflammatory; kidney stones; digestive, anti-toxic, remedy against drunkenness; pulmonary sedative [11].

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*)– Ginger was a very common trade spice in the medieval period. I find no evidence that it was grown in Sicily but it was well known and often traded for. In *The Jews in Sicily*, the introduction to that work described some of the trade goods that Jews in Muslim and Byzantine Sicily would trade for with North Africa. Ginger is mentioned prominently [12].

Additionally, Pliny gives us [13], ""The root of the pepper-tree is not, as some people have thought, the same as the substance called ginger, or by others sinpiberi, although it has a similar flavor. Ginger is grown on farms in Arabia and Cave-dwellers' Country; it is a small plant with a white root. The plant is liable to decay very quickly, in spite of its extreme pungency. Its price is six denarii a pound...Both pepper and ginger grown wild in their own countries, and nevertheless they are bought by weight like gold or silver." Ginger was well known in Ancient Rome.

And lastly, Davidson has, "The ginger plant is unknown in the wild state, but is thought to have originated in SE Asia. It has been cultivated since ancient times, and was among the most highly prized of the eastern imports to the Roman Empire. However, Romans used it relatively little in cookery, prizing it rather for medicinal purposes. The fall of the Roman Empire did not stop the trade of ginger to Europe. It was in use in England in Anglo-Saxon times; and in later medieval times it was almost as common in England as pepper. By that time it was also being imported in preserved form for use as a sweet meat. The history of gingerbread goes back to the same period." [14]

Medically, ginger has many uses. The most common is in digestion and anti-nausea. Dioscorides says in the *De Materia Medica*, that ginger "warms and softens the stomach". The Koran, and Indian and Chinese pharmopaedias give it similar claims. Ginger is also used as an anti-inflammatory and an aphrodisiac.

Almond (*Prunus dulcis*)– Almonds have grown in the Mediterranean since the Early Bronze Age. The ancient Greeks spread it to their colonies so it appears almost everywhere. The region between Syracuse and Ragusa is renown for its almonds [15].

Medically, almonds as almond milk was often used as base for medicines due to its easy digestion. Almonds are also used for pain relief, skin diseases, rabies, chronic cough, and dissolving kidney stones [16].

Apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*) - While already an import in Classical times [17], the Arabs brought apricots to Sicily in the early 900's. The English word apricot might be related to the Arabic word, al-barqooq though there are several other possible explanations as well.

Apricots were used medically for stomachaches, cold symptoms, fevers, toothaches, ulcers, and bleeding. The roasted pit was used for erectile dysfunction [18].

Bitter Orange (*Citrus aurantium bigarade*) - The Arabs introduced orange trees to Sicily [19, 21]. I used Seville oranges as I was having a difficult time finding Chinotto or Bergamot oranges which are native to Italy.

Medically, bitter orange was used as a cardiac stimulant and a digestive [20].

Sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) –Like oranges, apricots, and lemons, the Arabs introduced sugarcane to Sicily. Arabic irrigation methods allowed for the wet environment that sugarcane desired. By 900 CE, sugar was grown on Sicily, one of the few places in Europe to have it [19, 21].

Medically, Dioscorides tells us, “There is a kind of coalesced honey called *sakcharon* [i.e. sugar] found in reeds in India and Arabia Felix similar in consistency to salt and brittle enough to be broken between the teeth like salt. It is good dissolved in water for the intestines and stomach, and [can be] taken as a drink to help [relieve] a painful bladder and kidneys [22]”.

Honey – Honey is well known from the earliest times. Its uses in medicine are to offset undesirable tastes, as a mild diuretic, a laxative, and a hangover preventative [23]. Several treatments look at specific honeys, such as hyssop uses for coughs, sore throats, and the like [24]. In this case, I am using two honeys: an orange blossom honey for Sicily since I have already shown that Sicily had orange trees and a pine tree honey from Greece. Pine trees are also native to all regions of the Mediterranean.

Pine Nuts (seeds of various *Pinus* trees) - Pine nuts were a common food in the Mediterranean, known from Classical times. Pine nuts were often prescribed for coughs, roughness (ie trouble breathing) in the lungs and as a diuretic [25]. In Sicily as with much of the Mediterranean, the most common pine tree is the Stone Pine which is native to the region.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) – Rosemary was also extremely common and native to the Mediterranean, known from Classical times. Rosemary served many practical and spiritual uses in Medieval times. It was often burned to cleanse a house so it was common in incense. It also was used to promote memory. However, according to Lev, it was used medically to cleanse various organs, including lungs, kidneys and urinary tracts, cleanse body odour, cure coughs, and reduce pain [26].

Methods

Much of exactly how a medieval cordial or medicine would be made is a mystery. The writings passed down to us often leave out details.

However, in this case, since I am addressing Norman Sicily after the Muslim occupation, I can reference various Arabic sources. One very famous formulary of the time is The Medical Formulary, or Aqrabadhin, of al-Kindi [27]. It contains a variety of medicinal preparations. For example:

Pure water of the tamarisk seed is cooked until it is diminished by a fourth. Then the best honey and crystalline sugar, of each one a part equal to half of the water which had been cooked, is thrown on it. Its froth is removed. In it is put a linen bag which contains one ratl each of Cardamom, Chinese cinnamon, Walnut, and Ginger, and one daniq each of honey and sugar. (This mixture) is boiled until a syrup remains. The bag is squeezed, kneaded in it, and then taken out. The mixture is put into flasks and the tops stoppered. It is drunk like oxymel.

Whether a preparation would be given as an alcohol, water, enema, pill, poultice, etc is governed by a variety of rules laid out by medical scholars at the time. Avicenna is one of the best known that survives to us today. Throughout his work, he is well aware that wine/alcohol is quickly adsorbed by the body. If

the medicine needed to be absorbed quickly and there were not other reasons that it should be in a different form, combining the medicine with alcohol was recommended. In Avicenna's Canon of Medicine, there is a whole section (section 8) devoted to the uses of wine in medicine [28]. This is in spite of the Koran's prohibition against wine, even as a medicine or any Islamic laws about it. [Alcohol and Islam is a complex subject and there are many schools of thought even today.]

For my methods, here are the recipes.

Lemon – Ginger Gin

Take 3 cups of Gin, Juice of 2 lemons, 3 tablespoons of lemon zest, 3 tablespoons of chopped fresh ginger and combine. Let set for ~ 1 week. At this time, add a simple syrup formed of 1 cup of water and 1 cup of sugar. Let sit ~ 1 more week. After this point, remove any solids.

Orange – Almond Brandy

Take 3 to 4 oz of raw almonds. Crush them, and lightly roast them. Add 3 cups of brandy and 3 tablespoons of orange zest (Seville oranges). Let sit ~1 week. At this time, add a simple syrup formed of 1 cup of water and 1 cup of sugar. Let sit ~ 1 more week. After this point, remove any solids.

Apricot – Honey Vodka

Take 12 oz of dried apricots. Chop them coarsely and soak in 3 cups of Vodka. Let sit for ~ 1 week. Remove solids. Add ½ cup of orange blossom honey. Shake well to dissolve honey. Let sit another 1 to 2 weeks.

Rosemary – Pine Nut Gin

Take 5 oz of pine nuts and lightly toast them. Add the nuts, 4 to 5 sprigs of dry rosemary, and 3 cups of gin. Let sit 1 one week. Add ½ cup of pine tree honey. Shake well to dissolve honey. Let sit ~1 more week. After this point, remove any solids.

Conclusions

My tasters have all enjoyed these cordials. Again, it is highly doubtful that any of these were used recreationally and I would also say it is unlikely that they were used medicinally either. But it is at least possible that something similar could have been made in period for medical reasons.

The Muslims brought quite a bit to Sicily and the Normans quite wisely built on that foundation rather than tear it down. As a result, Sicily went from simply a bread basket for the Mediterranean to an island paradise with a wide variety of cultures and cuisines. Enjoy!

References

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